

COLLOQUIUM ON VIOLENCE AND RELIGION
CONFERENCE 2010

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
SOUTH BEND, INDIANA

THE EMPTINESS OF THE KINGDOM:
USING ANTICOLONIAL THEORY TO RE-READ GIRARD

BY

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BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

JULY 2, 2010

In his most recent book, *Battling to the End*, Girard claims that humankind faces a stark and urgent choice: renounce violence and vengeance absolutely, and bring about the Kingdom of God, or face apocalyptic violence. However optimistic or not Girard might be about this "community of love and joy"¹ appearing on earth, it seems clear that he is not hopeful about its coming about through any of the rational means normally hoped for in the areas of, say, politics, law, or humanism. In fact, Girard reserves special scorn for the hope of humanism that eventually humanity will transcend its violence through reason, and the Hegelian idea that violence itself contains the seeds of its own overcoming. Instead, Girard claims that the regime of mimetic violence, which he identifies with the Powers and Principalities described by Paul, will eventually trump any and all such rational attempts to contain it. So what, if anything, can be done?

In this paper I hope first to describe what role there is in Girard's account for human action in avoiding apocalyptic violence and preparing the ground for the kingdom. Then, by bringing Girard into dialogue with two foundational anticolonial theorists, Frantz Fanon and Mohandas Gandhi, I hope to reframe the struggle against the Kingdom of the Powers as an anticolonial struggle. Specifically, I want to suggest that a vestige of the very triumphal, autonomous subjectivity that underwrites mimetic violence is present in the notion of nonviolence, and of the kingdom, that Girard offers. As an alternative, I hope to offer an account of a subjectivity that I believe is more consonant with Girard's theory--a subjectivity and a kingdom fractured, humbled and empty.

Throughout his writings, Girard has maintained that humanity's imitation of the perfect nonviolence of Christ is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of the Kingdom:

¹ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans., with a foreword, by James G. Williams

Only the unconditional and, if necessary, unilateral renunciation of violence can put an end to [mimetic rivalry]. The Kingdom of God means the complete and definitive elimination of every form of vengeance and every form of reprisal in relations between men. Jesus makes all of this an absolute duty in everyday life.²

Within mimetic theory, this requirement of absolute nonviolence, renouncing vengeance and even self-defense, derives from an understanding of violence as arising from rivalries that the parties involved are unable to recognize. It denies the commonly held distinction between self-defense and the violence that one initiates, because it holds that both are the product of rivalries in which all parties are responsible. Girard offers the image of these rivalries as streams, some small and some large, converging into a giant river.³ Anything less than absolute nonviolence, even in self-defense, adds to this great river of mimetic rivalry, and the violence it produces.

According to mimetic theory, rivalries arise because our desires arise only in imitation of the desires of others. These rivalries are the source of violence because the rivalries can converge, for instance, on a single object, leading to conflict over that object, and ultimately a "war of all against all." At the height of this frenzy, the putatively desired object ceases to be attractive; only the rival remains fascinating. At this stage, as Jean-Michel Oughourlian puts it, each rival seeks to acquire the autonomy--the very being--of the other.⁴ Given this formulation, imitation of the desire of the other might be thought of as an attempt to secure real subjectivity,

(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), xx.

² René Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1987), 197.

³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 24.

⁴ Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*, trans. Eugene Webb (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 2010), 23.

such as the other is seen to possess. Mimetic rivalry can be relinquished only along with the drive to be a stable, enduring subject.⁵

Pursuing this line of argument, Christ's nonviolence was possible because he was free of the pursuit of "real subjectivity" and the rivalries which that pursuit leads to. He sought only to imitate the desire of God, for the Kingdom to come here on earth. Jesus could accept the rivalry of others without returning it in aggression, or fleeing from it.

The Powers, with which Girard has identified the scapegoat mechanism, are conceived of by Girard as ensuring "the shaky relative order that [humans] enjoy."⁶ Satan is another term Girard often uses to indicate the Powers as a whole. We support the Powers and add to their legitimacy insofar as we strive for victories in the world's rivalries: sexual, political, academic.⁷ The Powers do our dirty work for us, allowing order to be maintained via scapegoats without our needing to feel morally compromised. The Powers are constantly changing their shape, in order to maintain power. In our own time, the Powers have even appeared to be revolutionary, and to care about the fate of victims.⁸

And yet Christ is in the process of disarming the Powers, if not destroying them, having ultimately deprived them of scapegoats through his crucifixion.⁹ As John Yoder puts it, Christ was "not the slave of any power, of any law or custom, community or institution, value or theory.

⁵ For more on this perspective, see Eugene Webb, "Rene Girard and the Symbolism of Religious Sacrifice," *Anthropoetics* 11, no. 1 (Spring / Summer 2005), <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1101/webb.htm>.

⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁹ René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 2010), 118.

Not even to save his own life [would] he let himself be made a slave of these Powers."¹⁰ Christ's crucifixion was a decisive unveiling of this mechanism, mostly hidden until then and dependent upon that hiddenness for effectiveness at pacifying a group. Given Christ's victory, "all order is suspect in a way: it always hides the one whose blood was shed in order to reconcile us."¹¹

As knowledge of the scapegoat mechanism has spread more widely, its effectiveness has decreased, such that greater numbers of victims are necessary to achieve the pacifying effects that are still possible. Thus there is less and less of a middle ground: either humanity must renounce violence as a means of bringing order, or it must perish in apocalyptic violence. All of the systems that have seemed to guarantee some rational control over violence are gradually losing their effectiveness. This is the core of *Battling to the End*, an insight that Clausewitz seems to approach and then back away from: violence ultimately leads to extremes not subject to rational control.

And yet there are still some grounds for hope. Simply put, quoting Girard, "To make the revelation wholly good, and not threatening at all, humans have only to adopt the behavior recommended by Christ: abstain completely from retaliation, and renounce the escalation to extremes."¹² Such behavior is essentially an Imitation of Christ, to "identify with the other, to efface oneself before him." According to Girard, Christ alone allows us to escape from rivalry.¹³

Girard suggests that a recognition of mimetic rivalry is a necessary condition of its transformation,¹⁴ but not sufficient: ultimately, according to Girard, whether or not we can "lower our guard" before the attraction to rivalry that the other presents "*is not under our*

¹⁰ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 145.

¹¹ Girard, *Battling to the End*, 141.

¹² *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133.

control." There are no "infallible procedures" that will keep us from devolving into rivalry, and "no philosophical thought will master the shift to charity."¹⁵

However, Girard does allow that authentic love and identification with others already exists in our world, as "in hospitals, and even . . . in some forms of research," a love without which "the world would have exploded long ago."¹⁶ And Girard cautions not to "underestimate the insertion of the Spirit into history, nor exceptional individuals nor the opening of groups to the universal."¹⁷ In short, "Our world is both the worst it has ever been, and the best."¹⁸ The Kingdom of God and an apocalypse of violence are both imminent possibilities.

What might the anticolonial thought of Fanon and Gandhi bring to this line of thought? To begin with, both articulate a moment, in which the colonized party has allowed the colonizer at least a foothold in the territory of the colonized. And even in the present, there are many gradations between absolute colonizer and absolutely colonized. For instance, Fanon describes a "native bourgeoisie" that actively benefits from the presence of the colonizer, and a class of urban intellectuals that seek to expel the colonizer but at the same time are fundamentally out of touch with the needs of the masses of their colonized brothers and sisters. Similarly, Gandhi articulates an illusory vision of freedom in India, which he derides as seeking "English rule without the Englishman."¹⁹

Both Fanon and Gandhi also describe a necessary recovery of self, a necessary overcoming of humiliation necessary for the colonizer to be expelled. In Gandhi's terms, self-

¹⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵ Ibid., 133.

¹⁶ Ibid., 131.

¹⁷ Ibid., 119.

¹⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹⁹ M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 90 vols. (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1958-1984), 10:255.

rule must begin with the individual. For his part, Fanon famously urges the therapeutic benefits of violence against one's oppressor,²⁰ which Gandhi surprisingly also affirms, should the humiliated individual not have "assimilated the non-violence spirit."²¹

To apply this perspective to the Kingdom of the Powers, two points might be made, the first about how the Powers maintain control, and the second, about how that control might be weakened. First of all, as Girard might put it, the Powers might be thought of as having gained a destructive foothold among humanity for the benefits that they were seen to have provided to humanity--namely, their pacifying function, the basis for all that we term culture. And just as with the unwillingness of those colonized individuals benefiting from colonization, we too are unwilling to let go of the Powers. In both cases, the argument is made that the colonized would be unable to function without the colonizers--that there would be a slide into chaos.

Girard does often describe the collusion of humanity with the Powers, but an anticolonial perspective seems to highlight the depth of that collusion. An anticolonial perspective also seems to require the articulation of a fundamental fragmentation in each of us: each of us is both on the side of the Powers, and oppressed by the Powers.

This leads to the second point: at the individual level, a certain kind of self-transformation or a self-asceticism is crucial to prepare the ground for a possible action of grace, for the sort of conversion Girard often writes about. This is perhaps captured in John Yoder's understanding of *metanoia*: "not remorse, regret, sorrow for sin," so much as a "transformation of the understanding, a redirected will ready to live in a new kind of world."²² Similarly, Fanon

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 94.

²¹ Gandhi, 77:343.

²² John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*, 2d ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977), 38.

wrote of the individual seeking "liquidation of all untruths implanted in his being by oppression."²³ Such a transformed understanding could allow individuals to judge for themselves whether or not a given law or situation was "repugnant to . . . conscience."²⁴ Gandhi also famously prescribed ascetic practices such as fasting and meditation in pursuit of this transformed understanding, with the goal of "reducing the self to zero."²⁵ Finally, for Fanon and Gandhi both, experience working and living with the poor was crucial to this transformed understanding. Is it possible that Christ's example of fellowship with the poor and other outcasts was not just (or so much) an example of charity, as an example of how to work to transform one's understanding, to loosen the drive toward autonomy and "real" subjectivity?

Concretely, though, what do we do in the here and now? Fanon writes about the individual who cannot yet muster full resistance, urging him to "make it so that the slightest gesture has to be torn out of him."²⁶ Are we called upon to refuse cooperation with the Powers whenever possible? And if we believe the Powers are strengthened by rivalrous action, that "resistance itself brings about the reenactment,"²⁷ what might this refusal of cooperation look like?

The ground must be prepared for whatever act of grace is available to offer (relative) freedom from rivalry, and potential for action. An emptying is required, an opening to others, including--to put a Jungian spin on it--an opening to the poor of one's own personality, what Jung termed "the shadow": the repressed, denied, neglected parts of the psyche. There are multiple contemporary examples of such a procedure, such as the "admission of powerlessness"

²³ Fanon, 309.

²⁴ Gandhi, 10:294.

²⁵ Ibid., 44:468.

²⁶ Fanon, 294.

²⁷ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 20.

in Step One of the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Steps. Jean-Michel Oughourlian, in *The Genesis of Desire*, offers further guidance on what it might look like to begin to loosen the hold of mimetic rivalry in one's day-to-day life, and especially in one's intimate relationships. To the sovereign self, these ascetic actions can only feel like crucifixion and death. Yet, God willing, new life may await on the other side. And both at the level of our individual relationships and at the larger societal level, perhaps we have to relinquish control and even a requirement for order, which as suggested above always seems to involve the agency of the Powers. In contrast, the "order" of the Kingdom of God is not a result of human attempts to achieve it, but is always present, recognized only when attempts at control are relinquished.

The nonviolent "refusal of cooperation" of one who has undergone such ascesis and conversion through grace is not, as theorist Judith Butler puts it, that variety of "moral sadism" that arises from a nonviolence "posturing" as if it were beyond "ethical quandary," beyond "the struggle against violence [which] accepts that violence is one's own possibility."²⁸ Rather, it is the sort of nonviolence that depends on what Merton calls "the truth" of the situation between oneself and one's opponent: "a common relationship in a common complex of sins."²⁹ This true nonviolence is an outgrowth of a subjectivity that, to the world at least, is far from autonomous, powerful or effective.

Letting go of effectiveness seems to be key. I agree with Yoder that "what Jesus renounced is not first of all violence, but rather the compulsiveness of purpose that leads the

²⁸ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 171-72.

²⁹ Thomas Merton, Introduction to *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Mohandas K. Gandhi's Non-Violence in Peace and War*, ed. Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1965), 11-15.

strong to violate the dignity of others."³⁰ His most "effective" act was arguably to suffer shame, torture and death rather than be unfaithful to his vision of the Father's kingdom.³¹

And perhaps we also need to reexamine our own visions of the Kingdom of God in order to support a practice of true nonviolence. Perhaps the kingdom we must seek is not so much the "community of love and joy,"³² a kingdom of fullness and victory. Rather, to return to Girard in *Battling to the End*, perhaps we are to seek instead the kingdom of struggle, of emptiness, withdrawal and ceaseless battle (as suggested by the kingdom sayings in the Book of Thomas?). This experience of struggle is not the experience of those who have relinquished the drive for sovereign autonomy, but of those still captive to that drive.

The kingdom is available in the very moment of Christ's crucifixion--a moment of nonviolent fidelity in the face of terrible suffering. From the point of view of a subjectivity clinging to its autonomy, such action in and of itself can only be life-denying foolishness. But perhaps from the point of view of the converted self, a subjectivity that through grace has relaxed its grip on autonomy, such action is cause for great joy.

³⁰ Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 237.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

³² René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans., with a foreword, by James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), xx.

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