

## **ORIGINAL SIN, GRACE, AND THE APOCALYPSE**

### **Theological Remarks on R. Girard's *Battling to the End***

#### **Draft Version; only for personal use**

What I try to do today is voice some of my unease at some details of the *Battling to the End* from a theological point of view, and then vent some ideas about what our understanding of the apocalypse could gain from linking Girard's thoughts up with Raymund Schwager's five-act model of dramatic theology. The remarks as to how that is linked with grace and original sin will probably be less dominant than you might expect.

So, let us start with some problematic observations:

1) When Girard does allude to the apocalypse of John, he seems to regard its author as identical with the author of the gospel of John (and the three letters). To be sure, he does not explicitly say so, but his formulations indicate that he thinks so.<sup>1</sup> Historical exegetes tell us in rare agreement that this is hardly so: the John of the Revelation must be different from the John of the gospel; he probably not even wanted to use the evangelist's name as a pseudonym, as was usual in Biblical times, but was a different person who happened to have the same name: John of Patmos, not John the evangelist. Now, tradition did not know that, and probably most ordinary Christians don't know it; and since Girard is no theologian he has every right not to know it either, even more so because this simple omission does not invalidate anything he says about John's apocalypse. But as a theologian I wanted to clarify that point.

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<sup>1</sup> "This is where the apocalyptic question arises, less perhaps in the apocalypse of John, to which everyone rushes when eschatology is at issue, than in the texts of the other evangelists, Mark, Matthew, and Luke, [...]." (Girard, René and Chantre, Benoît. 2010. *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 110. .

2) It is, however, interesting that Girard says so little about John's apocalypse, and my question will be whether he could say more about it and in what way. I will dwell on that much more in a little while, but let me first get to my third problem.

3) It does not seem at all clear to me whether Girard takes apocalyptic texts as diagnostic or as prognostic texts. What's the difference?

If read as diagnostic, apocalyptic texts analyze our current situation in the here and now. They tell us something about the dynamics at work in our world. In that way they avoid the pitfall of so many fundamentalist groups who think they can read from these texts predictions about the how – and sometimes even about the when – of the end of the world. Now, the last one can be clearly excluded from Girard: The when is not to be known by us. With respect to the how, it is not clear to me whether Girard sticks to a clearly diagnostic approach or not. If he did, this would also entail that we do not know whether these dynamics really lead to a catastrophic cataclysm or not. It would mean that the texts show a possibility, not a necessity. A prognostic reading would view these texts as prognoses: so, if they are true, what they foretell must happen, we cannot stop it, we can only prepare for it.

There are indications in BE for either of the two readings: While Girard on the one hand says very clearly that the apocalypse is a *real possibility* \*\*, there are other passages where he seems to speak of a certainty. And for a while this back and forth caused me some confusion.

In the meantime, however, I would argue that my either-or distinction of diagnostic or prognostic is too blunt distinction. It is bridged and overcome by another viewpoint: the prophetic. The prophetic is a diagnosis of present dynamics, but since they are dynamics, the prophecy anticipates their future consequences. So it is not restricted to the present. On the other hand, the prophetic is

not prognostic in the sense of a certain prediction, it is a conditioned anticipation. It is conditioned on the assumption that the current dynamics will continue. A false prophet is not necessarily recognized by the mere fact that his prophecies don't come true (under these criteria Jonah would have been a false prophet, as actually would have Jesus, as I will explain shortly). For, if the people heed the prophet's voice and change their ways accordingly, the dynamics at work will change, and thus the outcome. So, the prophet might be instrumental in preventing the very catastrophe he prophesied. That makes him a good and effective prophet. The false prophet is the one who either elicits false hopes or announces a never-threatening catastrophe. Neither can be said of Girard: he is actually pretty scarce on hope in BE and the catastrophe he warns of does not seem impossible at all. So his book is a prophetic book, which does not necessitate the imminent demise of the world at all.

However, there can be different modes of probability: how deeply entrenched have the dynamics already become of which a prophet warns? Are the people still able to change their ways – and how? Here Girard seems to be very pessimistic when he says that while on the one hand Christianity has failed but that it has foretold its own failure (\*\*)

I actually think that this is a very hard statement for a declared Christian thinker, to state that Christianity has failed. Going deeper into what he means by it, I found that I should not have been surprised by this statement at all, although I would have formulated it differently.

If one takes Christianity to be the complete and eventual unmasking of the scapegoat-mechanism, and if one hoped that this revelation would enable humanity to give up their ways and convert to a peaceful mimesis, one must conclude that Christianity has failed because this has not happened and there is no reason to believe that it will happen. Christianity has taken away the sacrificial containment of violence with the effect that violence can roam the more freely

for it – and thus the possibility of human self-destruction, the apocalypse, has increased sharply. If that had been all Christianity is about, then it would certainly have failed; and the remark that it had foretold its failure would be hardly any consolation. Yet, I would say it has not foretold its failure but prophesied it – with the implication of what that means that I stated before –, and also that the unmasking of the scapegoat-mechanism was not everything it was about. Furthermore I would argue that this kind of failure was clear from the moment of the crucifixion, if we understand correctly what the crucifixion meant.

It is here that I want to bring in Raymund Schwager's dramatic model of Jesus' life and death. According to that, the first and foremost thing Jesus did was not to unmask the scapegoat-mechanism, it was to reveal a new image of God: of a non-violent God of proactive and universal forgiveness. (Here Schwager and Girard, of course, are in full agreement; however, I think that the consequences of that should also be stated more clearly in describing what Christianity is all about). This divine image was to be taken by people as their new model of emulation, thus leading them into a peaceful mimesis and a conduct with one another that mirrored the heavenly Father's conduct towards them, as Jesus had proclaimed it in his words and embodied it in his meals with sinners, his healings and exorcisms. If people had done so, the Kingdom whose advent Jesus had proclaimed would have materialized. So, was Jesus a false prophet due to the fact that it did not materialize?

If prophecy were prognostics, he would have been. But, as I said, things are different. People decided against this prompting, clung to their old image of a violent God and behaved accordingly. And now, Jesus responds by announcing the judgment to them. Again, Schwager and Girard are in perfect agreement that this judgment is not a violent retaliation of an angry God but rather the self-judgment that humanity will bring on itself, if it sticks to its old ways, endorsed by a violent image of God. So in fact, what Girard describes as the apocalypse

is this very dynamic on a planetary scale in a technologically advanced age: the apocalypse is the human self-destruction, it is also the unintended consequence of the destruction of the sacred by the introduction of the non-violent Father of Jesus Christ.

Yet, there are notable differences here too: so far we have not yet had a full unmasking of the scapegoat-mechanism in Schwager's model because Jesus is still alive, engaged in a struggle of words with his opponents but not yet having been put to death. It is only his death that completely unveils human bondage to the power of sin. Therefore it is only Jesus death that provides the first condition for the insight into the mechanisms of original sin (the other condition is the resurrection that enables us to bear this horrifying insight, as Schwager has held, but also James Allison has explained in his work). In Schwager's analysis, Jesus death has another more important meaning, however: in the passion Jesus undergoes the human self-judgment that he had announced earlier. This means, however, that Jesus again "falsifies" his own prophesy: it is not sinful humans who destroy each other in self-judgment; it is the one sinless human being, who is also in complete union with the divine father, that undergoes the human self-judgment. He substitutes himself for doomed humanity in order to save them from their own self-destruction. The resurrection shows that he was successful in this: the Father sends the risen one back to his fallen disciples with a message of peace, not of revenge. The Passion and the Resurrection have completely transformed what was announced before (human self-judgment). The parable of the wicked vinedressers has been "falsified" in the best way possible. Jesus, the prophet has "failed" in order to become Jesus the redeemer. The sacred sacrifice has been completely deconstructed but there is a new type of sacrifice now that can be called Christian.

It is interesting to notice that the early Girard did not allow for a Christian sacrifice. Only his discussions with Schwager convinced him that Hebrews was

not a relapse into the sacred but rather a transformation of the sacred. Schwager argued that Hebrews was indeed drawing on OT imagery of sacrifice but transformed it through the Christ event to mean something else.

So for Schwager the Passion and Resurrection of Christ transformed soteriology: human self-judgment was voluntarily taken on by Jesus and thereby he transformed the notion of sacrifice. When Girard was reluctant to accept the Letter to the Hebrews as really part of the Christian revelation, he was in good company. Hebrews was one of the last NT-writings to be universally accepted as canonical. Interestingly, it was the Western, Latin Church that was very hesitant to accept it as canonical. The other NT-book that was very controversial, this time in the Eastern, Greek Church, and was only accepted hesitantly and very late into the canon was John's apocalypse, of which Girard hardly writes, mostly concentrating on the gospel apocalypses.

My question now is: could this seeming historical coincidence have some systematic relevance? Or put in different words: would a transformed reading of Revelation analogous to the transformed reading of Hebrews change anything in Girard's look on the apocalypse and would it enhance our understanding of it?

I want to suggest so along the following lines, and forgive me for just providing a short sketch:

First of all, Girard rightly observes that the apocalyptic parts of the synoptic gospels stand before the Passion, but that they contain the apocalypse after the Passion. He states:

“The synoptic gospels have a fundamental structure in which human history is inserted into that of God. The second circle of history (and its catastrophic end) is *contained in the first circle*, which finishes with the Passion.”<sup>2</sup> “There

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

is an initial circle, which is Christ's life and ends with the Passion. There is a second circle, which is human history and ends with the apocalypse. The second circle is contained in the first."<sup>3</sup>

What would that mean? I think it means that the Resurrection and the Sending of the Spirit both separate and link the two circles. Thus, the synoptic apocalypses have to be understood exactly like the judgment parables: in them Christ warns in a prophetic way of the consequences that ensue, if humans continue on the path they are on and reject Christ's new image of God and the positive mimesis it would make possible. One could say: Christ prophetically shows the consequences of people's rejection God's grace offered to them by the proclamation and incipient embodiment of the Kingdom. The Passion proves that the dynamics among humans stayed the same, it shows that Jesus – and with him Christianity – have failed in this respect and the logical consequence would be human self-destruction. In that process, the deep entanglement of humanity into sin, its connection to the scapegoat-mechanism, which can be called its captivity in original sin, is exposed and the failure of Christianity as ethics is revealed. This does not mean, however, that following Christ's original call was completely impossible. If that were the case, his warnings would have been prognoses not prophecies. Yet, a prophecy is not merely a neutral assessment of possibilities, it is a warning of real, imminent danger. To heed Christ's call was still possible and yet almost impossible, according to which way one looks at it.

Schwager analyzes:

“But since Jesus appeared and proclaimed God's rule at a point in time when, over the course of evolution, sin had long lodged in the natural make-up of human beings, an acceptance of his message was no longer possible on a purely ethical level. Nevertheless, the kingdom-message remained a real possibility. To realize it a miraculous power was certainly needed, namely a faith that could move mountains (see Matthew 17:20; 21:21; Mark 11:22–23) and liberate and heal the human nature that was ill and imprisoned by

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 112.

evil (see Mark 1:21–2:12 and parallels). This faith did not yet include the Cross but the willingness to lose one's present life in order to gain it through God in a new way (Matthew 10:39 and parallels; 16:25 and parallels). Also part of this faith that Jesus intended to waken with his message was the willingness to bear the sufferings and sins of others, as he himself did in his healing activity (see Matthew 8:16f.). So in spite of a long history of human sin the original will of God was not simply out of date. Indeed, the merely ethical appeal had become powerless in the meantime, as the fate of the Israelite prophets shows. In Jesus, however, there came a new possibility: the innermost dynamic of God's dawning reign, occurring through a mountain-moving faith that subverted the whole past history of sin so as to heal the sickness of human nature."<sup>4</sup>

I think there is a lot of resonance here with BA, which I cannot detail now for reasons of time.

However, the Passion and Resurrection also mean that the dynamics on the part of God have changed: he does not return to take revenge at the vinedresser for his son. The son has taken on the violence willingly to transform it. And the Spirit as the director of world history weaves that new element into history, so that the conversion to such a faith still remains a possibility.

That would mean that the apocalyptic parts of the gospels cannot be taken at face value anymore, because the judgment-parables can't either. They both have to be transformed. So the logical conclusion would be to see the post-Passion apocalypse of John as the transformed version of the gospel apocalypses. The problem with this logic is that it is the gospel apocalypses that clearly show violence on the human side of – not on God's – while Rev. has some passages that are very hard to read without placing excessive violence on God's side. On the other hand, Rev. is dominated by a figure that is unknown to the gospel apocalypses, namely the slaughtered lamb, which clearly symbolizes

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<sup>4</sup> Schwager, Raymund. 2006. *Banished from Eden. Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation*. Translated by Williams, James G. Leominster: Gracewing, 60. (= BfE)..



the crucified Christ and thus signifies the transformation that has taken place through the Passion and Resurrection. This new aspect may not be overlooked.

So the suggestion is that – as with Hebrews – Rev takes up an older imagery, that of a violent God, but transforms it to say something different. Of course, that is not at all my idea. Jackson and Redmon argued for that in their brilliant article in *Contagion* 12<sup>5</sup> and a student of Józef Niewiadomski's in Innsbruck, Karin Peter, who is currently working with us on the Schwager-edition, did the same independently of Jackson and Redmon in her dissertation by focusing on Schwager's published and unpublished thoughts on how to interpret the book of Rev.

To be sure, both interpretations of Rev still have their problems when they want to convince the reader that Rev. can completely be read without placing violence on God's side. Too clearly does the book seem to speak of God's violence. So I think there is still work to be done, despite these outstanding works. But this work has to be continued along the lines laid down by them, and in continuing it we have to hold on to the insight that a central element of the transformation of the apocalyptic is placing the slaughtered lamb in the middle and making it the center of everything that happens, also making it the hermeneutical key to it.

For a conclusion of this quite disoriented sketch let me make two more suggestions:

One is to read Rev as a kind of epilogue to the Jesus-Drama, as presented by Schwager. This idea is also put forward by Karin Peter in her thesis, and she was inspired to try that by Józef Niewiadomski. An epilogue in that context

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jackson, J. A. / Redmon, Allen H. : "And They Sang A New Song": Reading John's Revelation From The Position Of The Lamb. In: *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 99-114; ebenso online: <http://muse.jhu.edu/content/z3950/journals/contagion/v012/12.jackson.html>  
<http://muse.uq.edu.au/content/z3950/journals/contagion/v012/12.jackson.html>.

would mean that the message which the drama has already delivered is reinforced but also placed in a new situation: the one that has come about through the Christ-event and its transformative influence on human history. It reinforces the message that human violence, unchecked and left on its own, will lead to human self-destruction. And it keeps in mind that this is not a neutral assessment but an imminent danger that can only be avoided by a mountain-moving faith. It situates this warning in the new historical circle in which the Christ-event has broken the sacred power of violence, in which Satan has basically fallen. However John's apocalypse also tells us that violence has reoccupied a place in heaven symbolized by the angels who propel the apocalyptic violence. Not because God is violent; this has been once and for all clarified. But the message of the non-violent God has resorted to violence itself in the course of history in the church, and the care for victims that has become a hallmark of modernity and post-modernity, which could be called the secular consequence of the Christ event, can degenerate into scapegoat-hunting just as easily. These angels thus would symbolize that while violence does not belong to the divine, it has reentered in a more dangerous way even the religion that unmasked it and its secular offspring that wanted to overcome it. The lamb and the two animals of the apocalypse have a lot in common but the main difference is: the lamb does not bear its wounds like the marks of a hero, it is hurt and still healed; the animal bears its wound in a heroic, i. e. basically a self-righteous fashion, as Jackson and Redmon also point out.<sup>6</sup>

The second suggestion asks how Jesus' taking human self-judgment on himself in his Passion transforms the apocalypse, or asked in a different way: how is grace operative even if and when the self-destruction of humanity occurs? Here

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jackson, J. A. and Redmon, Allen H. . "'And They Sang A New Song": Reading John's Revelation From The Position Of The Lamb", *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, 12, 99-114, 107-109. Also available from <http://muse.jhu.edu/content/z3950/journals/contagion/v012/12.jackson.html>  
<http://muse.uq.edu.au/content/z3950/journals/contagion/v012/12.jackson.html>.

I would like to draw on Petra Steinmair-Pösel's analysis of the special way that grace appears in the Passion itself. For, I would suggest that the Passion has ended the connection between a possible historical human self-destruction and divine judgment. Petra argues that during the Passion, Schwager's third act, grace has two important ways of appearing: one is the grace that Jesus experiences from the father, the other the grace that humans are offered through Jesus in the Passion. The former is Jesus' ability to give himself up into his death without resentment and hatred, to allow his life to be used for others, to give his life for their salvation. The latter is the resulting attitude of non-violence and forgiveness on Jesus' side that is expressed most clearly in his prayer for his persecutors. I would suggest that the slaughtered lamb of the apocalypse embodies grace in exactly the same form, even if the surrounding violence is mistaken for God's or even the lamb's.

Thus apocalyptic texts show us that God will not intervene violently to stop our violence, that he respects the consequences of our deeds to the utmost. But they also show that he intervenes in the form of the slaughtered lamb that knows that we don't know what we are doing while we do it – the principal revelation of the mimetic mechanism of violence notwithstanding. Violence cannot be enlightened away but it can be borne away by that lamb. Interestingly the images of the new heaven and earth and the new Jerusalem that form the hopeful side of John's apocalypse correspond very well to Steinmair-Pösel's view of grace in the fourth act, in the situation of the resurrection. But I don't have time to elaborate on that now.

To conclude: the prophetic voice of Christian apocalyptic does not predict an unavoidable cataclysmic end of the world, but it does seriously warn of a highly relevant, imminent, danger of humans producing apocalyptic events. The Shoah was an apocalyptic event for the Jews of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The persecutions of Nero were an apocalyptic event for the Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup> cen-

tury. Prophecies of an apocalyptic event in our time are to be taken seriously, but they are prophecies not predictions. What the Biblical apocalypses make clear: the violence in these events is of human, and not divine, origin; and God in the person of his son has saved and will save his flock not from its material, but from its spiritual consequences. We do not know who belongs to that flock and who doesn't. The revelation of the cross also tells us that the line will not be drawn between people – there were no people on Jesus' side with the disciples failing him. The line will be drawn within people [weiter ausarbeiten in paper als eine Konsequenz]. We will not avoid the material consequences by a special ethics because the merely ethical approach was already insufficient in Jesus' time. What can save us is faith, a faith that can move mountains. It is not restricted to any particular religion or tradition, although it has found its full expression in the Jewish-Christian revelation, which therefore is of irrevocable relevance.

Girard, René, and Chantre, Benoît. 2010. *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Jackson, J. A. , and Redmon, Allen H. . "“And They Sang A New Song”: Reading John's Revelation From The Position Of The Lamb”, *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, 12, 99-114. Also available from <http://muse.jhu.edu/content/z3950/journals/contagion/v012/12.jackson.html>

<http://muse.uq.edu.au/content/z3950/journals/contagion/v012/12.jackson.html>.

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