

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **Watching new Star Wars movie.** Watching about fictional rebels in a galaxy far, far, away, weeping uncontrollably about Aleppo.
- B. **Why we have literature, and art, right?** They can shine a mirror on our reality. Reveal thing about human nature, about social relations, about culture that empirical observation alone might miss. This is even true in how we understand our faith.
- C. Religions at times can be walled off from other disciplines. No one is credited as having authority to speak into the shaping of theology or church practice if they aren't an expert in Ancient Greek or Biblical manuscripts or Jewish history. And while I'm 100% for learning and the development of expertise, it can create a myopic way of understanding faith to not have input from other disciplines and the fresh perspective that yields.
- D. I am grateful that in our little Blue Ocean Network, one of our core distinctives is that we are **joyfully engaged with culture**. Secular culture is not something to be held at arms length or to be looked down upon, its to be fully engaged, enjoyed, critiqued, in dialogue with, recognizing the life and truth and enrichment even to our faith to be in vibrant conversation with partners that help enrich our sense of meaning, and purpose, and beauty.
  - 1. We recognize that the Divine is bigger than any religious portrait could capture and that we can hold to our core commitments to Jesus as a central revelation of the Divine, and the Bible as a supremely helpful tool to meet this Jesus, and still open our minds and hearts to the contributions of other disciplines in helping us understand what our religious traditions might not fully capture about the nature of God or humanity.
- E. Personally, **I'm extremely grateful that I came to faith as a theatre student in a secular university**. I declared a double major in religion so I could take the classes I was interested in taking as part of my own sojourn of discovery; reading Buddhist texts alongside the classical Greek plays. Studying ancient Christian mysticism on one hour and playing Lady Macbeth in the next. Art and faith were intermingled in that season, and always have been since.
- F. In that vein, a source of insight that many of us in B.O. have found supremely helpful recently is the work of **Rene Girard** - a French man and professor of literature throughout the United States including many decades at Stanford. Girard was not a theologian by trade. He was an atheist, and a professor of literature with an anthropological bent. Girard, eventually became a man of Jesus-Centered faith, but it was not because of the preaching he heard or a particular encounter in worship, but because of what he saw in the Biblical story and how it interacted with the bigger landscape of literature and ancient mythology.
- G. **At the heart of Girard's work is the question of human violence**, why it's so universal, where it's rooted, and what might be done to meaningfully address it. These are profoundly important, vital questions, which are at the heart of what it means to be community, but they're not questions that the Christian Faith or other faiths for that matter have always grappled with well.
  - 1. If anything, one might argue that much of the **growth of the "nones"** in the West (or "no religious affiliation" folks) in recent decades is a reaction to the ways religion seems to contribute to violence (physical, emotional, spiritual violence) in the world rather than helpfully grapple with it.
- H. **Girard noticed a common pattern in how humans universally from culture to culture from age to age tend to channel their aggression and tension into violence, specifically violence toward an individual or minority group seen as different**. As he understood it, the only way this pattern continued and held such power was that within the mechanism of violence was **self-deception**.

1. People have generally been blind to the patterns and so they continue unchecked. For us, particularly provocative is that **Girard saw something different when he turned to the Jesus-centered story**. Rather than reinforcing the same framework he had developed in looking at other Ancient myths and foundational literary works, the texts of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles he found unmasked the violence mechanism and even gave the tools within it to undo and combat it.
- I. So this is what we're gonna spend the next several weeks exploring this together. Today we're just gonna focus on the first foundational concept in Girard's theory of human violence, and that has to do with **how human's desire**.
- II. First, a little more biography on Rene Girard
  - A. Born in France in the 1920s. Was studying in Paris when it was occupied by the Nazis in the mid 1940s. Violence was a part of his world up close at a very formative age. After the war ended, he immigrated to the United States and began teaching in University settings; initially French, then French literature, and eventually his literary interests broadened from there.
  - B. As he working on analysis of the 19th century novel, he kept noticing a pattern in the characters he read, and as his interest in literature broadened, he found the pattern remain. It's a pattern that Girard would say the Hebrew Bible begins to reveal from the very beginning in Genesis. The way human's come to desire.
  - C. Most of us think that desire is fairly innate. Maybe we think our desires were born with us. At the very least, we believe we have the agency to initiate and direct them as adults. But Girard sees something different, even in Genesis 3, the story of Adam and Eve.
  - D. Let's Look at that afresh
  - E. **Fall Story, Genesis 3:1-6**

***Now the serpent was more shrewd than any of the wild animals that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Is it really true that God said, 'You must not eat from any tree of the orchard'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit from the trees of the orchard; 3 but concerning the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the orchard God said, 'You must not eat from it, and you must not touch it, or else you will die.'"*** 4 The serpent said to the woman, "Surely you will not die, 5 for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will open and you will be like divine beings who know good and evil."

***6 When the woman saw that the tree produced fruit that was good for food, was attractive to the eye, and was desirable for making one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some of it to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.***

1. So this is a kind of mythic origin story (like many ancient mythic stories) that folks like Girard have examined with unique qualities like talking animals and so on. But in the Genesis story, Girard saw something unique: **the story makes clear that the desire for the forbidden fruit that both of the garden dwellers experience is not an innate desire**. Adam and Eve had just been reveling in each other. The man had just looked at the first woman and said "this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" and celebrated her. And then something shifts. The serpent comes on the scene and draws the attention of the woman to something else.
2. **Eve gets desire from serpent**. He's the one that first shows the desire for the fruit. He asks her a question which is not factually true, and she corrects him. But even though she was able to mentally engage and not fall into his little trap, she still was changed by him.

Because she saw in the snake the desire for the fruit. Suddenly, she looks at it a different way, *“When the woman saw that the tree produced fruit that was good for food, was attractive to the eye, and was desirable for making one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate it.”*

3. It doesn't stop there. The man sees the desire of the woman, and the next thing you know he's eating it.
4. This insight is the foundational insight of Girard's work:

### III. All human desire is mimetic desire.

- A. **Mimetic means “imitative”.** We desire something because we see someone else desire it.
  1. It was something Girard first noticed in the novels he was teaching. **Don Quijote wanted to live the life of a knight.** Why? Because he read the romances of Amadis de Gaule and he wanted to emulate them. Madame Bovary is the story of a woman who becomes enraptured in another kind of life because of the romance novels she reads. I wanted to be a Shakespearian actor when I was younger because I watched *Dead Poet's Society* a lot. (And like Robert Sean Leonard's character, I did get to play Puck in high school and it was a real high.)
  2. **Desire was not direct, it was triangular.** (*Image.*) The subject, the object and the model. This happens unconsciously, usually with people close to us in our lives. We use them as models, or mediators. And we absorb their desires as our own.
  3. The forbidden fruit is the object, the serpent is the model, Eve is the subject.
- B. **Human beings are mimetic creatures. Not a bad thing in and of itself.**
  1. Science has validated Girard's theories. We've talked before about brain's mirroring system. **Mirror neurons** - our bodies respond as if we're doing what we see, etc. What wires us for empathy.
  2. Mimesis is how we learn to be in the world. Babies learning to talk, learning to walk. You see it in toddlers and preschoolers. We try to get our kids to notice the other kids eating the broccoli without complaint. On the other hand, it works the other way too. One kid starts crying at a moment in a story of a movie, more start crying.
  3. You could say from an evolutionary standpoint, this was important development, the capacity to imitate and learn.
  4. In the age of social media, this is magnified.
    - a) **I want a new iPhone because you want one, and you post about it.**
    - b) My kids are addicted to watching **unboxing videos** on YouTube.
    - c) Advertisers totally understand how this works and love it because they can exploit it.
    - d) In fact, **Peter Thiel, the original big investor in Facebook, directly credits the work of Girard** which influenced him as Girard's student at Stanford, for the role it played in why he invested in Facebook in the first place. Because he understood that the model for Facebook was essentially tapping into the human mimetic need.
  5. I asked **Elliott recently** if he could notice this pattern in himself. Are there things in your life you can think of that you like cause other people like it. He responded about Pokemon. But said, “But now that I've tried it, I really like it.” So there are positive affects of acting on mimetic desire. You discover new things that are appealing to you. **You learn.**
  6. **So mimesis in and of itself is not bad.** It's what it means to be human, at least Girard believe that.

### IV. But mimetic desire can have bad effects.

1. **Desire for destructive things.** That's what's happening in the Adam and Eve story right? The servant is planting the desire in them for something that will ultimately hurt them.

- a) Why you don't want your teenager getting caught up in the wrong crew. Desire for drugs, alcohol, crime.
- 2. **Mimetic desire usually leads to envy and rivalry.**
  - a) you have some scarcity of resources, shared desire, creates rivalry. It becomes a spiral, people picking up on each other's desire, and eventually each other's aggression. Tension the needs to be resolved.
  - b) we're going to be looking more at how this develops next week, but for now, you don't have to look too far in the Genesis to see that the mimetic pattern leading to violence:
- 3. **The first death in the Bible is what? A murder.** The murder of Abel, one chapter after Adam and Eve eat of the fruit. They have two children: Cain and Abel. Cain kills his brother in envious rivalry.
  - a) **Mimetic desire acts like a contagion that infects humans, one after the other. And that contagion triggers another: violence.** Violence, not disease, is the contagion most feared by the early humans. **By Genesis 6, the ancient authors tell us, "the earth was filled with violence."**
  - b) the pattern of mimesis can give way to violence.
- 4. **What the 10 Commandments seemed to be getting at.** Rather than an afterthought, the 10th commandment seems like it may be the most fundamental. Don't kill. Don't cheat on your spouse. Don't steal. Don't lie. And Finally: **"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that belongs to your neighbor."** (Ex. 20:17)
  - a) all the problems are rooted in what's going on inside. You have to address the desire because the other problematic behaviors, the other sins, are all rooted there.
  - b) Jesus himself picked up this point famously in the sermon on the mount. **"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."** (Matthew 5:27-28). You gotta pay attention to the desire because it has the power to master you.

V. So where does this leave us?

- A. I have a friend who's Korean American, and from an Eastern faith background, and she noticed recently the critique of desire from Girard's work as feeling similar to a **rejection of desire in Buddhism**. In Buddhism, the spiritual path is one of trying to eliminate all human desire because of the power seems to have over us. This leads to asceticism. It could lead to a repression of our senses, of our enjoyment. Is that what Girard seems to be going for? Is that what we should be emulating if we don't fall into the trap of envy and violence?
- B. I don't think so. The Bible seems to affirm throughout its scope **a life that is filled with joy and meaning and beauty and pleasure**. A life in which the follower of God is invited to "taste and see that the Lord is good." A good life that is often described in terms of abundance, with images like rich wine, land flowing with milk and honey.
- C. But I do think Girard would say that the Jesus centered story, as told through the Bible and lived throughout history, invites us into some **helpful responses that might lead us away from rivalry and violence**.
  - 1. First: **we can become more aware of what influences us**. The mimetic desire loses some of its power when we recognize it at work. I think that's part of the gift that Girard sees in Genesis. The way it makes clear how desire starts and how it infects.
    - a) next time you are on Facebook and you see someone post about some cool new gadget and then you click over to Amazon before you hit buy, maybe take a moment to

think about why. Or maybe the next time you feel compelled to share that particular video on your wall. Think about why.

b) Personal story here?

2. Second: **We can direct our mimetic desire in positive directions.** This is totally what Jesus embodied and encouraged his followers to do. He channelled his imitative impulses to God, God's self. He saw himself as one who follows the divine like a son follows a Father.
  - a) **"I tell you the solemn truth, the Son can do nothing on his own initiative, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise."** (John 5:19)
  - b) I am following. I am imitating. But I'm not imitating others out of rivalry. I'm imitating God. And he invited others to do the same. To imitate him. He washed his followers feet and then he told them, **"For I have given you an example—you should do just as I have done for you."** (John 13:15)
  - c) Personal story here?
  
3. As we end: reflect on **who are the people that have a lot of influence in our lives?** Does imitating them lead us closer or farther away from Jesus? If turning towards Jesus and progressively walking more towards him is your goal, what relationships or sources of wisdom and insight might Jesus be inviting you to pursue that would help direct your imitation towards him? Which ones might he invite you to pursue less so you can be more open to imitating Him. (Pray)