The Mimetic Nature of Desire

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Desire Stems from the Victimage Mechanism

In this article I will consider the French philosopher and literary critic René Girard's understanding of desire. Girard propagates an understanding of desire as evoked by other people's desires. In this way desire in mimetic theory is seen as something distinct from instincts. Desire is fundamentally and exclusively human, as it is originally linked to the scapegoat mechanism. Desire is also essentially and exclusively mimetic.[1] If desire were not mimetic it would be instinctual. Desire is inherited and learned,[2] but it is not primarily biological as it is released by the victimage mechanism. If it was biological it would also encompass all kinds of 'natural' desires or needs, but Girard tends to use the word desire in a way as to distinguish it from normal biological satisfaction.

Once his basic needs are satisfied, man is subject to intense desires. (Violence and the Sacred, 147.)

Desire can be described as the drives which emerge from a non-biological source, the victimage mechanism, and is, according to its nature, interdividual. According to Eugene Webb, desire *'is always reaching past its ostensible objects and finds little or no real satisfaction in them'*[3] There is a certain lack of clarity in Girard's thinking as to how to describe the role of desire before and after the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. Within the context of mimetic theory, desire may be seen as a more modern phenomenon which arises after societies are no longer regulated by the scapegoat mechanism.[4] Desire then functions as an individual and advanced form of victimizing. A problem arises as to how to describe desires in 'primitive' societies regulated by the victimage mechanism. Clearly it is desire that ignites and motivates the expulsion of the victim. Therefore desire related to scapegoating must also be labelled desire. So what is the difference between the desire before and after the revelation of the victimage mechanism? Or, in other words, what is the difference between the desires in 'primitive' societies and modern societies? To be able to

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[1] Girard. *Violence and the Sacred* (5th Ed.) (Maryland Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 146.
[2] Ibid., 145.
[3] Eugene Webb. Philosophy of Consciousness. Polanyi, Lonergan, Voegelin, Ricoeur, Girard, Kierkegaard (London and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 184.
[4] 'Desire can be defined as a process of mimesis involving undifferentiation; it is akin to the process of deepening conflict that issues in the mechanism of reunification through the victim.' (*Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (London: Athlone Press. 1987), 287.)

understand the differences between modern and 'primitive' kinds of desire, one needs to differentiate between desire before and after the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. In establishing the victimage mechanism as the catalyst, transferring collective desires to individual desires means that sacrifice does not change desire as such, but turns desire into more individual expressions. The development (made possible by sacrifice) into hierarchical societies based on different forms of us and them, inside and outside, which are not necessarily violent in a physical manner, indicate what I would call a certain shift from instinctual desires to more mental desires.

Desire and Passion

I will return to the questions arising around the transference of desire. But before I do that, I will pose another question: What should one call desires which cannot be labelled either as instincts or bad desires? Either Girard does not think that such desires exist (which would be close to a world view of total negativity) or he should distinguish between desire and mimetic desire. (Mimetic desire would thus contain both negative and positive desire.) Girard also uses the word passion, but the term seems to refer uniquely to a religious context. Passion, in my view, could be used anthropologically to denote positive human desires, the desires that do not lead to violence but to love instead. Using the term passion with an anthropo-religious connotation, referring to good desires, would prevent our looking upon desire as something purely negative, which in turn would prevent a demonizing concept of desire.

Desire, Drive and Motivation

Desire begins in rivalry for the object.[5] In this respect desire has nothing specifically human about it. Thus, the starting point of desire is nothing specifically or fundamentally human. But mimetic desire is built upon a desire *concerning the other*; this is something fundamentally human, especially given the fact that involvement or desire has no reality as such. One could claim that desire is a distinctively human phenomenon that can develop when a certain threshold of mimesis is transcended.[6] Desire can, in its most common configuration, be understood as a drive, as a motivating factor. Drive and motivation often include an understanding which incorporate instincts. Especially the use of the word 'drive' today, in an everyday linguistic context, is related to the Freudian understanding of desire, that is the libidinal desires. Motivation, on the other hand, is more related to an understanding of desire

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[5] *Things Hidden*, 294.
[6] Ibid., 283.

as being of the mind. Girard's theory is not, however, exclusively a theory of the mind. Rather it is a theory of desire, where even our self-understanding is governed by desire.[7] Mimesis is something pre-rational and not only limited to the mind. Also, one has to take *intention* into consideration when discussing desire, though I would not agree with Livingston that mimetic desire belongs to intentional psychology,[8] because mimetic desire is seldom very conscious. Desire, according to Livingston, can be interpreted in a cognitive and motivational way. It can mean both a sensuous wish or that which motivates an action. If desire is a disposition, it leads only occasionally to action, Livingston claims.[9] If, however, we regard desire as a motivational factor, it must clearly stem from mimesis. But motivation can also imply duty, meaning that mimesis or desire can be good mimesis. If desire is defined as motivation, it could hardly be described in such negative terms as Girard does. Clearly, motivation and the initial stages of desire seem to correspond. On the other hand, motivation does not necessarily indicate the acquisitive and rivalistic elements in desire. But motivation is also mimetic, based on the other. All the same, motivation is not restricted to negative imitation, sparked off by jealousy, hatred and admiration for the other. If Girardian theory had linked desire totally to motivation, it would have meant that every motive would eventually lead to destruction. There are reasons for claiming that desire, according to mimetic theory is motivation stripped of its religious and ethical ideals. This, however, would suggest that the religious person has more profound motives than the non-religious, which again would be to opt out of anthropology and psychology and create a separate theological niche for the religious. This would again be contrary to mimetic anthropology. Nevertheless, it reveals a gap, something missing in Girard's understanding of a *mundane or secular mimesis* which is good even though its reference is not religious.[10]

The Dynamism of Desire

Desire in mimetic theory is not static and therefore cannot be fixed except in stages. And the stages of desire are stages of worsening. The stages of desire, from being fascinated by the rival to the final stages of being possessed by the same rival (imitating destructive desires), can be explained by the increasing intensity of imitation of *the other*, an intensity which

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[7] Paisley Livingston. *Models of Desire, René Girard and the Psychology of Mimesis* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 24.

[8] Ibid., 29.

[9] Ibid., 19.

[10] However, mimesis, in my interpretation, is, finally, motivated by the Christian religion. But this does not mean that one should restrict Christian influences to the religious realm, despite, as I will attempt to show, mimetic desire basically stems from a religious context, both in its negative and positive expressions.

gradually becomes more and more conflictual. There is a direct line from fascination to rivalry to conflict to hate and eventually to madness/murder/suicide.[11] It is, however, not the one stage but the *process as a whole* that explains desire. Desire in its initial stages is often what, in everyday language, one labels as desire because of its semblance of vitality and creativity, while the later stages of desire are often ignored and given other names. Actually they are only the ripened effects of desire. Therefore, desire can only be grasped in a process, where each stage is seen to be in line with other stages. But if there is a stage where desire is most poignant, it is clearly in the later stages, the stages of conflict, violence and illness. Therefore desire must be linked to and defined in relation to these negative phenomena. There seems to be a tendency in Girard's thinking to describe both good and bad desire as mimetic desire, while the purely bad desire is either described as metaphysical desire or only desire. There is also a development from using mimetic desire to denote something purely negative, to using it to describe all types of desiring. In *Things Hidden,* however, the word desire is still almost always used in a purely negative way, denoting the development of a competitive structure in society after the victimage mechanism has been revealed.

> *Desire is what happens to human relationships when there is no longer any resolution through the victim, and consequently no form of polarization that is unanimous and can trigger such a resolution.* (*Things Hidden*, 288.)

Such a negative understanding of desire makes the term 'mimetic desire' problematic. The Austrian psychoanalyst Werner W. Ernst has tried to solve the problem by separating mimesis and desire totally.[12] This solution would, I admit, initially, make the concepts look more logical. But, at the same time, desire cannot, from a Girardian point of view, be seen as devoid of mimesis. However, the desire to imitate is not necessarily something bad, but desire itself is bad as it, according to Girard, means a negative or double-binded preoccupation with the model. One solution in relation to understanding the Girardian concept *desire* is that mimesis and mimetic desire are both good and bad, whereas desire is only bad. In the late 1990s Girard expressed discontent with the word desire. He called for alternative

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[11] 'The dynamism of mimetic desire has always been oriented towards death and madness.' (*Things Hidden*, 414.)
  'Mimetic desire thinks that it always chooses the most life-affirming path, whereas in actuality it turns increasingly towards the obstacle – toward sterility and death.' (*Things Hidden*, 415.)
[12] 'We claim that only the concept of mimesis that has utterly been dissolved from desire allows us to see unequivocally the appropriate way of approaching the (pre-ceding) data of this world and of the universe (God). Any form of contamination with desire or wish produces an ego-centered harmony which threatens to undermine transcendency of the model and its imitation. Mimesis has nothing to do with desire and, therefore, it has nothing to do with rivalries. Desire on the other hand, has to do with rivalries (..) (Werner W Ernst. 'Theory of Drives and Mimesis: Controversial Positions between Freud and Girard.' (See http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/.)

words because desire connotates too much the sexual or erotic. The goal should be to find words that would express the whole personality. Girard has loosely suggested terms such as *drive, élan vital, and project*.[13] These words, however, do not convey the negative connotations with which Girard has endowed desire. *Élan vitale* is a thoroughly positive, life-affirming concept. 'Drive' and 'project' are more neutral, but blur the connection Girard has established between desire and scapegoating.

Mimetic Desire and Desire in the Bible

In my view, desire in Girard's work is closely linked to the prohibitions in the Ten Commandments, based on wanting something to which one is not entitled, and which will do harm both to oneself and others if the desire is acted upon. Especially the ninth and tenth commandments function as prohibitions against desiring things belonging to the other. The prohibitions in the commandments provide a kind of *a priori* basis in the Christian world for an understanding of desire. These prohibitions concerning desire, however, give no elaborate explanation of the process of desire. They merely state that breaking the commandments means breaking away from the will of God. Both the analysis of desire in mimetic theory and the negation of desire in the Ten Commandments calls for the need for prohibitions.[14] In the Hebrew Bible (*Old Testament*), however, there is more an attempt to warn against desire than describe the phenomenon. In the New Testament, meanwhile, there is a certain attempt in the *Epistle of James* to give a more elaborate description of desire.

> *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death. (The Epistle of James 1, 14-15.)*

In this passage there is a process, from individual desires to submission to the same desires, to sin and finally to death.[15] This process clearly follows a similar pattern to the process of metaphysical desire: desire for an object, desire for everything which owns or leads to the object, rivalry for the object, rivalry leading to death. This biblical understanding of desire is, in my view, already outlined in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.[16] Girard's work on desire can be seen as

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[13] *The Girard Reader* (Ed. James Williams) (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 268.

[14] *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 14.

[15] A similar development of desire is outlined by Hamerton-Kelly when he claims that it begins by wishing to be like the rival, then wishes to conquer the rival (envy) and finally to destroy the rival. (Hamerton-Kelly. *The Gospel and the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994)*,* 134.)

[16] In Girard's first major work (*Deceit Desire and the Novel*) desire is outlined, but within a much more narrow scope than in *Things Hidden*. *Deceit Desire and the Novel* is limited to a discussion on the development of desire, from the

an attempt to make a biblical anthropology coherent and vital, a way by which to interpret modern, secularized society from a mimetic point of view. One should not underestimate the missionary strategies in Girard's work.

From Sacrificial to Non-Sacrificial Desires

In order to continue my argument on desire as being derived from the biblical context, I will look at desire in relation to the victimage mechanism. Both before and after the sacrifice there is preoccupation with the model, first a desire not to be like the model, and then, after the deification and the veneration, to be like the model. [17] In other words, both before and after the revelation of the victimage mechanism, desire is founded on the other. The great difference between 'primitive' and modern desire is that 'primitive' desire is more closely linked to a collective desire and is not necessarily based on the individual's emotions. Sacrificial desire is sacrifice, while non-sacrificial desire is desire evolved from sacrifice but leading to more subtle, individual and differentiated forms of sacrifice. Briefly, non-sacrificial desire[18] is a prolonged effect of sacrifice. Also non-sacrificial desire has a tendency to be less violent. It could be exemplified by the transition from leaving unwanted children to perish in the forest to abortion. Thus, desire could be interpreted as modified sacrifice. The hypothetical character of the transition from sacrificial to post-sacrificial societies is clearly problematic, since as these changes take place at very different times in history and, in due course, many post-sacrificial societies also tend to revert to the scapegoat mechanism.

In *Deceit Desire and the Novel* Girard claims, in an existential vein, that an internal weakness or want is what generates desire.[19] This has, however, not been elaborated any further in later works, perhaps because it would provide a notion of a prefixed anthropological state *before* mimesis. From *Things Hidden* on, the only pre-fixation is mimesis. But mimesis also represents an internal weakness; a need to imitate others in order to exist and develop. It is this dependence which different kinds of autonomous thought try to hide, overlook, minimize

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17th century until mid 20th century. Desire in *Deceit Desire and the Novel* is understood as a desire to imitate a mediator. In this book Girard introduces a paradoxical movement from an external and transparent imitation, to an internal and hidden imitation. The paradox is that this hidden, internal mimesis is more fundamental and possessive and much more intense than the external imitation in the 17th and 18th century. Desire in the early stages of Girard's work is understood as the desire to be as the mediator. And the desire towards the mediator is seen as a consequence of desiring man instead of God.

[17] Girard used the word 'mediator' in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Later he switched over to the word 'model' which can, perhaps, be seen as part of his gradual effort to develop a more general theory.

[18] Non-sacrificial desire means desire *after* the gospel revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. This concept, however, is not very precise, as it does not mean that scapegoating has ended. What it does indicate is the changes as regards to desire after revealing the victim's innocence.

[19] Girard. *Deceit Desire and the Novel*, (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1966.),282.

or despise. Mimesis represents the need for the other, while desire is a perverted form of this need for the other. Desire is the dualistic and never-ending movement from fascination to disdain, and back to fascination again. Girard's initial work on desire was an interpretation of desire in the great European novels. Even if the notion of desire, and especially the configuration of triangular desire, was developed through an analysis of fiction, Girard has always claimed that these desires are the desires of everyday life. Great novelists such as Cervantes, Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Proust have not invented these desires in any way;[20] they are discoverers of the most banal and fundamental drive in human life. It is, according to Girard, this ability to show and reveal the most common desires that makes them into geniuses and scientists of interdividual psychology and anthropology. [21]

From Ritual to Individual Desire

The transition from ritual to individual desire refers to the most basic and most astonishing transition in Girard's reflection on desire. This hypothesis tries to make sense of the transition from sacrificial societies to post-sacrificial societies. In the process of ending scapegoating, sacrificial mentalities become more individual. James Alison clearly supports this thesis of seeing desire as a part of an individualization process in a post-sacrificial society, when he claims that 'desire is the "interdividual" living out of a sacrificial crisis without public resolution.'[22] Thus, we can see that even when the scapegoating systems are revealed, scapegoating has not vanished. There is, however, a metamorphosis from collective to

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[20] There have been attempts to limit the discoveries (on desire) worked out *in Deceit, Desire and the Novel* to fiction. Girard's aim, however, was clearly an attempt to locate the desires of the *real world* by a systematizing of the novelists' discoveries. Lucien Goldman, for example, interpreted mimetic desire as basic to the novel genre, limited to a historical period and a specific social milieu. But, according to Girard, desire, as it is developed in the great European novels, has the most profound referentiality to reality. The attempt to locate and limit Girard's theory to the realm of fiction, has helped inspire Girard into developing a more anthropological theory on desire. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* desire is located in imitation, mainly in the imitation of the model. But there is no claim of any mimetic totality as the emphasis is on the triangular structure of amorous desires. Imitation of good models is hardly emphasized. In this respect one could claim that desire in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* contains only bad, metaphysical desires, and ends up having no existence. Imitation is also a more inner, psychic phenomenon in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, and there is no scapegoat mechanism or theory on violence to invigorate imitation into a total theory on the human condition. The great benefit of the mimetic hypothesis developed from *Things Hidden* onwards, compared to the looser reflections on imitative desire in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, is that the later works locate a basic structure and a clear tendency. The limitation of desire in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* is its dominant psychological character, while the force of the fully developed theory on mimetic desire succeeds in integrating and rationalizing large amounts of historical data around one basic structure.

[21] Girard's genius, in this respect, is his being able to turn these insights into a *negative theology* (without readers feeling that it is theological) based on a Christian anthropology. The terrible process of becoming more and more entangled in the desires of the mediator, entails a Dantesque structure, built upon the structure of descent into hell and ascent towards salvation. Thus desire, in its crudest forms, must be seen as the transformation of human existence, caused by transforming the imitation of Christ into imitation of one's neighbour. In other words, desire is the human condition without God.

[22] James Alison. *The Joy of Being Wrong* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 14.

individual desire, and this latter desire (stemming from the scapegoat mechanism) materializes into individual rivalry and violence. In extremely chaotic periods of history post-sacrificial societies[23] revert to systems of sacrifice - Nazi Germany being perhaps the most obvious and violent example. It is, however, important to emphasize that a post-sacrificial society does not have to be less violent, even if the revealing of the scapegoat mechanism constitutes a revealing of violence. In extreme cases such as World War II, violence can actually grow more severe, because certain collective regulations and prohibitions that operated in a sacrificial society have disappeared and individual desires play a more obvious and therefore powerful role. There is also the fact that post-sacrificial societies permit a greater degree of competition, which leads to a more advanced technological stage, which in turn creates more potentially destructive weapons. The process of killing with ever more effective and longer range weapons can be seen as an attempt to rid a community of direct violence, but in using more technological weapons, violence is actually escalating. The paradox is that non-sacrificial desire seldom legitimizes violence, while, at the same time, it is potentially extremely violent. This violent consequence of modern desire can be linked partly to Paul Virilio's theory of *dromology*,[24] where speed is seen as violence, and where secular violence operates with enormous speed, thus distancing and modifying the guilt of the killer. Mimetic theory, however, is clearly different from the theory of speed. According to mimetic theory, the superiority of modern, desacralized culture is shown in the way it modifies violence and is, in actual fact, less violent (imagine the consequences of atom bombs in Antiquity) than previous sacrificial societies, even though modern society has the means for mass destruction. However, desire should be seen as playing a part in technology, not the least in the misuse of technology, and the process of accelerating speed, meaning more potential violence. In this respect speed can be seen to be connected to desire. But, on the other hand, speed, from a mimetic point of view, cannot be seen as a direct consequence of desire.

Desire and Violence

Desire in mimetic theory should be closely linked to violence.[25] The danger in doing this, however, is to fuse desire and violence together as one and the same. This would be to obliterate the process, as desire is usually anything but violent in the initial stages. The initial,

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[23] A post-sacrificial society is not a society devoid of sacrifice, but a society where the victimage mechanism has been revealed as such. In this respect my introduction of this term can easily be misinterpreted.
[24] Paul Virilio. *Speed and Politics. An Essay on Dromology* (New York: Semoitext(e), 1977).
[25] 'Violence is always mingled with desire.' (*Violence and the Sacred*, 145.)

seductive stages of desire are marked by the fascination with models. This stage is rivalistic but not necessarily violent.[26] It is very doubtful that every desire leads to violence, for example the desire to win in competitions. It seems more likely that most desires or drives are channelled into non-violent, even highly creative forms. But if these drives are positive, can they then be labelled as desire according to mimetic terminology? Girard seems to turn the question around. Instead of claiming that all kinds of competitive and rivalistic desires are violent, he *links* competition and rivalry and makes them only secondary to desire, as potential desire. The reason for his moderating the tendency to explain all types of production as caused by desire is that desire must be introduced in order to explain cultural advancements. And by defining its double nature, desire can be used to reveal human development.

> *All kinds of connotations relating to conflict, competition and subversion cluster around the term desire, and help to explain the amazing success the word and the thing has had in the modern world. (Things Hidden, 284.)*

This quotation is, however, not quite representative of the more negative attitude Girard displays towards desire in *Things Hidden*. In this work the word 'desire' has basically negative connotations. In most cases desire is not described as something creative or lifegiving; on the contrary, desire is the force which leads men to destruction and death. In *Things Hidden* desire is linked to a theory on the satanic, the force or structures that lead to scapegoating. Just as Satan is the seducer, the force which initially gives the impression of leading people into something wondrous but, eventually, turns out to be violent and murderous, so too desire gives the illusion of victory, but ends up by leading people into conflicts, mental agony and murder. The symmetry between the satanic processes and desire makes it logical to conclude that desire and the satanic in mimetic theory stem from the same thing. The problem, however, which arises when attempting to fuse desire and the satanic, are the comments Girard makes on the desacrificial and demystifying effect of desire.[27] Thus desire in mimetic theory must be seen to be the prolongation of scapegoating after the scapegoat revelation. It is not scapegoating itself. This also makes desire less satanic. It is

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[26] It may also be worth mentioning that Girard presents the etymology of the terms 'competition' and 'rivalry', claiming that philology is on his side, as the *competitors* are those who run or walk together, while *rivals* are those who dwell on opposite banks of the same river. This philological statement indicates that Girard does not consider competition to be desire. But, on the other hand, Girard seems extremely aware of how easily competition, as a result of very minor changes in the mimetic game, end up by turning competitors into rivals, positioned on opposite sides of the river. (See *Things Hidden*, 11.)

[27] *Things Hidden*, 285.

important to be precise that Satan in mimetic theory is not transcendental and, therefore, can be located within anthropological structures.[28] But if desire is seen partly as a force of demystification where desire and the satanic are seen as one and the same, the satanic should also have positive effects. This would lead, however, to a concept of the world, where evilness also contains some good. This is not totally out of place in mimetic theory because the satanic is seen as the force behind the scapegoat mechanism, and the scapegoat mechanism clearly has, and especially has had, some positive effects. Any attempt to mix the concept of Satan with the concept God would, however, be the opposite of what Girard intends to achieve when he writes in theological terms.[29]

Would it be too simplistic to fuse the concept of the satanic with desire? Desire could be seen to be mimesis devoid of religious imitation. But does this mean that desire is purely satanic? First and foremost desire, like the satanic, leads to scapegoating. But scapegoating does, as is especially emphasized in Girard's later works, moderate violence. In this respect, scapegoating, when seen against a background of total violence, has something beneficial about it. Scapegoating, however, seems to have nothing to do with God's nature, but is, at least historically, a preliminary step towards revealing the victim's innocence. There is in mimetic theory a mingling between the ways of God and the ways of the world. In the same way, secular desire is not something totally distinct from Christian imitation. From a mimetic perspective it is deviated transcendency, the worship of the rivalistic model instead of the non-rivalistic man-God, Jesus, whose imitation is not acquisitive.[30] The lack of desire does not in this case, stem from the subject, but from the model. It is the model which differs. But even if the structure of desiring a desirous model appears identical to the imitation of Christ,

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[28] 'Our being liberated from Satan's bondage means that the supernatural power of Satan and his demons is an illusion, that Satan does not exist.' ('Satan' in *The Girard Reader*, 209.)

[29] Girard has commented suspiciously on the Manichean idea of evil, meaning evil or violence attaining something good, and that humans must participate, to some extent, in evilness in order to reach truth and knowledge. It seems more likely that Girard interprets Jesus' revelation of the satanic, of the scapegoat mechanism, as conquering the evil from inside, by not becoming evil or partaking in the evil, but in conquering the scapegoat system and stopping its use by showing its inherent violence. The theological understanding would be that Jesus turns the evil of scapegoating into something good by revealing the innocence of the scapegoat. In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* Girard tries to give an anthropo-theological explanation to the Greek Fathers' concept of 'Satan duped by the cross.' (*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 148-153.) The main idea is that desire is entrapped in desire, meaning that it cannot think outside its realm, outside the logic of power and violence, which again means that making Jesus a scapegoat, seemed, from the point of view of desire, to be a victory, but this victory actually marks the end of the scapegoat mechanism. Jesus reveals scapegoating as a violent act, thus revealing its origin. In other words, Jesus' death seems, from the perspective of persecution, to be a fulfilment of righteousness. But this righteousness is a different kind of righteousness, as it reveals, not the persecutors' righteousness, but the victim's innocence. This mentality introduces a new humanity, based on concern for the victims. This is for Girard the explanation of the concept 'Victory of the Cross', meaning the end of the satanic and the revelation of love.

[30] *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 12-18.

the results differ. Desiring a rivalistic mediator leads to (spiritual) death, imitating Christ leads to (spiritual) life. As we can see desire in mimetic theory somewhat lacks coherence. This is partly due to Girard's shift in interpreting sacrifice.

The Nothingness of Desire

Girard claims that desire is *nothing* or, more precisely, *leads to nothingness*. It is nothing in that it has no substance. The deeper one penetrates into the process of desire, the more symbolic, blurred and sterile the desired objects gradually become in the mind of the subject. Also, the references to reality become more and more blurred. The process of imitating through desire is what Girard calls *skandalon*. Skandalon is the process whereby the ongoing desire for pleasure results in pain, again and again. Skandalon is this attraction that leads to wounding.[31] In other words, it is the process of desiring through desirous models, which eventually leads to nothingness. Thus the content of desire is metaphysical. This means that desire has no substance, but, on the other hand, has the most extreme effects on individuals. The concept of metaphysical desire (as used in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*) is not precise in locating the scope of mimesis, but it is perhaps the most precise concept as regards locating the process and goal of desire, as desires make human beings lose contact with reality.

Desire ends up being something totally metaphysical; having no substance at all, and leading to a nothingness which resembles death. It does not primarily refer to physical death but to a spiritual death, where all that really exists in the mind of the subject is conflict. Within the logic of desire, the problem is the model. In this gradual process towards a death-ridden existence, desire does not understand that the problem is desire itself. When desire has the upper hand in human relations it is always the desired and despised model which is the problem.

> *And he (the subject) automatically transforms the model's desire into a desire that opposes and frustrates his own. Because he does not understand the automatic character of the rivalry, the imitator soon converts the fact of being opposed, frustrated and rejected into the major stimulant of his desire. In one way or another, he proceeds to inject more and more violence into his desire. (Things Hidden, 413)*

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[31] See *Things Hidden*, 162, 322, 416-31; *The Girard Reader*, 161, 198-99, 215-16; *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 16.

The model is the metaphysical object. The reason for its metaphysical existence is that the subject thinks the model has something which he himself does not have. It is this emptiness, this void combined with a desire for fullness, which creates the model's metaphysical attributes.[32] This emptiness or void, which Girard never attempts to explain[33] (except in terms of imitating the model), is the nearest he comes to reflecting in terms of existentialist philosophy. The void is something deeply and exclusively human and is reminiscent of the Sartrean existence *pour soi*. The metaphysics of the model also consists in the fact that the model will not respond in a way that will fulfil the subject's desires. On the contrary, if the model is itself caught up in the death-ridden process of desire, it will do its best to prevent the subject from fulfilling its desires. This game of mediating desires is contagious. The mimetic effect indicates a process of making the other identical with one's own desires. This, however, only enhances the desires' desire to overcome the other(s) as obstacles. The desires will not only be doubled, they will be spread contagiously to all areas where desire finds other desirable desires. The epidemics caused by desire indicate a weakness or, at least, a lack of clarity in Girard's system-model. The insufficiency of the theory concerning the subject-model-obstacle is, especially in *Deceit Desire and the Novel,* that the model is described as one single person, whereas different models appear and reappear every time there is somebody present who seems to embody something which the desiring subject desires. In most cases there is a mixture of the many desiring one another in numerous configurations. Triangular desire, although the most fundamental and most common desire (especially in the context of loveless love), is just *one of numerous variations*.[34] In this respect James Alison is mistaken when he claims that all mimetic desire is triangular[35] as this configuration is only a (basic) starting point. Mimetic desire contains all kinds of mimesis of the others, in an endless complexity of interdividual desires. It is like the germs described in Raskolnikov's dream, spreading out into infinity, and turning everyone affected into deceitful

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[32] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 66.

[33] From a theological point of view it would seem relevant to interpret this void as lack of love, and that voids are created by this lack. The human condition implies lack of love, but the enhancement of this lack of love occurs when the God of love is replaced by loveless and rivalistic models.

[34] Girard's first attempt to understand rivalry was by locating desire as a triangular structure. Since the elaboration of triangular desire in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, this has been his most elementary and model for rivalry. The triangular structure makes rivalry inevitable, as there will be at least one of the three desiring parts that will not have his or her desires fulfilled. The paradox, though, is that in triangular desire absolutely all parts become losers if the process intensifies. Up to a point (the point of external desire), however, sentimental love-stories contain a certain truth: to unite in love means one is left out. But this is only the case when rivalry is loose and external, governed by prohibitions. If one looks at the principle behind triangular desire, the initial scarcity makes rivalry understandable. In a group of four, for example, the chances for being left out, diminishes - as in all other numbers except three. This case of numbering, of people involved, however, has no primary importance to the Girardian concept of rivalry, but it is, on the other hand, an interesting fact that the triangle is not established by chance when describing desire and rivalry. The triangle is clearly the most common number when expressing conflictual desires.

[35] Alison. *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 9.

doubles. Thus, the system is more complex, more plural than the original models described in mimetic theory. A system where mimesis involves greater plurality needs to be elaborated.

Desire is, as has been noted, the consequence of the mimetic crisis. [36] It is the negative effect of desacralization, of desacralization on a more individual level. In a way, desire marks the continuity of the scapegoat mechanism. Desire is the modern mark of victimizing. It is something that encompasses all areas of modern life, and the lack of love for others is caused partly by desire.

> *(…) it is the acute mimetic rivalry with the other that occurs in all the circumstances we call 'private', ranging from eroticism to professional or intellectual ambition. (Things Hidden, 288.)*

But a society governed by desire is, in my view, still preferable to one where people live enclosed and regulated by the victimage mechanism. In the modern world, mimetic desire is intense because the barriers have been pulled down and differences eradicated.[37] There exists a kind of dialectic between sacrifice and mimetic desire, where desire has the upper hand all the time. The more the victimage mechanism is revealed, the more intensely and individually mimetic desire can flow. In this respect desire is a continuity of the destructive effects of scapegoating, *without the regulating mechanism*. Desire, though, can be stabilized at different levels according to the individuals concerned, but it lacks the resources of catharsis and expulsion.[38] Instead of the resentment inherit in religious prohibition, the obstacle gradually turns into a rival,[39] and one can talk about external obstacles becoming internal. As a result desire in the modern world is much more invisible, intimate, subtle and individual than desire regulated by sacrificial societies. According to Oughourlian, desire is the movement by which mimesis gives autonomy and individuality to humans.[40] The difference between sacrificial desire and the desire predominant in the modern world is that modern, non-sacrificial desire lacks the resources of catharsis and expulsion.[41] There is a sort of automatism in the way that desire flows as the regulating and cathartic resources vanish.[42]

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[36] *Things Hidden*, 288.
[37] Ibid., 284.
[38] Ibid., 288.
[39] Ibid., 286.
[40] Jean-Michel Oughourlian. *Un mime nommé désir: Hystérie, transe, possession, adorcisme* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), 24.
[41] *Things Hidden*, 288.
[42] Ibid.

Secularization and Desire

The difference or shift from a sacrificial world to a post-sacrificial world is clearly a consequence of moderating sacrifice and thereby enhancing secularization. Thus secularization can be seen as the consequence of the Christian revelation. The Gospels' renunciation of scapegoating and violence could be seen to be the origin of the modern. The taboos and prohibitions, the notions of a vengeful God have lost their absolute power, and a new, less sacrificial notion has arisen. The notion of a God hanging on the cross praying for the forgiveness of his persecutors creates a new mimetic climate. This act of desacralization is the decisive moment when a new and less sacrificial mentality is created among people. This is the decisive moment in the origin of a new and modern mentality, meaning a mentality of desacralisation. The movement towards a society that avoids sacrifice is similarly the force behind secularization, which implies a world no longer dominated by the scapegoat mechanism. The modern world is, because of desacralization, capable of absorbing high doses of undifferentiation.[43] This non-sacrificial development has created an atmosphere where desire and rivalry have a legitimacy (especially in the West) completely unheard of when compared to earlier generations. Especially the freedom among ordinary people to act according to their own desires, has been given an enormous boost.

In this context Girard seems undecided as to whether desire is good or bad. The double effect of desire becomes, in various contexts, quite prominent in his thought. Girard claims that desire '*liberates us from the mystic terror, the purely maleficent form of sacralization, that dominated centuries of Puritanism and a certain direction of Freudianism, and in our own day with a whole host of epigonal movements so devoid of real creativity that they seem more pathetic than dangerously misleading.*'[44] Despite the emphasis given in these utterances to the double effect of desire, the somewhat astonishing thing about this statement is the positive significance desire is given in relation to demythologizing sacrifice, even though modern atheistic substitutes are dismissed as rather futile.[45] Girard's view on secularization could be said to be in tune with that of Gianni Vattimo when the latter claims that the boundary for secularization is where it trespasses against love for one's neighbour.[46]

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[43] Ibid., 284.
[44] Ibid., 446.
[45] In most other statements desire is regarded as the negative effect of secularization.
[46] Gianni Vattimo. *Belief* (Stanford California: Stanford U.P., 1999), 62-65.

In the statement on desire, quoted above, Girard claims that desire liberates humans from certain maleficent forms of sacralization. In other words, desire has a positive effect on certain sacrificial phenomena. This liberation can be seen to be a heightened awareness of violence. These positive effects are modified by the claim that many new desirous and non-sacrificial approaches end up rather lifeless and sterile. The statement, however, makes it difficult to claim that Girard in *Things Hidden* regards desire in a totally negative way. There is also the fact that he is not consistent when distinguishing between desire and mimetic desire. At times these concepts are blurred, sometimes meaning the same and, in another context, meaning something different. In the following lines Girard uses the term mimetic desire to describe the positive effects desire has had on the modern world.

> Everything that makes our world the most energetic and creative that has ever been in art, politics, modes of thought and, especially, science and technology is a consequence of the liberation of mimetic desire. (Things Hidden, 285.)

Desire in mimetic theory can, when linked to the process of permitting rivalry and demystification, be seen as a creative force. It is therefore essential to focus on the liberating effects of desire, in order to understand the double effect of desire. One of the liberating effects of desire consists in tolerating rivalry.

> *Modern society is extremely refined and developed in the symbolic sense. It can permit and encourage growth of mimetic rivalries that are normally forbidden to man. (Things Hidden, 93.)*

Rivalry in a sacrificial society has to be controlled by strict prohibitions in order to avoid violence. In a desacralized world desire is let loose. The consequence is enhanced rivalry and a speeding up of production. The threat from violence is less strong. Toleration towards desire can only materialise when violence is moderated, or aggressions have been channelled.

In Girardian thought this kind of desacralization constitutes a progress, but progress not in any straightforward way such as the liberals imagined it. Firstly, the victimage mechanism is seen as partly beneficial since it has regulated society and limited violence. This also means that violence is less motivated by contingent and absolute violence. Secondly, the deconstruction of prohibitions creates a world of individual rivalry, which leads to new and differentiated forms of violence. The tensions caused by heightened rivalry can also lead to creativity, for example in the technological field, which in due time may lead to mass destruction. Thirdly, when the prohibitions and penal systems are modified, the incitement to commit lawless and immoral acts becomes easier. The liberation of desire creates a freer society, but desire is still

there, and creates new kinds of problems. The liberation of desire demands that individuals are able to control their desires, and so the question arises: can a society dominated by desire, control undesirable desire?

The Gospel's Liberating Effect

From a superficial point of view, it might seem as though desire had engendered a non-sacrificial, liberal society. This, however, would imply that desire embodies tolerance, openness, love and forgiveness. This is hardly the case when desire is seen as a negative product of desacralization. In most cases Girard does not consider desire as the prime engine behind desacralisation. He claims that the Gospels have revealed the scapegoat mechanism, and, as a secondary consequence of this non-sacrificial mentality, desire has evolved, both liberating and damaging at the same time. Therefore, it is not desire that is the primary force behind modern society. In fact, according to mimetic theory, it is religion. Religion is both the force behind the scapegoat mechanism and the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. And because of the latter, the Christian demythologization of scapegoating has engendered the mentality of the modern world. Thus, the side-effect of the modern is the flowing of desires. Therefore, in my view, it is absurd to try to understand mimetic theory without considering religion as a motive in the way desire works.

When interpreting desire in relation to religion, due to the emphasis mimetic theory puts on the Passion of Christ as a revelatory mechanism, one needs to understand the shift in desire evoked by this new mentality. Before post-sacrificial societies appeared, desires were checked and balanced through the scapegoat mechanism and one can speak of collective desires being channelled into victimizing. In a sense Girard is saying that desires understood in a individual way are only possible in a post-sacrificial society, which also means that individuality can evolve only as the victimage mechanism has been revealed.

The Desire to Hide the Effects of Desire

Girard has adopted Bateson's phrase 'double bind', which was originally used to understand mental problems, mainly schizophrenia.[47] Girard uses the phrase in order to understand interdividual psychology and desire, and claims that this structure should not be limited to

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[47] See *Things Hidden*, 291-93.

mental illness; it is a basis for all human relationships.[48] The double bind is manifested in mimetic theory as a desire to 'be like me, not to be like me, copy me, not to copy me.'[49] The feedback people give, when dominated by desire, operates on the level of contrasting signals, creating obstacles and dreams of initiation, and then again new obstacles. But desire described in a desirous manner will tend either to ignore the obstacles or deify them. According to Oughorlian, descriptions of desire, where the obstacles are not revealed as such, are romantic tendencies, which '*do not understand the role that others play in the formation of desire.*'[50] Therefore, in the modern world especially, desire is presented without obstacles, sometimes retreating into sacrifice by turning obstacles into something semi-sacred.

Modern advertising presents triangular desire as healthy competition, and the double binds are basically prescriptions for how one reaches and conquers the object; not for how the desires are transformed towards the model. When the focus is on the model, the emphasis lies on his or her superiority and ability to control and manipulate the other desiring people involved. In this way desire is presented through desire, obliterating or deifying most of the negative aspects caused by rivalry.

Desire in the Girardian sense is basically desire according to somebody else's desires.[51] This makes desire acquisitive in nature, while the more popular view; that desire is evoked by the object, easily turns objects into representations of desire. The dismissal of desires as being primarily drawn towards the object's inherent value, indicates that desire is motivated by desire. If there was a straight line from the subject to the object, it would mean that our lives would be totally rational, on the verge of being instinctual. Girard, on the other hand, claims that all our desires stem from the other.[52] This other can be virtually anyone outside the object. It does not even have to be human, even if the primal reference always turns out to be human. It can be what we have read, seen on television, heard at a lecture and so on. It is always imitated. And all imitation, which is rivalistic, is desirous, based on a want. The fact that desire is represented by a more symbolic reality than core interdividual scenes, reveal the representational potentiality stemming from desire. But despite the tremendous ability which modernity has displayed to transform desire into cultural images, representational mimesis is,

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[48] *Violence and the Sacred*, 147.
[49] See Ibid.
[50] Oughourlian. *Un Mime nommé désir: Hystérie, transe, possession, adorcisme*, 32.
[51] See *Violence and the Sacred*, 145.
[52] See 'Metamorphosis of Desire' in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 83-95.

according to my understanding of mimetic theory, only a secondary effect of desire, manifesting its force by producing symbols. These symbols, however, should be seen to emanate from mimetic relations.

The Weakness in Desire

Desire is initially a weakness; it consists of an urge to acquire something which one thinks others have. This, however, is not the main weakness; the main weakness is to think that if one has what the other person seems to have, one will be fulfilled. In the act of desiring, the other's weakness is not taken into consideration, since desire makes people blind to the underlying desires of desire. Therefore, the desiring subject always has the feeling that it is pushing its head against the wall. He or she does not consider the fact that the other either desires the same object (and the last thing he or she will do is let the subject have it), or he/she will begin desiring the desires of the subject in a rivalistic manner, and thus, rival the subject on the basis of the subject's desires. In both cases rivalry will have the upper hand, and the chances of achieving what one desires, is minimal.

In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* it seems as though the subject has a chance to fulfil his desires so long as he does not fall into the hands of the mediator. In this work, the other plays a decisive, but not a total role in the act of desiring. In Girard's later works all desires are labelled mimetic. This does not mean that there is always a clear-cut rival present; it means that all desires for objects are mediated. In most cases there is no principal or material reason for not being able to fulfil one's desires. But so long as rivalry is predominant and the others' desires are intensely bound to the subject's desires, fulfilment is indeed very difficult to achieve. There is also the fact that one does not know what one really wants, that the desire for something only hides something deeper and more profound, the something which desire keeps one away from.

The other prohibits the fulfilment of desire, while, at the same time, the desire for objects is also imitated through the other. The human situation is a double bind in that both the initial desire and the later prohibitions are based upon the other. The chance of opting out of these mimetic games, when they are motivated by desire, is impossible. The only way out is to renounce desire, or, more precisely, renounce rivalistic desire. This, according to Girard, is extremely difficult, often painful, and its process is structurally the same as a Christian

conversion.[53] And even if one does convert from double binded rivalries, there will always be rivalry in one's life. The difference is the revelation of one's own destructive desires and the decision not to enhance the double binds, the illusory desires that perpetually haunt individuals.

Mimetic theory sees the main weakness of desire in the fact that humans are not only unable to fulfil the goals set out by desire; they also invert the goals into the opposite.

> *Modern people imagine that their discomfort and unease is a product of religious taboos, cultural prohibitions, even the legal forms of protection. They think that once this confinement is over, desire will be able to blossom forth. (Things Hidden, 285.)*

When reflecting in a desirous manner, one sees only the negative sides of all prohibitions. Seen from a desirous point of view, prohibitions only exist to hurt or modify the life of individuals. Desire creates an anthropology of freedom, a freedom that says that if everybody follows one's heart's desire, everybody will be happy. Mimetic theory, in deep contrast to this view, claims that it is desire that actually creates the need for prohibitions. Desire leads to conflict; it splits up relationships, and in extreme cases causes murder and madness; the prohibitions are set up to avoid such consequences.

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[53] See 'The Conclusion' in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 290-314.

From Collective Illness to Individual Illness

Madness according to Girard, involves the disappearance of the object and the persistence of rivalry in its pure state.[54] In a society governed by the victimage mechanism, madness is the preliminary state when there is total disruption in society, when violence and anarchy threaten society. Madness in a collective manner is total violence, the frenzy of all against all. In this kind of madness there are no regulatory mechanisms, no rules, no prohibitions to stop the violence. In this respect the scapegoat mechanism saves society from madness and total violence by channelling aggression onto the scapegoat. In such a society, scapegoating clearly has positive implications: in minimizing violence, restoring peace and calm, and preparing a way to establish prohibitions. (One might claim that the scapegoat mechanism is the origin of differentiation.) Madness in a sacrificial society is clearly collective madness, where violence is something that affects the whole of society, and can be cured by scapegoating. In this respect one could say that scapegoating acts as a *pharmakon*, both as something destructive and as a remedy.[55]

In the process of developing into a post-sacrificial society, violence and scapegoating lose some of their grip on society. Instead of desires being channelled, desires spring forth, or to be more precise, take hold of individuals. And in a society not governed by the scapegoat mechanism, aggressions that were previously directed against the victim, are now directed towards oneself and the others. Scapegoating is transformed into individual desire, and desire develops according to the same structure as scapegoating - from rivalry to conflict and ending in violence. Mental illnesses can be seen to start when the model's feedback is in any way violent. This violence, it should be emphasized, is mainly psychological, especially in its preliminary stages. The subject's desires, which can be desires for practically anything, are given a violent return. The model's feedback is dominated by variations on the 'be as me, do not be as me,' creating all kinds of different mental problems.[56]

Firstly, Girard's theory attempts to show how the victimage mechanism generates all the different forms of desire and symptoms of psychopathology.[57] In a way, desire is a mental illness in itself, as it expresses a want, something unattainable. But this, however, is too static

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[54] *Things Hidden*, 48-49, 348-349.

[55] See *Violence and the Sacred*, 95.

[56] Girard elaborates these different mental agonies in Book III of *Things Hidden*, when he discusses and compares mimetic psychology with traditional psychological concepts. (See *Things Hidden*. Book III: Interdividual Psychology, 283-432.) In this work Girard sees all mental problems in relation to mimesis. It is not my task, however, to repeat these new definitions of mental illnesses in the light of mimesis; my task here is to discuss the relation between mental illness and desire.

[57] See *Things Hidden*, 289.

a description of desire. Desire is more clearly perceived in the process where the symptoms are aggravated.[58] Desire generates the double binds in which it gets caught.[59] It changes or transforms obstacles into models.[60] Desire aggravates all symptoms.[61] In principle desire spares no-one. Also the model falls victim to the contagion of desire.[62] The model himself becomes more interested in the object which he designates as a result of the subject's imitations. But soon the focus is no longer on the object. It is instead directed towards the subject's desire. He himself falls prey to his own contagion.[63]

Desire gives the illusion of success, while in reality one sinks deeper and deeper into the hands of one's rivals. In desire, one refuses to understand why the model changes into an obstacle, even though one sees clearly that this change always take place.[64] Governed by desire one increasingly interprets the humiliation and disdain as emanating from the model's superiority. Desire gives people the masochistic feeling that to undergo such humiliations is merely a preliminary stage in achieving what one desires. But gradually the desire for the initial objects grows weaker, the desires get more and more focused on the obstacles; and in the end there are no objects left to desire, there is only rivalry.

This process is an anthropological description of the descent into to hell, a Sartrean hell, where hell is the other. But in all the different stages, there is always a chance to opt out of the process. First and foremost there is religious conversion, a change of model, to a non-violent, non-rivalistic and therefore loving model, the model of Christ. There is also the possibility of using one's rational faculties to avoid this possession of the other. Rationality is to be able to decipher the process of madness, and enable people turn to more life-giving models. Understood in a secular sense people can rid themselves of mimetic contagion through work and non-desiring interests.

> Being rational – functioning properly - is a matter of having objects and being busy with them; being mad is a matter of letting oneself be taken completely by the mimetic models, and so fulfilling the calling of desire. (Things Hidden, 311.)

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[58] Ibid., 304.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 327.
[61] Ibid., 304.
[62] Ibid., 299.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 327.

Mental stability or instability depends on relationships with others. If desires are strong enough, the other becomes a model, and if the model itself is contaminated by desire, rivalry will begin. But mimetic theory only interprets mental problems in relation to bad or desirous models, and, in my view, does not take into consideration the great complexity of mental problems caused by the dialectic between good and bad mimesis. Even good mimesis can cause mental problems, especially through the loss of good mimesis, the good model. If for example a father or a mother dies when a child is young, the lack of mimetic models can cause the same mental problems as preoccupation with a bad model. Therefore it is not sufficient to explain mental problems as being generated only from rivalistic desire, they can often be generated by the loss of a good model - manifested as a loss of love. In this respect it is important to expand the focus of mental disorder to include good mimesis, especially when we consider that it is often the less desirous who become victims.

The Role of the Object

In mimetic theory everything is decided by the relationship towards the other. But it would seem that when considering normal, everyday relations, the object is more to the fore than mimetic theory suggests. Everyday coexistence seems to be governed by a greater rationale, whereby the desire for the object plays a more decisive role. There therefore seems to be a need for a certain modification of the theory of desire according the other. Firstly, in everyday life the value of the object seems to be governed by certain inherent laws of value. Gold, for example, has always been associated with to desire, because of its intrinsic and stable value. People will, especially in the initial stages of desire, desire things of stable value and not desire things which are absolutely absurd - so long as desire is not extreme. The fact that people in Europe prefer to live in town centres, while people in the USA prefer to live in the suburbs, is one example I have encountered among Girardians to illustrate the non-rational and interdividual side of desire. But there are objective reasons for this. In the centre of European towns it is usually safer, and for example in London or Paris, the buildings are of high quality. In the suburbs, meanwhile, there is often poverty. In the USA violence and poverty is more prevalent in town centres, while wealth and safety are more prevalent in the suburbs. Also, the fact that more people work in the suburbs makes the American choice rational. These rather banal examples show that desire is usually built around objective criteria. As I see it, the desire according to the other departs from the rational when the relationship towards the other passes a certain threshold of intensification.

Asplund criticizes Girard for having forgotten conflicts of *real* worth.[65] There is, admittedly, something in this critique, especially when we consider the initial stages of conflict. Although the mimesis of the other will always be a part of any desire, the desire according to the other is seldom detached from rationality. The tendency, from *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* to *Things Hidden,* has been to endow the object with less and less value. This needs to be modified. In my view, Girard's understanding of desire has two weaknesses: Firstly there is a lack of clarity between desire and mimetic desire. I will propose defining desire as the *negative version of mimetic desire*. Secondly, desire is, when conflict is not intense, also *object-related*.[66]

The Religious Nature of Desire

Desire as a phenomenon is, as we have seen, a reflection both on the prohibitions against desire in the Ten Commandments and on the New Testament's understanding of desire as leading to death. The religious framework of Girard's work is evident. Desire, which appears to be both modern and mundane, is, in mimetic theory, primarily understood in the context of Jewish and Christian ethics. Girard's work on desire marks no point of departure from the religious understanding of the nature of desire. Its modern redress does not mean that desire has only certain religious implications; it means rather that the basic understanding of desire is born out of the dialectic between Christian ethics regarding desire and the modern, secularized version of desire, where the latter refers to an understanding of desire in which autonomy is questioned. Thus, if desire basically is seen through the lens of Christianity, it should not surprise us if the source of mimetic desire is also religious in origin. The *imitatio Christi* understanding of Girard's thought, is cleverly subdued by anthropological language. But once this language is stripped of its literary and anthropological context, one cannot avoid seeing the theology underlying the whole mimetic project. Therefore it seems futile to try to limit the religious dimension in Girard's thought solely to the victimage mechanism.

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[65] Johan Asplund. *Rivaler och syndabockar* (Gøteborg: Kørpen, 1989), 93-94.

[66] Further objections to Girardian desire are, as I see it, minor. The scarcity of objections is due to the fact that I am primarily in tune with Girard's basic understanding of desire: desire is, in my view, not primarily aroused by the object but by the other. In this respect Girard has been able to dismiss desire as something *a priori* as in erotic desire, desire for recognition, desire for power etc. Thus the Girardian scope of desire will principally be much wider and more complex than previous understandings of desire, as desires can take almost any form. And it is this liberation from a pre-conceived understanding of desire, which makes it possible to analyse desire in all its different configurations.