

Actual Presentation COV&R 2010

Here is my argument in a nutshell.

1. Human consciousness is a “scandalized” consciousness. That is, it is formed and deformed by scandal. By this I mean that all of us are born into and caught up in relationships that are marked by double-binds, mimetic rivalries and conflicts that lead a person to both want and not want something, to want something only in so far as one cannot have it, to be offended by other people’s possessions, claims, or even their very being.
2. If this is true, then it follows more or less of necessity that the texts produced by this kind of consciousness will be scandalous texts. The texts produced by scandalous consciousness will scandalize others. A simple and very explicit example of this would be some journalist writing with outrage about the outrageous acts of President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski. The reader can then either react in agreement or be outraged at the moral smugness of the reporter.
3. Therefore, scandal, being formative of human consciousness and the texts produced thereby is the hermeneutical key to interpreting texts.

I would like now to bring up and try to deal with possible objections and problems with this argument. I can imagine, first of all, that there are readers who will demand a definition of “scandal.” I refuse to give one for the following reasons. We know what scandal is, we use the term everyday. The demand for a univocal definition is one way of avoiding its reality. Further, scandal is transgressive. It violates boundaries both social and linguistic, this is precisely what makes it so scandalous and make attempts at definition fail.

Second, there is the objection against the universality or generality of my claims. By claiming in advance that scandal is the key to interpreting texts I have, in effect, created my own Procrustean bed upon which I will now lay the texts to be interpreted, cutting off any excess and distorting the remains to make it fit.

I want to put on the record that I do not think that people who hold this position are thereby arguing for the hermeneutical principle of the “empty head.” This position holds that the less we bring to the text the better off we are and carried to its logical extreme implies that knowing nothing will best allow the truth of a text to emerge.

Those who object to the universal claims made for mimetic theory would be more comfortable with a position that says mimetic theory gives us a set of tools to add to our interpretative tool box. They should be used when appropriate and used appropriately. When this is done, they have no objection.

So the question here is why do I want to maintain the strong claims

of mimetic theory?

I think it appropriate before answer the question to note that the claim that scandal is the key to understanding texts is a scandalous claim.

We are already in the world of scandal.

I proceed with the strong claims because I am convinced that they are true. This means that the first step of the argument, that human consciousness is formed by scandal requires a proof. I will not provide the proof in this talk because I think it has been done by Girard and a five minute summary of it will do nothing to convince the unconvinced and the convinced do not need it.

Finally, I will raise what I consider to be both the chief objection and the main support for the universal claims of the argument. If human consciousness is scandalized and therefore produces scandalous texts making scandal the interpretive key for understanding the text, are we not in the terrible condition of not being able to understand because everyone's consciousness, including the interpreter is equally distorted by mimetic

rivalry, equally caught up in deceptions and delusions.

This is the vicious circle that any attempt at understanding is caught up in and I accept this. So what do we do? First, admit that we need help. That is, I accept the strong claims of mimetic theory precisely because they render me humble before the text. They give me a solidarity with the text. The strong claims of mimetic theory yield to a much more humble admission of being implicated in the scandal, of needing to read each text as it is, to figure out the particular shape that forgiveness will take. We have to admit that we have the key and are unable to wield it.

Second, we go back. How is it that we know that all human consciousness is deformed by mimetic rivalry and scandal. We know it through the great texts, including but not limited to the Old and New Testament. René Girard was able to make the distinction between novelistic truth and the romantic lie by reading the great texts of western literature. The literature reveals the truth by representing it and ultimately rejecting it. It is, as Girard makes clear, a structure of conversion.

So, what do we do? In my case, I want to turn to John the Baptist and his relationship with Christ and see if that can help us.

John the Baptist represents the whole of Israel's salvation history. I do not think that John's temptation to be scandalized by Jesus was all that different from the scandal that the Pharisees actually took at Jesus. Let us try to understand John's situation more deeply. "After Herod had arrested and imprisoned him, John the Baptist heard what Christ was doing and he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Mt 11.3)

When someone sits in prison, he has time to reflect on the events that brought him there. The works produced in prison by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Alfred Delp, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King all testify to the clarity of thought that can be born inside prison walls. John the Baptist has been arrested and imprisoned by Herod because he criticized Herod for marrying his brother's wife. John was scandalized by the scandalous acts of a scandalous court and now he is suffering the

consequences. In this state he heard “what Christ was doing” (Mt 11.2) Something in what he heard disturbed him and disturbed him deeply enough to call into question an identification that he had made on the occasion of Jesus’ baptism. When Jesus presents himself to be baptized, John had demurred saying, “I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?” (Mt. 3.13). John is proclaiming this person to be the one for whom he has been preparing the way. But now in prison he seems to be calling his whole life’s work into question. Are you really the one, or was I wrong? Have I been deeply mistaken because what you are doing is not how I pictured it? You are supposed to be baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire. You are to be clearing the threshing floor, gathering the wheat, and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire (cf. Mt 3.12).

I think that Jesus understood every nuance to the question that John’s disciples put to him: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect another?” The question comes from someone who has spent his life preparing for Christ and now sits in prison in a sense because of Christ and

for Christ. And yet when he hears what Christ is doing, he ... He whats? He doubts? Perhaps. He questions? Certainly. But I think Jesus sees deeper and given his answer, we know what John does: He is scandalized.

Jesus' answer to John is both respectful and challenging: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Mt 11.4-5). Jesus puts his strongest credentials before John to prove that he is God's anointed, the one who is to come. He fulfills everything that the Law and Prophets prophesied.

Jesus then formulates a new beatitude: "Blessed is whoever is not scandalized in me" (Mt. 11. 6).ⁱ

Jesus is admitting what Paul later proclaims – he can become a stumbling block, a cause of sin, to those who approach him. By addressing this particular beatitude to John the Baptist, Jesus suggests that the closer one is to him (John the Baptist is the only person recorded in the New Testament to take the title "friend" on himself in reference to Jesus; cf. Jn

3.29), the more liable one is scandal.

Blessed, then, is the one who does not stumble on account of Jesus.

In effect, if you do not fall away because of Jesus, you will not fall away at all.

More precisely, there are all kinds of ways that can fall away: concern over material comfort, reputation, sensuality, but even if one has conquered all of these, there remains the danger of falling away because of Christ himself. If one does not fall away on account of him, then one is truly happy.

Here we approach the heart of the mystery. That the Cross is a scandal is unsurprising. It is a scandal in the usual sense of the word. Someone who seemed good and was a public figure turned out to be a blasphemer and is executed. It is a scandal in the more technical sense that Girard uses it: the mimetic conflict that ends in the sacrifice of the scapegoat. It is even “scandalous” in what I will call a Platonic sense. In Book IV of the *Republic* Plato has Socrates relate a story. Socrates begins the story by remarking, “I once heard something that I trust.” I surmise that he feels the story is trustworthy because it is a self-reported story and no one would

report such a shameful story about himself unless it were true. He continues:

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying by the public executioner. He desired to look, but at the same time he was disgusted and made himself turn away; and for a while he struggled and covered his face. But finally, overpowered by the desire, he opened his eyes wide, ran toward the corpses and said: “Look, you damned wretches, take your fill of the fair sight.”ⁱⁱ

But that the resurrection is a scandal is surprising. The symbol of the resurrection is the empty tomb. The stone, the obstacle has been removed. There is no more scandal. And yet, living without scandal turns out to be the biggest scandal of all.

ⁱ I am trying to stay as close to the Greek as I can in this case. It is translated as “Blessed is the man who does fall away on account of me” in the NIV and “Blessed is he who takes no offense at me” in the RSV.

Works Cited

- (ISSF) René Girard, *I Saw Satan Fall Like Lightning* (NY: Orbis Books, 2001)
(TH) René Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987)
ⁱⁱ –**Plato** (Πλάτων), *Republic* (Πολιτεία) bk iv, 439e-440a (Bloom tran. p. 119).