The apocalyptic feeling

On the occasion of René Girard’s reception among the *immortels* of the *Academie française*, Michel Serres spoke for them both: “We shared a childhood of war, an adolescence of war, a youth of war, following a paternity of war.” He went on claim that: “Historians will one day ask us to explain the unexplainable: this formidable wave of violence that submerged the West in the twentieth century, that sacrificed not only millions of young people during the World War I, but then dozens of millions during World War II.”¹ Undoubtedly the violent history of the twentieth century has been a formative context for the development of Girard’s mimetic theory. And perhaps it is no surprise that, late in his life, after the events of 9/11 and the globalization of terrorism, he has turned his attention to the study of modern warfare and the contemporary experience of global violence. Indeed, at each developmental stage of his theory of the violent origins and sacrificial

maintenance of human culture there has lurked the shadow of an uncontrollable violence that cannot be “managed” successfully by the religious logic of the scapegoat mechanism. Recently, in Battling to the End (2010), Girard brings us face to face with the prospect of an escalation of violence among humans to a degree where our survival at the global level is threatened.

In typically paradoxical fashion, however, Girard argues – in Achever Clausewitz and a number of interviews conducted around the time of its publication – that while on the one hand humanity has entered irrevocably into a new phase of its violent history, on the other hand this feeling of things escalating out of control is nothing new. Not for those who read the Hebrew and Christian scriptures anyway. The biblical text exhibits for us precisely this “apocalyptic feeling”—an awareness that comes from living in the midst of violence while knowing that violence is ultimately powerless. For Girard, “The apocalyptic feeling is the consciousness that the scapegoat business has run its course ... Any great Christian experience is apocalyptic because what one realizes is that after the decomposition of the

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sacrificial order there is nothing standing between ourselves and our possible destruction”. “How this will materialize”, he concludes, “I don’t really know.”

This eschatological realism has been a hallmark of Girard’s thinking from his earliest writings. Yet increasingly he notices an uncanny resonance between global events and the apocalyptic genre of some biblical texts: “Two world wars, the invention of the atomic bomb, several genocides, and an imminent ecological disaster have not sufficed to convince humanity, and Christians above all, that the apocalyptic texts might not be predictions, but certainly do concern the disaster that is underway.” Several times, Girard has spoken about two principal attitudes towards human history: the mythological and the biblical. The mythological interpretation of history tries to dissimulate violence, in order to camouflage and divert attention from the unjust violence upon which human cultures are founded and by which they are maintained. This is the historical hermeneutic of the classical Greeks, the great Eastern traditions, the Enlightenment philosophers and their critics; the logic of both the “eternal return” and the “myth of progress”. It remains, Girard claims, the predominant

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6 Battling to the End, x It is important to underline that Girard does not read apocalyptic literature mythologically but historically; the apocalypse is not the violence of God unleashed on the world, but “the violence of man unleashed by the destruction of the powers [that restrain it].” Robert Doran, “Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11,” 26; Cynthia L. Haven, “Christianity Will Be Victorious,” 5.

religious attitude up to today. The biblical hermeneutic of history is much rarer, and is to be found at work (to various extents) in historical contexts in which the Judeo-Christian narrative has been culturally informative. Contrary to the mythological worldview, the biblical attitude is the revelation of violence in all its injustice and all its illusory power. The biblical perspective sees through the haze of escalating violence and notices the “real time” of the victimage mechanism: the gradually unfolding process of accusation, expulsion, and attempted divinisation of an innocent victim. Here progress is not the advance from one turn of the sacrificial cycle to the next, or the self-determining fulfilment of human reason or freedom, but the surprising and incomplete recognition of the innocence of the scapegoat in all its cultural manifestations.\(^8\) Rather than a linear and predetermined dynamic of progress, Girard prefers the formula of Jacques Maritain, that “with the passing of time there is always more good and more evil in the world.”\(^9\)

But here the paradox is again evident: the recognition of the truth about sacrificial violence exposes us to the unfettered escalation of that violence (\textit{la montée aux extrêmes}); it disables the mechanisms and conditions (cultural, political, technological) which “contain” our mimetically-generated violence. Thus real time, the time of the gradual recognition of the innocent victim and undoing of sacralised violence, is experienced as “a great test”, particularly by those who read history through the biblical text.\(^10\) It means learning to live with the “apocalyptic feeling” of knowing the failure of violence in the midst of violent attempts to gain security, prosperity, and unity. It means learning to live – in a phrase of Hölderlin employed by Girard in the pivotal fifth chapter of \textit{Achever Clausewitz} – “where

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\(^8\) This gradual process is outlined in the final chapters of René Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, translated by James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).


danger threatens”, without becoming scandalized by the escalating violence which surrounds us and runs through us. This great test is the time of conversion – to introduce the other side of Girard’s apocalyptic coin. The Gospel gives us no guarantee of a happy ending to history, says Girard, “it simply shows us two options ... either we imitate Christ, giving up all our mimetic violence, or we run the risk of self-destruction.” Learning to live “where danger threatens,” neither fleeing from nor conforming to the escalating violence, requires us to participate in a slow turning from the latter option towards the former, from violence to truth.

**Facing the danger**

In the biblical landscape, the place where one learns to live faithfully “where danger threatens” is the desert. The desert is the environment in which the apocalyptic feeling is experienced and urgently intensified, where one enters bodily and spiritually into the awareness that “there is nothing standing between ourselves and our possible destruction.” In biblical literature, “the desert is a perpetual reminder of the reality of danger, hardship, and death ... to lose one’s way in the desert was almost certain death (Job 6:18 ff.).” Yet, and because of this, the desert is also the place of encounter with God. By learning to successfully negotiate the desert experiences of testing, temptation and trial, we learn to sense the presence to us of “that which saves” from the danger – to cite Hölderlin again.

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In early eastern Christianity, as the likelihood of persecutions and martyrdom decreased and Christian people became accustomed to the patterns of the urban lifestyle, some Christians intentionally sought out the experience of the desert and its apocalyptic promise. Like the Israelites and Jesus himself at the beginning of his ministry, these monastics exposed themselves to the dangers of the desert, dangers both physical and spiritual, and to the task of learning to live faithfully, in a Christ-like mode, in the midst of those dangers. Other commentators have brought Girard’s mimetic theory and various monastic traditions and writers into mutually elucidating interplay. Here, I focus on processes of spiritual discernment (discretio spirituum) described in the Conferences of John Cassian (c. 360 – c. 435) in order to identify strategies of Christian living in the apocalyptic context described so richly by Girard.

Written in a period of profound social and cultural change in the western part of the Roman empire, and drawing on his earlier training in monastic practices in Egypt, the Conferences of John Cassian outline a process of discernment (diakresis, discretio) based on the extra-canonical saying attributed to Jesus from the time of the second century and cited by many early authors: “Become like skilled money changers.” Exploring various aspects of

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the money changer’s know-how, Cassian outlines four procedures in the task of discernment in the life of the monastic. I will describe them briefly.15

1. discerning the difference between the ways of good and evil. At the most fundamental level, the task of the monastic is to choose between the two ways: good and evil, life and death, the divine and diabolical. By the fourth century, all the Egyptian cities had been Christianized, but the demonic powers were understood to remain active in the surrounding desert areas.16 The monk stood on the front line of the apocalyptic struggle between the powers of good and the powers of evil. Constantly at risk of being conquered by the demonic energies that assailed him, the monk must learn to recognise their strategies and avoid being controlled them. Diabolic manifestations can strike at any time and place and in any activity; whether at prayer, work, or rest the monk must be spiritually awake and ready. The demonic techniques, however, always bear the characteristics of secrecy, disguise or deception, distorting reality and creating confusion. The demonic powers attack the human person at the weak points of our constitution: the vulnerable parts of our minds and senses, particularly our false sense of self, our pride, and obsessive patterns of thought and will. Despite the fact that, since the fall, humans beings are off-balance and prone to opting for these distorted images and demonic fantasies, Cassian has confidence in the human capacity for this task of discernment, just as Jesus was confident in the disciples’ ability to read the signs of the times. We learn to distinguish between the two paths by the signs we become aware of: either the “fruits of the Spirit” or the “works of the flesh” (Gal 5:19-24).

“If the kingdom of God is within us and that is a kingdom of justice, of peace, and of joy, then whoever remains with these virtues is certainly in the kingdom of God. By contrast, all who deal in unrighteousness, in discord, and in death-bearing gloom have taken their stand in the kingdom of the devil, in hell and in lifelessness. It is by these token that the kingdom of God or of the devil is recognized.”

2. **interpreting the current situation in the light of God’s intention.** Once it is discerned whether or not the coin is gold, we go on to “read” the image on the coin: does it bear the likeness of the king or of the tyrant? As Cassian notes, this is a hermeneutical process which follows after the fundamental discernment between good and evil, aided by authentic practices of scripture interpretation. Here we learn to read the “neutral” or “indifferent” events and circumstances of our day – what Cassian calls the “middle things” (*media*), which are neither good nor bad inherently – in light of God’s desire for us and for our flourishing as human beings. In the light of the scripture, we learn to interpret whether these particular neutral circumstances (e.g. my new occupation, a particular prayer practice I’ve been using, a broken leg my spouse sustained in an accident) are in fact leading me towards God or not. These middle things can become means in and through which God communicates with us, making known God’s saving desire on our behalf. This requires an openness on the part of the human person towards God and God’s intention for him or her, and a spiritual freedom in the face of life’s circumstances. Cassian sees this attitude as an exercise of humility. “True discernment is acquired exclusively by true humility.”

3. **responding in moderation, and through interaction with the community.** Here the minting process of the coin is explored. The coin is forged through a minting process, and

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stamped with the minter’s mark. The task of discernment, also, proceeds through interaction with others, and is marked by that interaction. Cassian sees this interaction developing on two fronts: the discernment is shaped by interaction with excesses of “too much” and “too little”, and by interaction with other members of the community and their experiences and perspectives. These two shaping interactions are interrelated and forge a moderated response of discernment; they keep the monk in the middle of the road, on the “royal road”, the golden mean of prudence.

“The prudent standard of discretion ... consists in avoiding extremes on both sides. It teaches the monk to walk always on the royal road. It keeps him from veering to the right, that is, it keeps him from going with stupid presumption and excessive fervour beyond the boundary of reasonable restraint. It keeps him from going to the left to carelessness and sin, to sluggishness of spirit, and all this in the pretext of actually keeping the body under control.”

This moderation of response is mediated to the monk through relationship with the other members of the community, living and dead. No person can live “where danger threatens”, and persevere in spiritual warfare in that dangerous place, by themselves and in isolation. Living in community with experienced people is a constitutive factor of the monk’s identity, “he is inwardly molded by it. He learns to look through their eyes, to listen with their ears. He puts himself squarely in the midst of the field of forces of the community which is making him a monk, just as a mint strikes a piece of gold into a particular coin.”

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20 Waaijman, “Discernment,” 27.
4. *growing from what is to what can be*. The skilled money changer knows what the full weight of a particular coin should be, and what measure is lacking (due to wear or accident or forgery). In discernment we see our present condition in light of our true identity, as bearers of the image of God. And we see the step-by-step possibilities which open from the present moment, and enable us to progress in “purity of heart.” For Cassian, a pure heart – integrated, transparent, watchful readiness for love – is the goal of spiritual growth. “Therefore, we must follow completely anything that can bring us to this objective, to this purity of heart, and anything which pulls us away from it must be avoided as being dangerous and damaging.”

21 In the scriptures, this process of spiritual growth is described as “being tested”, and consists in (a) recognizing the difference between the actual situation of my life at present and the image and likeness of God I am intended to reflect, (b) making attempts at extending the boundaries of my experience toward that destiny, so that (c) my authentic self will emerge, as “gold is tested by fire” (cf. Jer 9:7; Zech 13:9). As the proverb puts it (Prov 17.3):

“The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.”

Through this process of testing, in which the heart is purified and made ready and able for love to be received and given, the person is conformed to the image of God in which he or she is created.

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21 Cassian, *Conferences* I: 5, 40.
Desire and Discernment in the Midst of Danger

Those familiar with Girard’s writings will be hearing resonances between mimetic theory and the diakrisis outlined by Cassian, in terms both of their overarching themes and their internal dynamics. Here I will draw on mimetic theory, particularly the “apocalyptic” consequences of mimetic desire, to explore the four dimensions of discernment – discerning, interpreting, responding, and growing – suggested by the comparison with the skilled converter of currency.

Discerning. The two ways before which the human being stands, in Girardian terms, are two types of transcendence. Our existence is fundamentally oriented toward the other who transcends us, constituted as we are by our experience of desire “according to the other”. Always present to us is the violently constructed transcendence that is produced by the scapegoating mechanism, which Girard refers to as “the sacred” (le sacré). Girard has often described the “phenomenological sequence” in which people are caught up as a result of the mimetic nature of desire, and which leads almost inevitably to this relationship with a false transcendence. But the biblical texts reveal another, utterly different, transcendence, which originates beyond human mimeticism and the social structures it produces, and is unmarked by the violence that creates the sacred. Recently, Girard has referred to this authentic transcendence of the Judeo-Christian revelation as “the holy” (le saint). In Battling to the End, Girard has simplified and intensified this fundamental discernment. He

sees that there is battle being waged between – in Pascal’s terms – truth and violence, and that we must learn to discern between them and decide where we stand in relation to them.

While Girard observes that battle being waged in the global acceleration of aggression, he is clear that it must also be confronted in the depths of each person’s existence. We must decide which model of desire to imitate: Satan or Christ. Imitating Satan leads us to participate in the way of desiring and relating structured by the false transcendence of sacralised violence; imitating Christ leads us to participate in his non-rivalrous desire emanating from the authentic transcendence of love, le saint. A primary skill of living faithfully in apocalyptic contexts, as Girard has repeatedly insisted, is discerning that the true source of the rivalry, conflict and violence that emerges in human relations is not the living God (le saint) but the death-producing powers of the satanic transcendence (le sacré). Cassian teaches that the way to recognise the satanic model is to learn to recognize the strategies that it uses: in Girard’s terminology - rivalry, méconnaissance, deceits of autonomy and distorted relations of desire. Followers of Christ freely enter into the desert, as he did, to face the assaults of Satan, to learn how to distinguish between the satanic voice and the Word of God, and to endure the trial of fidelity. While feeling the full force of the violent transcendence, those who model themselves on Christ are fortified by trust in the “victory of the cross” over the demonic forces (i.e. various manifestations of the victimage mechanism) that exercise power in human relations.

24 Girard, Battling to the End, 115, 213, 217.
25 Girard, Evolution and Conversion, 222-225; Battling to the End, 130-135.
26 See the Introduction to Battling to the End, ix-xvii; Doran, “Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11,” 25-26; Haven, “Christianity Will be Victorious,” 5.
27 See especially Girard, I See Satan, 137-153.
Interpreting. But living in the midst of apocalyptic danger requires further, and more nuanced, discernment – as the monastic desert-dwellers knew well. For even after the fundamental choice between models has been made, that decision must be enacted in each situation of daily life. Every circumstance of life is an opportunity to be drawn closer to the model (Christ), or to be led away. In Girardian terms, this is the ongoing process of the conversion of our desire to the imitation of Christ; it means the gradual, uneven but persistent, alignment of the movement of our heart with the desire of Christ, as that is made known to us in the scriptures. This process is accomplished, according to Cassian, by spiritual watchfulness. “So we must first scrutinize thoroughly anything appearing in our hearts or anything suggested to us. Has it come purified from the divine and heavenly fire of the Holy Spirit?”\footnote{Cassian, \textit{Conferences} I: 20, 54. On the practice of watchfulness see, for example, Martin Laird, \textit{Into the Silent Land: The Practice of Contemplation} (London: DLT, 2007) and “Continually Breathe Jesus Christ: Stillness and Watchfulness in the \textit{Philokalia},” \textit{Communio} 34 (2007): 243-263.} Learning to be inwardly still before the suggestions that come into our awareness – images, thoughts, feelings, memories, and not chasing after them in our minds and hearts—allows us the freedom to interpret them in the light of the desire of Christ, our true model. This practice weakens the \textit{méconnaissance} that produces a false sense of autonomy and righteousness about our thoughts and longings, and allows a proper humility to emerge that recognizes our dependence on the model of our desire.

Although at times he has spoken about human desire in negative categories in order to emphasise the dangerous consequences of its mimetic dynamics, both Girard and the desert monastics understand desire to be a positive and creative – although ambivalent - condition of human experience. This ambivalence arises from the restless and undetermined nature of our desire, and from the impact of the model (Girard) or object (spiritual writers) on which our desire comes to be fixed. The gradual process of releasing
our desire from rivalrous and envy-producing models/objects – which can be spoken of as the “renunciation” of desire\(^{29}\) - is at the same time the process of enlarging, intensifying or “stretching of our desire” (Augustine).\(^{30}\) The *discretio spirituum* which occurs in the practice of prayerful watchfulness is the means by which the violence of desire (its urgent and compelling command of our attention) is transformed into ever more intense longing for the authentic model, the one who truly enables our desire. In the language of the spiritual writers, all our desiring is a manifestation of the more originary desire of God for us.\(^{31}\)

*Responding.* This intensifying of our desire for a completely loving and non-competitive model is further refined through our attempts to respond, to act, to live faithfully where danger threatens, according to the desire of such a model. Cassian identifies two inter-related moderating factors: the avoidance of extremes, and the modelling of the community of disciples. Throughout his work, Girard has highlighted the danger of mimetically-generated reciprocity, which, when infected by envy and acquisitiveness, increases by more and more energetic oscillations between extreme positions: model/rival, love/hate; brothers/enemies. This doubling in human relations reflects the dualistic structure of the false transcendence of the divinized scapegoat. In *Battling to the End*, Girard speaks of the need for an asymmetrical action which unlocks this reciprocal escalation. This requires a type of “withdrawal” from the field of mimetic rivalry, a renunciation of the next act of reciprocation in the cycle of violence;\(^{32}\) it offers neither “too much” nor “too little” response in the relational dynamic. In an earlier essay, Girard

\(^{29}\) For Girard’s argument for the renunciation of desire see the conclusion of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 290-314. In recent years, Girard more often speaks of the renunciation of violence. See, for example, *Battling to the End*, 211-217 and “La guerre est partout.”


\(^{31}\) “Désir,” in *Dictionnaire contemporain des Pères de L’Église*, 211-212.

\(^{32}\) Girard, *Battling to the End*, 120-123.
explored the consequences of good and bad reciprocity in a seemingly innocent gesture such as a handshake.\textsuperscript{33} Of course, this kind of response is an art more that a categorical imperative or a formal norm, and can only be discerned in particular circumstances and contexts.

For Cassian, the monk also learns how to act in accordance with the desire of Christ in the midst of the monastic community, and of its common traditions, practices, successes and failures, in living together in following Christ. The community itself becomes an exemplum, a model for the monk’s attempts to live faithfully in discipleship of the model, Christ. Much has been said about Girard’s position regarding the possibility of individuals and communities being peaceful and non-rivalrous models, i.e. the possibility of positive mimesis among humans.\textsuperscript{34} While acknowledging that peaceful mimesis can occur among people, Girard has maintained a type of prophetic critique of mimetic relationship, convinced as he is of the difficulty of avoiding reciprocal rivalry at the level of actual relations. It is significant, therefore, that the central chapter of Battling to the End, titled “Hölderlin’s Sorrow,” stands under the rubric of keeping in mind the “possibility of positive imitation.”\textsuperscript{35} In that chapter, Girard concedes to his interlocutor the need for a consideration of the reality of peaceful mimesis in human relations. “Unlike what I thought


\textsuperscript{35} Girard, Battling to the End, 109 and 119. See also Evolution and Conversion, 222-223.
for a while, you are forcing me not to linger on the duel, but to pass through it.” Yet Girard alerts us, with his every breath, to the ambivalence of human relations, and the fragility of the positive mimesis that exists among communities and their members. Christian communities are marked by the same ambivalence and potential for violence that operate in all human communities, and they too provide imperfect modelling of the gratuitous love of the living God.

Growing. Cassian speaks of an ongoing process of growth from what is to what can be, from the existence I am now to the existence I am intended to be as the image of God; Girard describes the ongoing process of conversion “from reciprocity to relationship.” As the méconnaissance of the satanic transcendence dissipates, and the violence of human relations is recognized for what it is, Girard sees that Christians’ responsibility increases to renounce that violence in all its manifestations, and more consciously conform our thoughts and actions to the true model, Christ. The first step is one of humility: the peaceful acceptance that we always already relate and act within the dynamics of mimetic desire, that there is no “non-mimetic” sphere to which we may escape. “We will always be mimetic, but we don’t have to be so in a satanic fashion. That is, we don’t have to engage perpetually in mimetic rivalries. We don’t have to accuse our neighbour; we can learn to love him.”

This is a Girardian description of Cassian’s call to growth in “purity of heart”.

Like Cassian, Girard also refers to this growth as a process of “being tested”. He speaks of the “test of the warring brothers (frères ennemis)” in which the dangers of the escalation to extremes are moderated by asymmetrical acts of generosity and mercy – the

36 Girard. Battling to the End, 131.
37 Girard, Evolution and Conversion, 225. See also Battling to the End, 109-110: “Christ invites us to work from within mimeticism.”
38 Girard, Things Hidden, 277.
love of enemies described in the gospels. In both monastic spirituality and mimetic theory this testing process involves two movements: firstly, a separation of the person “from the mob” of violently structured relations,39 brought about by an intensifying of desire for the genuinely friendly model, Christ; secondly, the building of different relational dynamics structured according to the desire of Christ for the other. Recently, Girard has referred to this two-fold movement as the journey from reciprocity to relationship (de la reciprocité à la relationalité), and as the freeing of “holiness from the sacred (la sainteté du sacré).”40 This gradual transformation of human relations, made possible by the conversion of our desire by way of the gracious model Christ, is realized through continual discernment, and through trial and error, in concrete relationships.

Using the language of Girard’s mimetic theory to describe the tasks of Cassian’s phases of spiritual discretio – discerning, interpreting, responding, growing – allows us to recognise the fundamental role of the freeing of desire from the dynamics of self-seeking reciprocity in order to imitate the gracious giving of self to the other modelled by Christ. This fragile, step-by-step transformation of relationality is the work of non-mythological, apocalyptic time; it calls for watchfulness, patience, and endurance in face of the dangers of mimetically structured relations. As our affections and behaviours are unravelled from the “excitement” of escalating rivalry, we must learn to live in the ordinariness of relationship. At each step, we must renounce the dramatic extremes of reciprocity and choose instead the slow, hidden work of non-violent solidarity with others. Girard calls this the “great trial” that Christians must endure as the danger (which ultimately is powerless) threatens to engulf humanity and our global environment. “During this long apocalypse, what do we

40 Girard, Battling to the End, 122, 129.
do?” Cynthia Haven put this to Girard in a recent interview, who replied: “Nothing spectacular ... we just wait it out.”\textsuperscript{41} We should not take this to imply a passive irresponsibility in the face of intensifying global strife. Rather, Girard is suggesting precisely that we ought to take responsibility for not getting caught up in the reactive dynamics of escalating reciprocity. Instead, we must endure patiently in the work of building relationships in which that strife is “de-escalated”—relationships that have passed through the “test” of reciprocity and been purified by acts of asymmetrical generosity and forgiveness. Only such relationships, modelled on the desire of the Christ, can save us “from the danger” that threatens to engulf our communities and our world.

\textsuperscript{41} Cynthia Haven, “Christianity Will Be Victorious.”