

CHAPTER 5

MIMETIC REALISM

Mimesis, the human reflective capacity that makes us most like God - able to love - is also the capacity for the greatest evils, namely, hatred, conflict and violence. The very quality that makes us more than animals is also the quality that causes men to stoop much lower than animals.

When we lose sight of the God who adores us, when God is no longer the source of our desires, we simply don't know what we desire and start searching, mostly unaware of our quest. Soon we begin to reflect the confusion and desires of those around us.

Adoration turns to accusation.

Affirmation turns to suspicion.

The very quality that was meant to draw us into intimacy as we reflect the love we behold in another who is like us, can lead to the greatest isolation when we misinterpret the intentions of the one we unconsciously mimic.

Let me illustrate. Two young boys may become best of friends because of shared interests. Their enjoyment of similar activities, such as fishing and hiking, forges a bond between them. Each may think that the desire originates

within himself, that he is individually the origin and owner of his own desires, and that he was simply lucky to find a friend with whom he has so much in common. The fact that their desires are interactive and mutually reinforcing each other's desires, is mostly beyond the conscious level.

Mimicking one another's desires provides a basis for a beautiful friendship as they grow into adulthood.

Then it happens!

Both notice the same girl.

Both fall in love.

Both are oblivious to how much their friend has contributed to what they think is their own desire.

What was once the basis for friendship, now becomes the reason for conflict.

Mimesis sustains their rivalry as much as it once sustained their friendship.

Jean-Michel Oughourlian, in his book, *The Puppet of Desire*, says it this way:

Like gravity, mimesis is at once a force of attraction and a force of repulsion: imitation begins as discipleship, in which the model is taken simply as a model. But before long, the imitation of a gesture will cause the model and the disciple to grasp at the same object: the model will become a rival, and mimesis will take on the character of a conflict. In this way mimesis engenders both attraction and repulsion;

in this way it produces both discipleship and conflict, nonviolent and violent acquisition, peace and war, alliance and tension, fighter and opponent, likeness and difference - or should one say it gives rise to the difference as such? Just as gravity, which hurls bodies against one another, is at the same time the condition of their separation, that is, of their individual existence, so also mimesis, the force of attraction between human beings, assures by their very workings their concrete distinctness, their simultaneous identity and individuality - in a word, their particular existence.

RENÉ GIRARD AND MIMETIC THEORY

We have looked at the human ability to reflect, to mirror. Up to now we have illustrated these concepts on a personal and interpersonal level: Mimesis and desire; desire and the formation of self; unconscious mimesis in personal relationships. As we continue our discoveries of the presence and effect of mimesis in larger groups and communities, I think it is a good time to introduce René Girard and his contribution to mimetic theory.

René is a French historian, a literary critic, and a philosopher of culture. His thoughts have influenced many branches of science including anthropology, theology, psychology, mythology, sociology, literary criticism, economics, cultural studies, and philosophy. In each of these areas

there is a growing body of literature that builds on the work of Girard.

Mimetic theory, or mimetic realism as some prefer to call it can be summarized as follows:

1 - Desire is mimetic.

Much has been written and said about desire since the earliest literature. The same is true for mimesis. What René Girard made the world aware of is how these two are connected - desire is suggested by another.

2 - Mimetic rivalry and conflict originates in mimetic desire.

When two hands reach for the same object, conflict is most often the result.

3 - In early human groupings, mimetic violence resulted in scapegoating - the single victim mechanism. This represents the birth of sacrifice, which became ritual, which is the basis of archaic religion and culture.

4 - The Bible reveals all of the above, whereas myth tries to conceal the violence or the innocence of the victim. The Biblical scriptures are unique in making us aware of the scapegoating mechanism and thereby condemning it.

MIMESIS AND HUMAN HISTORY

What do these concepts look like in practice?

Peering into our prehistoric past, attempting to understand the problems our ancestors faced and how they went about solving them, is obviously a very complicated task. There are many studies that focus on particular events, such as the transition from hunter-gatherer societies to agricultural communities. What follows is by no means a comprehensive overview of these processes. Its purpose is to give a specific example of how mimesis could have influenced the development of civilization.

How did early human communities form? Family units obviously provided the most basic structure, but how did small and simple family groups develop into complex social structures?

When primitive groups met, violence would often be the result. However, there were obvious benefits of joining forces as well. More effective hunting, diversifying the means and methods of finding food, safety in numbers - these are but a few of the benefits.

However, imagine such an early community in which there were no formal laws. Conflict was inevitable. Because desire is mimetic, competition, rivalry and violence would thrive

in groups where there were no prohibitions to violence. Unlike most animals, humans do not seem to know at what point to stop rivalry - they will fight until someone dies.

Sacrifice seems to be the one characteristic of early communities that kept them from disintegrating. Archeological evidence show that most of these early communities were religious or at least ritualistic. Some form of sacrificial system, often a human sacrificial system, was at the heart of primitive communities.¹ Why?

The example I will use is set in the context of an agricultural community. It is important, though, to realize that sacrificial practices were present amongst hunter-gatherer groups as well. In fact it might well have been the development of rituals that prompted the transition to agricultural communities..

“From a scientific standpoint there is no generally accepted model accounting for the origin of agriculture, above all in the consideration that agriculture was anti-economic.

Agriculture, far from being a natural and upward step, in fact led commonly to a lower quality of life. Hunter-gatherers typically do less work for the same amount of food, are healthier, and are less prone to famine than primitive farmers: why was this behaviour (agriculture) reinforced

(and hence selected for) if it was not offering adaptational rewards surpassing those accruing to hunter-gathering or foraging economies?”²

In other words, changing from a hunter-gatherer community to an agricultural settlement, was not motivated by a better lifestyle, better health, or more food. So why change?

Girard gives this insight: *“The hunter-gatherers started to settle permanently because of the increasing importance of ritual sites and the complexity of the rituals of which they were part, and which in turn produced, the domestication of animals and the discovery of agriculture. Climate changes or particular soil conditions were also important elements in this later development, but the discovery was very likely to have been made around the sacred burial sites in which any symbolic activity of the primitive community was carried out (such as burying seeds along with human beings, for instance).”* (Girard 2008)

MIMETIC DESIRE AND CONFLICT

The example I will give is purely fictional, however, Girard has offered countless examples of text, from ancient myth to accounts from the middle ages, to modern conflicts, that follow the same pattern. (1)

Let's imagine an early agricultural community. The desire for a certain commodity, let's say a certain kind of livestock ... a goat, will fuel the desire of others to also possess a goat. There will be an ever increasing desire to own goats, however, there are only so many goats. Because we are often oblivious to the origin of our desires, we claim pre-eminence for our desires: "I wanted it first".

Because desire is mimetic, we sense, in a very personal way, the intention of the other to own the object we want for ourselves. The schemes we make to outwit the opposition, mixed with our reflective nature, suggest to us that our rival is making similar schemes. Suspicion begins to scrutinize the opposition for signs that might confirm our fearful imaginations. Confirming signs soon appear.

Rivals often don't know that they are imitating each other. As desire for an object intensifies into rivalry, the object becomes less important and the rival becomes more important. For the sense of lack that awakens these desires, is not only a sense of lacking the object, but rather, a sense of insufficiency - a lack of being. Desire to possess the object, which is an imitation of the rival's desire, grows into a desire to replace the rival - the model of the desire becomes more desirable than the object of desire in this perverted cycle. But the model is a rival and so the only way to satisfy desire is to replace the model. The desire for

an object masks the fundamental desire, which is a desire for being. This can escalate into a situation where one no longer only claims the superiority of one's desire, but one claims the superiority of one's existence.

ESCALATING VIOLENCE

What started as innocent desire, develops into competition. Competition in itself is not bad, but if there are no prohibitions against violence, competition often spills over into violence. Violence in turn, will continue to escalate, if allowed to go unchecked. One conflict gives rise to another. One act of violence, stirs the fires of revenge.

The energy produced by the movement of desire between two people greatly increases within groups, just as the gravitational pull of bodies are directly related to their mass and the distance between them. Soon such communities find themselves torn apart by escalating conflict. Boundaries become blurred. Violence has little respect for position or status. As differentiation within these communities collapses, so does order.

SCAPEGOATING

It is at the very height of this conflict, at the point where it seems to be a war of all against all and the community is about to disintegrate, that the community finds a way to preserve itself. The war of all against all is transformed into

a war of all against one. A single victim is chosen. In the very act of finding a scapegoat, the fragmented and broken community becomes united in their enmity against the minority group or the one. Old enemies are reconciled as they find a common, new enemy.

In the fervor of the moment the selection of the scapegoat is largely spontaneous, but certain criteria seems to happen naturally. The person is normally a bit different: the prettiest (source of jealousy), or the ugliest; a new arrival or a foreigner. If the victim does not have a large family or friendship circle, it makes the task at hand much easier and minimizes future reprisals.

FOUNDING MURDER

As the community externalize their own evil and project it onto the scapegoat, the victim is demonized and so symbolizes everything that is wrong in the community. Usually the accusations include the kind of crimes that disrupt the natural order such as incest and bestiality. **Different offenses, multiple conflicts, melt into one that contains the emotion and frustration of them all.**

A communal catharsis takes place:

The community is unanimous in their verdict.

The reason for our conflict, the source of our frustration has been found. The sacrificial scapegoat is undoubtedly guilty - the community, undoubtedly innocent.

A communal murder happens.

The chaos ceases.

A magical peace descends.

The effect of this founding murder is profound. The community that was torn apart by conflict, at the verge of disintegration, suddenly finds themselves united, at peace and stronger than what they have ever been before. The mindless violence that recklessly damaged the community before, has been replaced by a new kind of violence, a sacred violence that restores peace to the community. The idea of a separation between profane violence and sacred (or redemptive) violence begins to grow. The sense of a community that transcends the individual adds to the sacred nature of this murder. This murder is called the founding murder because it has such a significant influence on unifying and establishing the community.

DEVELOPMENT OF RITUAL AND MYTH

The profound effect that the sacrificial murder has upon the community demands explanation. “The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative”³

We cannot deny the unifying effect, the reconciliation and peace that these events bring to our communities, yet the deeply disturbing nature of the violence of the event stares us in the face. For the sake of the survival

of our communities we need to justify this ‘redemptive’ violence, that brought an end to the destructive violence. And so the very victims that we at first demonize, we then begin to divinize. Rituals and stories explaining the rituals develop. *“Myths are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crisis, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them.”*⁴ Because the whole process is one of symbols and changing representations, the horror of what is actually happening is swallowed up in sacred awe. The murder of an innocent victim becomes heroic sacrifice. The stories grow: stories about angry gods who delight themselves in blood, and therefore restore the peace in exchange for sacrifice; stories about guilty scapegoats. **Blind to the mimetic nature of their own desires, fantastic myths develop to explain what they cannot understand.**

At the first sign of disorder within communities, people who are caught up in magical thinking, resort to the single victim mechanism to rid themselves of the evil. Many models are developed to explain this exchange, but in essence it remains a transaction with a god or gods to whom we are indebted. Ritual becomes the mimetic repetition of the founding murder.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE SCAPEGOAT

As religions develop out of the ritual, a need arises to make the horror of sacrificial murder more acceptable. Often, the victims themselves are persuaded of the necessity of their sacrifice. Parents, sincerely believing in the power of sacrifice, would persuade their child that the gods required his or her life. Our myths try to hide, either the suffering or the innocence of the victim. In describing a ceremonial ritual of child sacrifice, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, observes the following:

*“The mother caresses the child so that he does not moan, witnesses do not weep or cry out of fear of compromising the dignity of the ceremony, and so on. Nor does the victim consider himself a victim, since his mother has handed him over to the priest, and since he has been made to understand that his sacrifice is necessary to appease the wrath of the god.”*⁵

And so the victim is transformed into a willing and heroic sacrifice.

ANCIENT FOUNDATIONS OF CIVILIZATION

Long after the establishment of these early societies, our more modern civilizations remained bound by the myth and violent mechanisms on which they were founded. Empires, sincerely believing in their divine right to domination, would teach their slaves, from the Bible, that

slavery is god's will and purpose. Nations, believing in their divine right to luxury, would persuade their young men to sacrifice themselves in wars to guarantee 'our way of life'. We convince ourselves that our victims either deserved their fate, or that they heroically volunteered to sacrifice themselves, in order to wash our hands of their blood.

When the suffering of our sacrificial victims is acknowledged, we can no longer hide the horror of what is happening. When the sacrifice is exposed as a victim, rather than a hero, the very foundations of the system start to crumble. When the innocence of our victims and the guilt of the community is revealed, we no longer have a legitimate reason for their slaughter.

WHAT HAPPENS IN REALITY?

People lose sight of the God who loves them.

In the absence of our true model, we begin to reflect one another's confusion and desires. Conflict escalates. Accusation thrives. The satan (accuser) stirs up chaos and drives the group to the point of destruction. The same process of accusation also finds a solution to the chaos by means of the single victim mechanism. This is satan casting out satan.

People lost in their quest, to fulfill desires that they do not even know the origin of, form a mob and expel or murder

an innocent victim. Their frustrations have been expressed in the most vile and violent form. They have killed their substitutionary rival, and for the moment they experience peace ... a very fragile peace, for the real cause of their conflict has not been identified.

Shortly after, tension begins to grow again, conflict begins to escalate, for they have not dealt with the source of the conflict. No one wants the conflict to escalate to the point of destroying the community. When violence begins to escalate out of control, they remember what solved the problem the last time - a sacrifice. And so the founding murder is re-enacted in ritual. The ritual becomes a religion and religion becomes the foundation for a new culture. Laws that prohibit profane violence begin to develop. Religion is therefore born from violence and becomes the means by which violence is controlled.

What makes this mechanism so successful is the fact that it works. It unites communities and human collaborations has untold benefits. However, despite the great success of sacrificial violence, it also comes at a great cost. Violence is never finally eradicated by violence. An evil empire might be overthrown by a better new empire, but if violence was used to do so, violence remains a threat to the new empire. A cycle of chaos and order, profane and sacred violence remains the best this system has to offer. The fact that

something works, does not mean it is right, or that it is the best. Sacrificial violence made human civilization possible, but is it the best way to be a community?

SCRIPTURE, HUMAN ORIGINS AND VICTIMS

Many only look at the Adam and Eve narrative for an understanding of human origins. But if we include the stories up to and including the flood, a much more comprehensive picture emerges of the fundamental human problem and a society very much like our own. The question of original sin can so easily digress into just another way of shifting blame. The question becomes much more useful by phrasing it in these terms: who were the first humans to be like us, what was the first society that faced similar problems to our own.

From the Genesis narrative, from Adam to Noah summarizes the problem as follows: The problem begins when mankind partakes of twisted mimetic desire - the acquisitive kind of desire that leads to rivalry. This results in broken human relationships. Nakedness is experienced as shame, for vulnerability is exploited to harm. Man rules over woman and mankind's relationship with creation becomes strained as well.

The Cain and Abel story has many of the characteristics of an origin narrative in its own right and so many scholars

think it was a separate story that was woven into the Adam and Eve narrative. The point is that the story communicates more than just a sequential event. It further elaborates on the initial condition of human relationship partaking of the wrong kind of desire and knowledge. This is the first time sin is mentioned. The Hebrew scriptures also sees the origin of human civilization in violence. The first murder, the first sacrifice, and the first city are all mentioned in this one story of Cain and Abel. As with many myths that imagines a founding death as the beginning of their society, the scriptures also testifies that the first civilization, the city of the Canaanites, was founded by Cain - the first murderer. What is unique about the Biblical account, compared to many mythical stories, is that there is no attempt to hide the innocence of the victim, or guilt of the perpetrator. It simply says it as it is. Cain murdered Abel. And God hears the cries of the victim.

Civilization itself, our societal and cultural achievements are implicated through this story. For if they had their origin in murder, they remain under threat of the sin that birthed them. In this story we see that God's warning 'you shall surely die' was not a promise of external punishment, but an internal consequence of realizing the wrong possibility.

The story races on and we find Lamech - a man who killed a youth for striking him and then promises unlimited

violence if anyone tries to take revenge. Violence continues to escalate. And so this theme of escalating violence leads us to the flood story.

“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.”

(Genesis 6:4–11 ESV)

Note how evil intent and wickedness (verse 5) finds their fullest expression in violence (verse 11). Here we see that all of creation has become subject to corruption and the answer to this problem seems to be nothing less than a whole new creation. As with many ancient stories, the scriptures sees violence as the most pressing human problem, but unlike many of these stories, it begins to propose an alternative

solution: The scapegoating mechanism, whereby the community expels or murders the minority, whereby the majority maintains their innocence by projecting their guilt onto the scapegoats, is starting to be exposed by the flood story. Here, in the flood story, the community is guilty and the minority is innocent. Consequently it is the whole community that dies while the minority escapes. It is by no means a complete debunking of sacrificial myth, but a new idea has been introduced: the majority is not necessarily right, and God might just be on the side of the minority.

The scriptures will continue to chip away at the myth of redemptive violence and maintaining order through sacrificial religion. They continue to tell stories from the victim's point of view. God's dealings with Israel as a nation began while they were slaves! Usually the Empires recorded their stories of victory and conquest, but in what is considered one of the most important stories in scripture - the Exodus - it is the slaves whom God chooses as the centre point of His story.

The aim of Empires is to maintain the status-quo, to justify their divine right to rule. The human dignity of slaves is something that the Empires are willing to sacrifice for their own glory. The Scriptures are surprising in that the story they tell is of a God who does not maintain the status-quo, but a God who makes all things new. Israel begins to see a

God who is mindful of human suffering and ready to do something about it.

The image of a patriotic god, a god on the side of the empire is easily manipulated. Israel begins to see a God whose image cannot be manipulated. A God who identifies Himself with victims is free from such manipulation. He continually threatens the stability of a society, a world, in which victims still exist.

The voices of victims grows stronger throughout the scriptures. Whether it be Joseph who is rejected by his brothers, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, or Job who protests his innocence, or the psalmist that laments the suffering of the righteous, the scriptures are filled with victims' voices, and so they begin to transform the concept of sacrifice.

Myths are not easily undone, especially because of their unconscious deceptive nature. A conversation needs to mature, a language needs to be developed and history needs to run its course for these stories to be concluded.

In the context of sacrificial history, Jesus, the last sacrifice, takes on a whole new meaning.