

DESIRE, DEICIDE, AND ATONEMENT

RENÉ GIRARD AND ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

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Human action begins with the good. The good is the cause of all desiring, wanting, or willing without which there is no human action. The goodness or evil of human actions can only be understood in the light of the good that is their end. And so a consideration of the good, and of desire for the good, is crucial for understanding our separation from God through sin and of the atonement that overcomes that separation. I want to show how the St. Thomas Aquinas's account the good as the final end can be of great help in understanding the teaching of scripture and tradition on how Christ's death on the cross atoned for our sins. But before turning to the Thomistic account I want to consider René Girard's theory of how Christ's death accomplished our salvation. Girard's theory is helpful because it sees the structure of human desire as a key to understanding the cross. Girard's account of desire contains brilliant insights, but it is somewhat one-sided, since it does not give enough weight to the attractive power of the good. Girard's insights can help to bring out certain aspects of St. Thomas's account, and the difficulties arising from his one-sidedness can help to set off the balance and subtlety of Thomas.

GIRARD ON MIMETIC DESIRE

Girard's first great thesis was that desire is imitative, mimetic. Contrary to modern delusions of autonomy and authenticity, our desires are copied from others. Girard distinguishes between *needs*, which have pre-determined objects that satisfy them, and *desire*, which has no fixed object and which can never be fully satisfied.¹ Needs, he argues are something that humans have in common with the lower animals. But desire is something specifically human. There is something infinite about desire. Desire is essentially a desire for *being*, for complete, "divine" being. The desiring subject feels his own emptiness and lack of being. But then he sees another (the model/mediator) who appears to possess fuller being, to be more real. He thus begins to desire what the model desires, thinking that by attaining it he will attain to the other's being. He convinces himself that what he desires is the object, but really he desires to be the model, and thus the desire for the object is *mediated* by the model, who is therefore also called the *mediator*. But the subject's desire to escape his own nothingness is based on an illusion—the illusion that the model is any less empty and miserable than the subject himself. Thus desire can never be satisfied: "Desire never actually acquires its true object: it leads to failure, oblivion, and death."²

One way in which vain desire leads to death is through rivalry. As long as the model is far removed from the subject, there can be no question of rivalry. Don Quixote copies the desires of Amadís of Gaul, but this does not lead to rivalry, since Amadís of Gaul is a fictional character, who can never compete with Quixote for concrete objects. But the closer the model is to the subject the more inevitable conflict becomes. If the subject copies the desire of his neighbor for a certain woman, say, then they both desire the same object, and become rivals to each other. The admiration that the subject feels for his neighbor as model then comes to mixed with hatred for him as rival. The neighbor in turn sees that the subject is desiring his object, and this intensifies his own desire— thus both copy each-other's desire, and the rivalry escalates in intensity, the object of the desire is ever more secondary.

In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, where Girard first developed the account of mimetic desire, he argued that the modern condition aggravates the conflict latent in such desire for two reasons. The first is that modern egalitarianism brings the subject closer to his model, and thus the model is always also a rival. But the second and

¹ See: René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1977), p. 146.

² See: René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1965), p. 238.

more profound reason is that modern civilization is based on the idea that man can take the place of God, that he can become autonomous and possess fullness of being in himself: "The will to make oneself God is a will to self-destruction which is gradually realized... Ever since Hegel, the modern world has boldly and openly presented this same negation as the supreme affirmation of life."³ Great novelists, however, such as Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoyevsky, show the truly negative nature of the modern project: "In the eyes of the novelist, modern man suffers, not because he refuses to become fully and totally aware of his autonomy, but because that awareness, whether real or illusory, is for him intolerable."⁴ But they also show that modern man is very good at deceiving himself. He sees that the promise of autonomous fullness is not realized in himself, but he continually finds others in whom he suspects it is being fulfilled:

Each individual discovers in the solitude of his consciousness that the promise is false but no one is able to universalize his experience. The promise remains true for Others. Each one believes that he alone is excluded from the divine inheritance and takes pains to hide this misfortune. Original sin is no longer the truth about all men as in a religious universe but rather each individual's secret...⁵

The contrast between the pre-modern "religious universe," and modernity is important. In more Christian times, it could be recognized that the emptiness and misery of man were the products of original sin, and thus common to all, but in the age of secular humanism the experience of nothingness is a shameful secret. We can see here a reason for the infinity of desire that Girard does not make fully explicit: desire (especially in its modern form) is the desire to be God. God is therefore the ultimate rival, and desire includes an implicit hatred of God.

THE SCAPEGOAT AND THE CHRIST

In *Violence and the Sacred* Girard goes back to pre-Christian times, and finds the same structure of vain desire in paganism that he found in secular humanism. It is here that he develops his second great thesis: the scapegoat as a mechanism for diffusing the conflict caused by mimetic desire. A society that is being destroyed by mimetic rivalries can save itself by transferring all its hostility to one victim (the scapegoat), usually one that is somehow different from other members of the society. The various rivals are then united in their common hatred of the one victim. The death of the victim gives a temporary harmony to society. Conflict will, however, soon arise again, and so the scapegoating has to be endlessly repeated.

³ Girard, *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel*, p. 287.

⁴ Girard, *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel*, p. 159.

⁵ Girard, *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel*, p. 57.

Girard speculates that the scapegoat mechanism lies at the origin of human society, culture, and religion. Human groups were originally forged into societies sacrificing a victim. The victim takes on a double character— as scapegoat it is guilty and worthy of death, but as cause of harmony it is worthy of veneration.⁶

Girard's third great thesis, which he began to expound in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* was that Christ saves humanity by unveiling the secrets of mimetic desire and the scapegoat. Christ comes to offer humanity a kingdom without rivalry— a kingdom of free giving rather than competitive taking. But humanity rejects this offer, and turns Christ into the ultimate scapegoat. The triumphant innocent of this scapegoat, however, reveals the scapegoat mechanism for what it is, and thus exposes the violence at the foundation of human societies.⁷

DIFFICULTIES WITH GIRARD'S ACCOUNT

Is desire really always as vain and arbitrary as Girard suggests? Granted that no finite object can ever fully satisfy the human heart, is it not true that there are nonetheless things that we desire because they are really good, and bring us closer to the complete good? Girard is puzzled by the fact that Aristotle, despite his insight into the imitative nature of humanity, does not see the inevitable conflict latent in mimetic desire. But could it not be that Aristotle's own experience of desire does not actually fit with Girard's account? Suppose that Aristotle began to desire wisdom because of some model. Can it not be that once he begins to taste wisdom, he sees that it is good in itself? Aristotle would presumably say that while his desire was not fully satisfied by the wisdom that he could taste, neither was it disappointed. Wisdom did indeed augment his being, but in such a way as to make him desire it even more. Aristotle was the friend of Plato, but even more the friend of truth— that is, he did not love truth primarily because he wanted to exchange his own emptiness for Plato's supposed fullness, no, he loved truth for its own sake. And although he loved *the same object* as Plato, this did not cause a rivalry in the Girardian sense, because truth is an object that can be possessed by many without being diminished or divided.

John Milbank has criticized Girard for projecting too much of the situation of modern, egalitarian society on to the situation of pre-historic man. In modern egalitarian, relativistic society the objects of desire appear to be entirely arbitrary,

⁶ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, passim.

⁷ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London: Athlone Press, 1987).

and Girard projects this arbitrariness on to pre-historic societies. “Desire, [Girard] assumes, is never for the objectively desirable, but only for what others deem to be desirable.” But in a hierarchical society “certain positions and values [would be] regarded as objectively more important and desirable than others,” and “in such a society, rivalry would appear to be a secondary phenomenon in comparison with the given objects of rivalry and desire.”⁸ Is there any reason for supposing an egalitarian “state of nature” from which society arose through the violence of mimetic desire and scapegoating? Would it not be possible to suppose instead that vain, mimetic desire is parasitic on an older order of desire that arises from the objective attractiveness of things? And that human society is originally founded in the common pursuit of goods to be shared, rather than in the common murder of scapegoats?

THE THOMISTIC ACCOUNT OF THE GOOD

Like Girard, St. Thomas Aquinas thinks of desire as desire for *being*, and ultimately for *complete, divine being*.⁹ But unlike Girard, Thomas does not make a sharp distinction between needs and desires. Following Plato and Aristotle, Thomas holds that all things desire participation in the eternal and divine. Rocks resist disintegration, plants grow, and animals hunt, all because they want to participate in the divine. This is because all these things are creatures: they are made by God and their completion and perfection consists in a participated likeness to Him. But obviously in the case of inanimate things we are talking about “desire” only in an analogous sense. Properly speaking desire follows knowledge. The animals have a limited knowledge through sensation that gives them an elicited desire for things that preserve or complete their substance or propagate their species. But human beings have a universal, rational knowledge that leads to an infinite desire.

The human desire for complete being lies behind all particular desire. Thomas argues that human beings cannot will anything at all unless they see that thing as contributing to complete being. Even basic human needs, insofar as they become the object of choice, are willed as means to complete being. This is an absolutely crucial point. While most objects of choice are chosen for something else (e.g. medicine for the sake of health), there must be some final goal for the sake of which everything

⁸ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 397.

⁹ See: Edmund Waldstein, O.Cist., “The Good, the Highest Good, and the Common Good,” in: *The Josias*, February 2015: <https://thejosias.com/2015/02/03/the-good-the-highest-good-and-the-common-good>.

else is chosen (IaIIae 1,4). If I will A for the sake of B, and B for the sake of C, then I cannot will B or A till I have first willed C. The final end, the completion of being, that all humans desire can be called “happiness,” but this term is slightly misleading, since it seems to denote the subjective satisfaction that comes from having what one wants, whereas for Thomas it means the very end that one wants itself. The final end has to be known in some way to be desired, but it does not have to be known *determinately*. It is sufficient to have a vague sense of happiness/completion/fullness of being in order to desire other things for it; one does not need to know *where fullness is to be found*.

In reality, fullness of being is found in God. God is the end of all human desire in a double sense. First because humans like all things desire the completion of their own likeness to God. God has made humans in His own likeness so that their being and flourishing reflects his beauty and goodness: *gloria Dei vivens homo*— the glory of God is the living man. Thus in desiring their own completion human persons are really desiring the glorification of God, and God Himself who appears in that glorification. But unlike other creatures, human beings highest completion and life consists in attaining to God through knowing and loving Him. Thus, even more than desiring their participated likeness to God, human persons desire God Himself as they can attain to Him through knowledge and will. By natural wisdom humans can attain to God indirectly, but through grace God calls all persons to a higher union with Himself. He calls us to a participation in the innermost life of the Trinity, He calls us to be adopted sons in the image of the eternal Son, to be united to Him by an infinite love, and to see Him face to face. That is eternal life: it is at once the highest reflection of God in created things, and the attainment to God by created things.

SIN

In one sense human beings want everything that they want out of love of God, since they necessarily will everything for the sake of fullness of being. But the initial knowledge of fullness is very vague, and so humans can be mistaken about wherein that fullness is to be found, or about what things actually tend toward it. God helps us through the natural law, which is inscribed in our hearts, and which is applied to our actions by conscience. But the voice of conscience can be suppressed. It is possible for human persons to act as though the completion of being were to be found in some created thing rather than God. Whenever we act in a way that our conscience tells us is contrary to God’s will, we implicitly say: “happiness, completion, fullness of being is not to be found in God but in something else”—

pleasure, honor, some human relation or whatever. Like the guests invited to the banquet in Luke 14:7-24, we turn down the feast of eternal life for the sake of looking at a field, or at oxen, or of being with a woman. None of those things are bad in themselves, but they are bad if they are desired in such a way as to put some created thing in the place of God as the final end. Such a desire and choice is indeed vain in the way described by Girard. It cannot attain to the fullness of being that is not found in any created thing, and so “it leads to failure, oblivion, and death.” Girard is thus profoundly right about desire, if by “desire” one means sinful desire, the desire to find one’s *final end* in something that is not God.

Every sinful choice is implicitly idolatrous; it puts some created thing in God’s place. Sin implies violence against ourselves; when we sin we “suppress the truth” (cf. Rom 1:18) that God has written into our hearts. And therefore it implies violence against God, whose being is a reproach to our sin. As Blessed Columba Marmion put it, the sinner says by his action that if it were possible he would destroy God.¹⁰ Girard’s idea of mimetic rivalry is quite helpful here. As we saw, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* sees desire at its deepest as a desire to take God’s place— thus God becomes the ultimate rival, who has to be destroyed to make room for man to come into his inheritance. This deep violence is prior to the destructive cycle of mimetic rivalries with other human beings that arises out of the inevitable disappointment of tasting the bitter emptiness and vanity of sin.

ATONEMENT

Girard is quite right to say that Christ’s death reveals violence and evil for what they are. But we can now see more clearly that what is revealed is not only the scapegoat mechanism, but also (and more profoundly) the opposition to God found in all sin. In Himself God cannot be harmed, but by becoming man He became vulnerable, and sin could thus appear as what it is. In order to suppress the truth of God that conscience speaks in our hearts, we killed Jesus, who proclaimed that truth. “This man was delivered up by the definite plan and purpose of God, and you nailed him to the cross by the hands of heathen men, and killed him”— St. Peter’s words in Acts 2:23 apply not only to the Jerusalem mob that shouted “crucify him,” but to each and every one of us.

¹⁰ Columba Marmion, *Christ the Life of the Soul* (St Louis: Herder, 1925), p. 158.

But Christ did much more than reveal the nature of sin. He also *atoned* for sin. That is, He reconciled humankind to the God from whom we had separated ourselves by sin. He made God and man to be at-one.

Atonement, even between two human persons, can only take place by a change of the *will*, a renewal of love. Since the essence of sin was the turning of the will away from God toward some created thing, sin could only come from turning the will back to God, and loving Him perfectly. But since we were not capable of such a love, the Son of God became man in order to love for us. “So, coming into the world, Christ says... Behold, I come to do your will... By which *will* we are sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ” (Hebrews 10:5-10). This is the essence of the atonement: the perfect love that Jesus gives to God, the whole of His will entirely united to God as the final end and highest good (IIIa 48,2) And he did this for us by assuming our nature, and teaching it to love God: “even though he was the Son, he learned obedience from his sufferings; and, made perfect, he became for all who obey him the cause of everlasting salvation” (Hebrews 5:8).

And this perfect love of God was shown *through his sufferings*. Love demands that the one who has fallen away, who has been unfaithful to love, somehow recognize the evil that they have done. This is done in the first place by the “contrition” of the heart, but it is done also by taking on a penance, by “suffering” what has been done in order to bear it away. As Fr. Norbert Hoffmann has argued, atonement is the bearing of sin as pain.¹¹ And this is what Christ does for all humanity in bearing his sufferings out of love. Only one who was at once man and God fully bear sin as suffering. Only in such a one could humanity bear its sin as what it truly is: an attack on God. As man Christ was able to suffer death. As God he was able to suffer it as the murder of God, as deicide.

SACRIFICE AND MERIT

Christ’s atoning death is a sacrifice offered to God: “Christ had offered for all time a single *sacrifice* for sins” (Hebrews 10:12). But this is sacrifice in a very different sense from that primarily employed by Girard. Girard usually uses sacrifice to mean the murder of scapegoat (though he later also uses it to mean giving up what one loves for the sake of the good of the one loved— as in the good harlot in the judgment of Solomon, who is willing to give up her child so that the child might live). The

¹¹ Norbert Hoffmann, “Atonement and the Ontological Coherence Between the Cross and the Trinity,” in: *Toward a Civilization of Love*, trans. Erasmo Leivo (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985) 213-66.

Christian idea of sacrifice, as explicated by Thomas (IIa IIae 85), has nothing to do with scapegoating. It is an outer sign of the inner offering of love that is due to God as our final goal and fullness of being. Such a sign could be merely the prostrating of the body. Or it could be the offering of a gift that could be placed in the sanctuary without changing the gift. But most properly, sacrifice is a gift that is taken out of our use and made “sacred” to God. This is done by destroying the thing: for instance, slaying an animal, burning grain, pouring out wine. Sacrifice is thus the symbolic opposite of sin; sin is choosing some lesser thing over God, sacrifice is giving up some thing for God.

In the Old Testament, bloody sacrifices were used to seal covenants. They signified that the people were joined into one family with God (one blood). They also signified a curse—if the people broke the covenant, their blood would flow like that of the sacrificial victims. But when the people did break the covenant, God gave them the sacrifices of atonement to avert the curse they had brought on themselves. Atoning sacrifices signify conversion to God, but also the bearing of the curse, which is deflected onto the sacrificial animal that stands in place of the people.

Christ’s sacrifice (IIIa 48,3) seals a new covenant by which we are taken up into God’s family. And it is the atoning sacrifice that bears the curses of all the previous covenants that we had broken: “Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming the thing accursed, for our sake” (Galatians 3:13).

Christ’s sacrifice is the most complete opposite of sin. In sinning we implicitly say that we do not want God to be God, we put ourselves or some other creature in his place. But Christ “did not think to seize on the right to be equal to God, but stripped himself by taking the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:6-7). In his sacrifice he gave up everything, even his life, for God. But then God shows that he does not want to take anything from us. He does not begrudge us anything. The lie behind all sin is that God is our rival, who prevents us from having complete happiness, but in raising Jesus to his right hand God shows that he is pure generosity: “all that is mine is yours” (Luke 15:31). The resurrection and Ascension of Jesus is not only for him, but for all of us, who are united to him through Baptism: “We were buried with him by baptism into death; so that, as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of his Father, so we too may walk in a renewal of life” (Romans 6:4). By his sacrifice Christ not only atoned for our sins, but merited (IIIa 48,1) for us a share in the very life of God. In suffering deicide Christ proves that there is no reason for deicide: God wants to give us everything.

The union with Christ's death and resurrection that we receive in Baptism is deepened and strengthened by the Holy Eucharist. In the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Christ's sacrificial death is made sacramentally present, and when we receive his body and blood in Holy Communion we are so identified with the sacrificial victim that we receive the life he merited: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life everlasting, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:54). The sacrificial banquet is a foretaste of the union with God in Heaven, "the wedding feast of the lamb," that satisfies the infinite desire of our hearts— a desire that leads not to "oblivion, and death," but to fullness of life and being.