

Introduction to Mimetic Theory

I want to begin with a few words about myself and my experience with Mimetic Theory.

I'm a pastor, serving a United Church of Christ congregation in Ottawa, IL, about 80 miles southwest of Chicago. I've been in ministry for 25 years, this September. I've been a Girardian for about 4 of those, but as with many you'll meet here over the next 48 hours, the work of Rene' Girard has changed my ministry—and my life.

Until I discovered Girard, I was a typical Progressive pastor. There were huge chunks of scripture I didn't know what to do with, so I did what I'd been taught in seminary. I ignored the perplexing and violent portions of scripture. I looked them up in the writings of the various members of the Jesus Seminar to see how likely, or not, it was that Jesus said them, and if the Jesus Seminar didn't credit them to Jesus, I didn't deal with them very much at all. It wasn't a very satisfying way to handle the tradition, but I'd been given no better options. The Old Testament I treated as, well, old...and therefore, interesting but not terribly relevant. And the Pauline corpus, well, let's just say I owe Paul a huge apology.

A few years ago, a good friend of mine, Stephen Kaufman, president and founder of the Christian Vegetarian Association, asked me to proof his book *Guided by the Faith of Christ*. In the process of reading his work, I was introduced to Rene' Girard, a strong influence on Stephen as he considers the violence we do to animals, the Earth, and one another. I had also seen Girard mentioned in a few articles in the *Christian Century*, but not with enough information to help me understand his work. Stephen got me curious.

But my busy life of ministry continued, and I didn't do much follow-up. Then, an article appeared in the *Century* written by my seminary adviser, Mark Heim. Mark and I had not been in communication in recent years, but I respected him and had always liked him. The article was a basic discussion of Mimetic Atonement Theory. The article noted that it was an excerpt from his book *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. In all honesty, I mostly bought the book because my friend Mark had a book out. What I read blew me away, changed my thinking and my life forever. You'll meet many Girardians who can point to a moment of conversion. In fact, there's a Facebook group entitled "Rene' Girard Changed My Life". Needless to say, I'm a member.

So, what is Mimetic Theory, and why is it so powerful? Let me explain a few of the basics.

1. Mimesis

We humans are imitative creatures. This is basic to understanding Girard and MT, but when it was introduced to me, I balked at the idea. Surely, I'm an individual, making my own decisions, running my own life. But the research says otherwise. Indeed, researchers have discovered a portion of the brain, called Mirror Neurons, which cause us to be imitative. After all, imitation serves an evolutionary purpose. For a child to grow to adulthood there's no better skill than imitating adults who've already made it! More than 90%, some estimates are as high as 99%, of what we learn comes through imitation. Even when we rebel, we have an image in our heads of what rebellion looks like, and we imitate that model. We are imitative. We do, however, have one important choice to make—we can choose who we will imitate. We'll come back to that.

2. Imitative Desire

We are imitative in all areas of our lives, but no imitation is more pervasive, nor more troublesome than imitative desire. We want what we want because someone else wants it. We discover that someone, or many someones, want something. This makes that thing valuable in our eyes. If it weren't valuable, why would those other people want it? So, we want it too. This is true of tangible items, like money, land, bigger houses, newer SUVs, another degree, that thing you've been debating spending money on. It's also true of intangibles, like love, respect, power, dignity. You want 'em because someone else wants them. The advertising industry knows we work this way, and they spend a lot of money getting you to notice, and want, what others find valuable. They wouldn't do that if it didn't work. All those commercials get your Mirror Neurons firing, and your checkbook open.

The problem becomes that we soon begin to think, rightly or wrongly, that there isn't enough of Thing X for everyone to have as much as we want. We begin to try to figure out who deserves this thing of which there is only a limited amount. Then we begin to compete for it. I often describe the process very succinctly: imitation, comparison, competition, violence. I use Willard Swartley's definition of violence—simply the harming of someone, though oftentimes this process leads to explicit, physical violence. It certainly destroys peace.

So, you want Thing X, because, well, all right-thinking people want Thing X. You soon come to realize that there isn't enough of Thing X for everyone to have their fair share (you also soon realize you have no intention of sharing, because others don't want to share). Left unchecked, this process would lead to what Girard (quoting Hobbes) calls "the violence of all against all". In time, though, it ceases to be about Thing X. One interesting part of the process is that the object of desire gets lost, and the competition begins to be about our sense of self, our very identity, our place in our community, family, congregation or other group. At this point, we begin to fight desperately against all those others who are competing with us, and things spiral out of control. For a sense of how this can overtake a community, I'd encourage you to look at the story of Sodom in the Book of Genesis. Sodom was a city at the breaking

point of a violent mimetic crisis, when the messengers of God have the misfortune of arriving.

And their arrival moves us to the next basic concept in Girard's work.

3. The Scapegoat

Somehow, human beings, ingenious as we are, discovered a technique for stopping the violence of all against all before it destroyed communities, families, groups. Indeed, some anthropologists believe the difference between humans and our hominid ancestors is that they couldn't find a way out of mimetic violence, and destroyed themselves. We developed a step, though, that allowed us to come to a tentative, if unhealthy, peace.

Once the violence of all has reached its peak, and things are about to move beyond recovery...the community's attention is turned to someone. It can actually be anyone. Girard says this process is completely random. It can be the richest person in town, the poorest person in town; the local genius, or a person suffering a developmental delay. Mark Heim describes this in his hymn "No More of This" with the lyrics, "no one is safe, either among the first or last". Some individual or subgroup catches the community's attention. And suddenly, the whole mob turns on that poor soul, fixing blame on him or her or them for the lack of shared resources, the threat to identity, the community's pain. The community has found its victim, and the scapegoating process has begun.

There is no clearer description of this process than the Passion story. It goes through the process just as Girard describes it. The community attacks the scapegoat with the worst possible accusations, ones against which it is nearly impossible to defend. Jesus was accused of blasphemy; of claiming to be the Messiah, or worse yet, God. In most cases, the scapegoat either makes the effort to defend themselves, which only angers the mob more, or, having been raised in a culture where the process was given sanction, accepts their role as scapegoat, as happened in many cultures that practiced human sacrifice. Jesus does neither of these things. He doesn't argue in his defense, nor admit to his role. He throws the responsibility back on the community...but I digress.

It's important to understand that scapegoating doesn't need to be as dramatic, or as fatal, as the Passion. Scapegoating happens when a congregation fires a pastor, or a clique of middle school girls decide who's not cool enough to speak to. Schoolyard bullying is scapegoating. International warfare is scapegoating. We engage in this behavior all the time. And we always convince ourselves—and sometimes the scapegoat—that we're justified.

Once we decide whose expulsion or death will bring peace, the community has a scapegoat.

4. Sacrifice

The only thing to do with a scapegoat is to sacrifice it. In the ritual from which the term is taken, a goat is ritually laden with the sins of the community and driven out into the desert. In less organized scapegoating processes, the victim is driven out or killed in a fit of communal violence—a pogrom, a lynching, a riot, the attack of the schoolyard bullies, a purge, a firing, a war. The community finds new commonality, new community, in its shared hatred of the scapegoat. All right-thinking people know they/he/she had it coming. No mercy is shown, no sanctuary offered. The community is convulsed in violence, but, happily, it is violence against only one victim, rather than the pervasive violence which was about to destroy the community. And sure enough, after the death or expulsion of the scapegoat, things fall into a sense of peace—all is quiet, life goes back to normal. And the community is grateful for the role the scapegoat played, even if there is a dis-ease at the way in which this peace was achieved. In ancient cultures, there was a sense of gratitude toward the gods that this process was offered, that there was a way out of communal violence. In order to maintain this peace, the community would ritualize the violence, offering a victim to the gods once a week, once a month, once a year, at whatever interval the community deemed necessary to keep the violence at bay. Girard points out that this regularly scheduled sacrifice of the scapegoat is the foundation of all religion. And the way in which violence keeps violence at bay is the basis for all human culture. Without this process, we would be in a constant state of war, a constant battle of all against all.

One of the interesting things Girard points out is how the scapegoating mob overruns everything in its path, and creates community in its wake. In *The Scapegoat*, he notes that, powerful though they were, neither Pilate nor Herod can stop the mob once it begins to move toward the scapegoating death of Jesus. But after their dealings with Jesus and their lack of response to the mob, Luke says, they “became friends, though they had been enemies before”. The scapegoating process brings a peace as pervasive as the violence it works to stop. But it is peace at a price.

Substitutionary Atonement Theory is an expression of this idea that God requires sacrifice, and that a single sacrificed victim will appease a violent God, and make peace based on this violence. In fact, substitutionary atonement is precisely the same scapegoating violence that, Girard says, forms the basis for all violent religion. There’s no difference—the mob chooses a scapegoat, the scapegoat dies as one victim to bring peace for everyone else, the sacrifice pleases the gods, or in this case, one god. There’s nothing unique, or new, or, in my opinion, salvific to it. And it leaves us worshipping, and imitating, a violent God. The early Church did not hold to substitutionary atonement, because it still remembered the truth laid bare in Jesus’ death. Later, the Church would assimilate back into violent human culture.

5. The God of Jesus

So, this all seems pretty bleak. It does to me, too. I’m amazed at how I now see the scapegoating mechanism at work all around me. I remember when I was reading *The*

Scapegoat, and it was all too heavy, so I decided to go see some mindless, fun movie. I chose “The Simpsons Movie”. I don’t know if you’ve seen the “The Simpsons Movie”, but it’s basically the story of the city of Springfield’s scapegoating of Homer Simpson, complete with torches and pitchforks. Once your eyes are open to it, you’ll see the scapegoating mechanism everywhere all the time. So, what can we do about this unjust form of peace based in violence?

Remember I said we’d come back to a discussion of our need to make a choice about our imitative model? Well, we’ve come back to it. Because that is our way out of this maze of violence. We need to break out of the web of imitation that keeps us tied to the desires of others, that moves us through imitation to comparison to competition to violence to scapegoating. But we are imitative creatures. We can’t simply choose not to be imitative. Remember those Mirror Neurons? You can’t wish those away. By understanding our imitative nature, though, we can find a way out of it. This is, for me, the most amazing thing about mimetic theory, and it is this discovery that causes me to say that I was not really a Christian until I discovered Girard...

Somehow, and it stuns me to this day, Jesus was able to choose not to be a part of the mirror imitative relationships that we are all entangled in. He does this not by being un-imitative, by being some kind of super-human who lacks Mirror Neurons. He makes the conscious decision to imitate not humans, but God.

Now you’re thinking, “Didn’t God destroy Sodom and Gomorrah?” “Didn’t God tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?” Isn’t God violent? I would ask you to also consider the role of scapegoating in forming religion. Many cultures, including our own, credit gods with offering sacrifice as a way out of violence. But the Hebrew Bible is in constant debate with itself about this matter. Girard describes the Hebrew Bible as a “text in travail”. It presents both the violent god of sacrifice, what I often refer to as “the god created in our own image”; and the Living God, the One Jesus chooses to imitate.

I’d like to offer an example of this travail, this debate, using a story from the Book of Genesis. We all know the story of The Binding of Isaac. “God” tells Abraham to sacrifice his own son, to take him to a place of ritual sacrifice, bind him and kill him. And Abraham moves through the process toward that end. In the Hebrew, two, even three names are used for “god” in this story. While it’s clearer in the Hebrew, most English translations hint at it. Early in the story, the translations tell us “God” gives Abraham instructions, telling him to take Isaac, travel to the mountain, etc. Yet, he is stopped by an angel of “The Lord”. In Hebrew, the words transliterated “God” here are “El” and “Elohim”. These are the pagan gods, the ones born of people’s imaginations in the wake of scapegoating violence. Abraham has come to believe, like all ancient people, that sacrifice would bring peace and prosperity. He credits this thinking to the gods. When the English says “The Lord”, however, the Hebrew says “YHWH”. He is moved toward sacrifice by the gods of violence. He is turned away from sacrifice by YHWH, the one, true God. It is YHWH’s breaking into human history that offers us alternatives to the violence inspired by the gods of the scapegoating mobs.

Jesus knows YHWH, the God of peace and mercy; and Jesus makes the choice to imitate this God. This frees Jesus from the cycle of scapegoating violence, and leads him to spend his ministry teaching a new way, and, in the process, preparing his students for the effects of his own death as the scapegoat. Jesus teaches us a new way. By following his teachings about generosity, we are freed from the feeling that there is not enough of Thing X, and that we must engage in violence to get our share. By following his teachings about forgiveness, we are freed from the need to engage in violence to punish others. Thus, when the mob tries to convince us that the current scapegoat has done some awful thing and must be punished, we are moved toward forgiveness, and freed from participation in the community's violence. By imitating Jesus, we frustrate the cries of the mob, and move toward real peace, not the peace based in violence.

Jesus was not the first to challenge the role of communal violence among his people. Indeed, it seems that Jesus was, during the Passion, imitating the Suffering Servant of 2nd Isaiah, in moving toward his scapegoating death without self-defense, like a lamb who before its shearers is dumb. And like the Suffering Servant, Jesus' silent walk to and through scapegoating violence reveals the violence for what it is, so that, at the foot of the cross a Roman soldier is moved to proclaim, "Surely this was an innocent man". By succumbing to, but not participating in, the scapegoating mechanism, Jesus lays it bare, confronts us with its power, its violence, its lie. And leaves it exposed and emptied.

And then, in the Resurrection, God rejects our violence, throws back the unwanted sacrificial victim, calls out to us "I desire mercy and not sacrifice". But even in this, God does not react to our violence with violence. It is most telling that Jesus, in meeting his disciples for the first time after the crucifixion, greets them not with anger at their having failed to defend him, or to step up and die with him, as they almost certainly expected. Rather, he offers them the very thing he came to bring. He greets them, saying "Peace be with you". In choosing to imitate YHWH, Jesus frees himself from the cycle of mimetic violence. In choosing to imitate Jesus, we can move the world toward the peace which God envisions for it.

6. The Paraclete and Satan

You can see that, in Girard I've been able to reclaim large portions of the Tradition that my Progressive roots had inspired me to jettison. I'd like to conclude by demonstrating the role of two more such traditions—the Holy Spirit (and thereby the Trinity), and Satan.

One of the most perplexing books in the Hebrew Bible is Job. Scholars debate about which portions are additions, how it's been influenced by other ancient texts, and other fine points. Girard took up this discussion, and wrote a whole book on Job, entitled *Job: The Victim of His People*. I won't give the whole plot away, but suffice to say that Job is a scapegoat. For me, though, the most important idea in that book comes from Girard's discussion of the *goel* in Job. Job cries before "god", "I know that my Redeemer lives!" This has always struck me as odd, and none of the explanations I've read have ever worked well for me. Who is this Redeemer, and

why would Job threaten God with this Redeemer's existence? It always had a sort of, "Just you wait! I'm gonna call mom/dad/the cops!" tone to it, but that made no sense. So, like a good Progressive, I ignored it. Girard, though, offers me an explanation. The god who has engaged in this contest with Satan, is not YHWH, not the Living God of Jesus and Isaiah. This is, once again, that god of the scapegoating mob, and Job is the randomly chosen scapegoat.

Job knows a truth, though, that his scapegoating wife and "friends" don't. He is not left alone in his suffering and trials. He has an advocate, one who argues for him, stands with him, and cares about him. Job has a *goel*, someone who takes on the task of caring for Job when no one else will. Jesus promises us the gift of such an Advocate in the Gospel of John; and the coming of the Holy Spirit in John and in Acts fulfills this promise. This is great good news for you and me, when we are scapegoats. The scapegoat does not stand alone in this process. When the world cries out that we deserve our punishment, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, declares us innocent, and offers us the strength to come through the storm. In the Holy Spirit, we know the living God, the presence of YHWH, the peace which passes understanding, in the face of the scapegoating mob. Girard writes much about the Paraclete, and I would encourage you to look at his work.

And finally, Girard has helped me to once more talk about Satan with some sense of integrity. Yeah, Satan. The word "Satan" as most of you know, is a transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning "Accuser" or "Prosecutor". Indeed, Satan is present whenever the scapegoating process is at work. When you and I choose to join the mob, crying for blood, insisting in punishment, even gossiping against a neighbor, bringing charges in any context, we are Satan, the Accuser, the Prosecutor. It doesn't go far enough to say that Satan is a metaphor, because this rabble rouser at the head and back of every mob is powerful and dangerous. We must be on our guard against satanic processes in ourselves, in our community, and in our world. To discount the Satan too lightly is to ignore our own role in the scapegoating frenzy. When we engage in scapegoating, we are enemies of the God whom Jesus imitates; we are destructive forces at work. We can stand against the Satans of the world, though, by resting in the presence of the Paraclete. The Satans are strong, but Jesus teaches us that Satan cannot cast out Satan, that is, violence/scapegoating cannot cure violence. Scripture reminds us that the Accuser is "the father of all lies and murder". And the best news in all of this is that Jesus has seen "Satan fall like lightning".

By imitating Jesus, by knowing the presence of the Paraclete, we can build a world free of scapegoating violence, free of victims; and based on generosity, forgiveness, and inclusion.