

# Theology and Catastrophe

## A (Girardian) Semiotics of Re-Humanization

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**ABSTRACT** Girardian anthropology tells us that the birth of human meaning and its signs are the result of a primitive catastrophe. But if these origins are exposed by the biblical record it is because another, transformative semiosis has opened in human existence. Girard's seminal remarks on the Greek logos and the logos of John, endorsing Heidegger's divorce of the two, demonstrate this claim and its source in the nonviolence of the gospel logos. In effect, there is a second catastrophe, one embedded in the bible and reaching its full exposition in the cross, generating a new semiosis in humanity. The transformation may be measured by viewing the original semiosis in a Kantian frame, as a transcendental *a priori* structured by violence. The second catastrophe generates an equivalent new *a priori* of nonviolence. The work of Charles Peirce illustrates both the way in which *interpretants* (of signs) open us progressively to new meanings, and how this process may ultimately be conditioned by love. The catastrophe of the gospel, therefore, works both on the dramatic individual level, with Paul of the New Testament as the great example, but also in slow-motion over semiotic history, changing the meaning of existence from violence to nonviolence.

**KEYWORDS** *a priori*; catastrophe; generative; interpretant; logos; nonviolence; semiosis

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What was the singular circumstance which gave birth to humanity, to “man” and “woman”? What produced the complex of relationships in which we humans are presently found, and which developed into the differentiated self, the “I” of Western thought?

These questions, so immense in consequence, are different from, while parallel to, the primitive questions of philosophy. The latter may be summed up by the perspective of ontology—an inquiry into the ultimate nature of being. Such inquiry has been around since the dawn of philosophy. In contrast, the questions concerning humanity—while not absent from traditional philosophy where ideal aspects of soul or mind are concerned—have grown to the first rank of importance only in the modern age. Now, in our current day, they have been given to us in perhaps their most stringent and urgent form in the twentieth and twentieth-first century work of René Girard.

Girard does not begin philosophically, with pure reflection, the logical content of mind, but with evidence. Evidence from literature, ethnography, biblical scriptures, psychology, and, indeed, from philosophy itself. From the convergence of this evidence, Girard demonstrates the violent origins of humanity—an evolutionary singularity where actual human identity first occurred through the killing of a collective victim, a substitute or displacement for the devastating violence of the whole group. The electric attention produced by this event itself became the birth of the sacred, of religion, and therewith of language and consciousness. The possibility of an external (objective) abstraction—the *god*—became progressively the possibility of ordered knowledge, happening by means of a multiplication of symbols and metonyms—of names—and, little by little, the formal indexing of a world through sequence, pattern and time.

This shocking yet compelling proposition now takes its stand next to the questions of philosophy, on a more-or-less equal footing, remaining at the same time methodologically separate, but affecting them intimately. For neither is modern philosophy itself indifferent to the question of the cogito or transcendental self. Since the Kantian “turn to the subject,” at least, philosophy has been deeply troubled by the role of the human mind and human attention in the production of the real—or what is considered real.

The philosophical implications are further, and deeply, complicated by an element in Girard’s thought already mentioned in passing but of crucial generative significance—the role of the bible. We therefore need to adopt a more considered approach, and take stock of how these elements fit together. Let us repeat Girard’s pathway in some greater detail in order to appreciate the vital role in questions of humanization played by his thought concerning the bible and its dynamic of revelation. It is essential to first

grasp what must be taken as the transcendental structure of his thought, and then, on this basis, see the radical transformation in human meaning brought about by the biblical logos.

In his book *Evolution and Conversion*, Girard speaks of the “catastrophic” nature of the origin of language and thought. He uses the word in its original sense—of a sudden, violent turn in events: “From an evolutionary perspective, language and the symbolic sphere could only be generated by a systemic ‘catastrophe,’ which will act as a springboard for the emergence of culture.”<sup>1</sup> There has to be a violent break from the instinctual density of animal signs (e.g. yellow and black stripes signal danger!) in order to generate the new space of religious and symbolic *significance*, followed by a developing ability for abstract thought. Girard employs the word repeatedly—“[O]ne needs a catastrophic moment in the evolutionary process.... This catastrophe is the mimetic crisis.”<sup>2</sup> Nothing less than an event of shocking violence, allied to a critical degree of collective sensibility, could generate the new space of non-instinctual attention which is the beginning of thought.

A terrifying rupture in the perceptual continuum of the animal world led, therefore, to a specifically human consciousness, and we can say that human thought will always somehow carry the tell-tale fingerprints of original violence when it undertakes its work. Speaking in something of a Hegelian way, we can say that thought always negates in order to affirm, and it is its birth-quality of violence that must surely underpin this possibility. As Girard himself reflects in the same pages, thought and prohibitions share the same necessary origins in violence—negation belongs essentially to both.<sup>3</sup>

However, the matter does not stop there. As we know, Girard also tells us that primitive consciousness misrecognizes the violence so that it becomes swallowed up in the benign effects of the murder.<sup>4</sup> There is the famous “double transference” establishing the sacred as both terrible and good.<sup>5</sup> This leads us at once and necessarily to question the philosophical notion of the good. The primordial good of proto-human cognition is not separate from violence, and violence therefore gains a counter-intuitive original

1. René Girard, Pierpaolo Antonello, and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion. Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2007), 109.

2. *Ibid.*, 110.

3. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

4. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 44, 164.

5. *Ibid.*, 37, 42, 78, 100.

double valence— as both evil and good. This is effectively summed up in Girard's identification of the "sacred"—that which is traditionally supposed to be the highest good—with violence: "Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred."<sup>6</sup> The same conclusion is reached if we view the question from the point of view of the victim of original violence, the physical object onto which the group violence is poured, and which then becomes the original object of human meaning. "(I)f, once dead, the victim brought life to the community, one will inevitably be led to believe that its ability to transcend the ordinary limits of the human in good and evil extends to life and death. If the victim possesses a life that is death and a death that is life, it must be that the basic facts of the human condition have no hold on the sacred. In this we witness the first outlines of religious transcendence."<sup>7</sup> In this description we can see there is no separate origin of transcendence from the primitive crisis, and indeed there is the implication that the victim carries its good/evil duality precisely to the realm of transcendence.

In the original Girardian world, therefore, the good and its role of transcendental signifier have no separate source in which to root themselves beyond the human crisis of violence. Such a conclusion is in striking, indeed scandalous, discordance with traditional metaphysical notions derived classically from Plato, which tell us that the Good is beyond the being and affairs of the earth, including, necessarily, its possibilities of violence.<sup>8</sup> But it is vital to underline this anthropological conclusion by way of contrast to traditional philosophy, as to elide it would be to fail to apprehend the true religious dynamic of Girardian thought. The situation is not made easier

6. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 31.

7. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 41.

8. *Epekeina tēs ousias*, "beyond being," (*Republic* VI, 509b). In ordinary Greek, *ousia* meant someone's possessions—basically their "stuff." Plato employed the term, giving it conceptual depth by shifting it into a matter of "the very stuff" or essence of something (*Euthyphro*, 11a4-b1). Because the word is the present participle of the verb "to be," it also obviously means *being*. Thus what is born from a common sign is a highly specialized sign, the "is-ness" of something. From a Girardian perspective, however, "stuff" can never lose its mimetic origins—something that "is" because two of us desire it. When Plato gestures to a good "beyond stuff," the imagination easily goes to a heavenly "beyond." His classic image of the sun as that which enables seeing, parallel to the idea of the good enabling the soul to see the truth, enshrines this thought of "beyond" and sets it apart from human conflict. But putting the good up in the sky does not stop it being just more "stuff," as all the wars fought over religion illustrate. Whatever Plato was gesturing toward, his semiotics of the good can only reach its fulfillment via non-violence, and this is nowhere part of his program. Meanwhile, it is the mixing together of Plato and the gospels which produces the strange—and highly ambiguous—"good" of metaphysical Christian thought.

by the fact that Girard himself can appear, on occasions, to agree with traditional metaphysics. But at the crucial point in *Things Hidden* where it might seem he is making such a gesture, it is clear that he is operating according to a very different principle indeed. This is the crux of the present essay, which it is essential that we illustrate. Let us continue.

At a certain juncture of *Things Hidden*, Girard is asked about the collective victim, and in the kind of language which reflects post-structuralist thought concerning the inherent lack of a transcendental signifier in texts.<sup>9</sup> Girard does not dispute the philosophical concept but identifies the victim in precisely these terms: “The [transcendental] signifier is the victim. The signified constitutes all actual and potential meaning the community confers on to the victim and, through its intermediary, on all things.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the victim is the original “textual” signifier, the ur-signifier, so to speak: it functions to confer the dramatically new discovery of “meaning” on the world around them. And because the victim is represented in ritual—as a repetition of the original murder—there is in fact a natural “writing” or semiotic substitution immediately implied in the surrogate victim.

Girard thus creates, almost in passing, an astonishing convergence of post-structuralism and anthropology; and it is appropriate to underline the way, in both cases, meaning is achieved as an effect of violence. According to the post-structuralist program the text functions as an arbitrary structure, a form of conceptual violence, one to be disclosed by deconstruction.<sup>11</sup> And in Girard, of course, the transcendental signifier comes as an event of violence. Thus, Girard seems to take his place as a postmodern thinker, for whom meaning is a product of violence in one form or another. But not so fast! Girard actually distinguishes himself forcefully from this fashion of thinking. Immediately before the statement just quoted, he says something

9. See Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1978). It was this paper, delivered at a symposium organized by Girard at Johns Hopkins in 1966, which opened the proverbial floodgates of post-structuralism. See Cynthia Haven, *Evolution of Desire, a Life of René Girard* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), chapter 8.

10. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 103.

11. Jacques Derrida: “On the one hand, we must traverse a phase of overturning. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition.” From an interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta, in Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass, and Henri Ronse, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41.

equally astonishing: “I am not saying that we have found the *true* transcendental signifier. So far we have only discovered what functions in that capacity for human beings.”<sup>12</sup>

On what possible basis can a thinker arrive at the violent origins of human meaning and *at once* dismiss those origins in favor of something other, something “true”? It might be assumed, in some default Platonic frame, that human reflection can carry us off to a world of pre-existent forms which guarantee meaning (in a rational soul) apart from organic human origins. But by his remark “what functions in that capacity for human beings” he makes no such exception. Rather, he reflects the language of revelation, of what is communicated by some truth from outside the actual human order. And the way his argument progresses demonstrates necessarily the medium through which this truth arrives ... something quite different from the metaphysical tradition. In this way, Girard produces a hugely important theological *novum*.

The middle section of *Things Hidden* is entitled “The Judeo-Christian Scriptures,” and it provides first a section on the “Non-Sacrificial Reading” and then a survey of “The Sacrificial Reading and Historical Christianity.” It is well known that Girard recanted on his rejection of the language of sacrifice, accepting a certain Christianized usage of the word.<sup>13</sup> But that does not mean at all that he abandoned his analysis of the intellectual pathway of Christianity. There is an arc of understanding here, running from the primary anthropological scene and its epistemology, through to the survey of historical Christianity, and it is vital we recognize it. Within the survey, Girard gives a reading of the German phenomenologist, Heidegger, and his adamant rejection of the Christian logos. Heidegger repeats the motifs of violent origins in a generally abstract philosophical frame,<sup>14</sup> yet it was enough to alert Girard to a radical continuity between humanity’s beginnings and Heidegger’s philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Girard does not attempt to argue philosophically against Heidegger—not at all. Rather he moves to endorse Heidegger’s philosophical perspective regarding Christianity precisely from his starting point of violence. Girard does not try to vindicate Christianity’s traditional claims to inheritance of Greek thought, but instead agrees with Heidegger’s drastic separation between the two.

12. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 103.

13. René Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2014), 33–45.

14. Anthony W. Bartlett, “After Sacrifice Ontology: The Shared Revelatory Dynamic of Heidegger and Girard,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 24, no. 1 (2017).

15. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 267.

Heidegger celebrates the logos of Heraclitus, the principle of meaning which does its work in a way that necessarily has recourse to violence. Girard comments on Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, saying that "Heidegger recognizes that the Greek Logos is inseparably linked with violence."<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, "The Johannine Logos is foreign to any kind of violence."<sup>17</sup> Heidegger does not draw out this phenomenal difference (if he notices it at all, he considers it unworthy of comment), but he underlines the gulf between the two, claiming that Christianity has nothing to do with the world of Greek thought. Girard agrees emphatically. "Heidegger is absolutely right to state that there has never been any thought in the West but Greek thought, even when the labels were Christian. Christianity has no special existence in the domain of thought. Continuity with the Greek Logos has never been interrupted."<sup>18</sup> In other words, there is an unbroken consistency in Western thought on the basis of its Greek character, and the advent of Christianity has done nothing to alter this. The grounds for this conclusion is the inherent non-violence of the Christian logos, as opposed to the congenital human violence of the Greek logos.

This is a dramatic proposal, whose meaning has not yet been pursued to its consequences in the context of Girardian studies. If Christianity "has no special existence in the domain of [Greek] thought," how may it articulate itself intellectually? Girard's own anthropological apologia does not answer all the questions raised, particularly those left us by the metaphysical inheritance. Does this mean that we must sidestep Girard's stringent line of thought and lapse back into Christianity's millennial default of Greek thinking? Doubtless, Christianity must engage in dialogue with its own historical tradition, but, in the meantime, we should not fail to make the qualitative leap that Girard exemplifies via his method of thought, which is essentially *semiotic*. Semiotics is a mode of thinking which comes to light in the Christian age and is deeply inflected in and through the Christian lifeworld.<sup>19</sup> Biblical scripture and the whole realm of Christian art testify

16. *Ibid.*, 265. Girard is mainly referring to Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, 2 ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). There are several passages in *Introduction to Metaphysics* which emphatically endorse the role of violence in *being* and its logos, e.g. 131, 149–50; see especially 62: "Polemos and logos are the same," just after quoting Heraclitus' fragment 53, *polemos pantōn men patēr esti* (*conflict/war is the father of all*). For Heidegger's thought of logos as "original gathering," see 128–9.

17. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 271.

18. *Ibid.*, 273.

19. See John Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding* (Toronto, London: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Deely's masterful commentary demonstrates the emergence of semiotics over

to the vigor of the Christian sign function, while the argument of semiotics as such tells us that there is constant signification *toward* truth without conceptual identities *with* truth. The gospel emphasis on proclaiming a transformative *news*—not to mention Jesus' insistent use of "likeness," *mashal* or figure of speech—strongly suggests that Christian faith depends on the popular use of words, with their built-in potential for metonym, allusion and suggestion, rather than strict conceptual-propositional agreement. The Gospel of John arrives at this reflection in a formal way, with its announcement of *sēmeia* or signs as an overall category for Jesus' actions and communication. We see this in the summary verses at John 20:30–31, where it talks of "these [signs] written in order that you may believe" (*tauta de gegraptai hina pistuēte*), suggesting thereby that it is the overall *writing* of Jesus' deeds and teaching that makes the effective gospel. In doing this the gospel sets in motion the particularly Western or Latin thought of semiotics: if the signs of revelation are written (*gegrammena*, John 20:30) then writing itself must be a modality of signs, not (in the standard Greek fashion) a simple reflection, at one remove, of mental activity.<sup>20</sup> The fourth gospel does refer primarily to miracles or works of power as *signs*, but in doing so it immediately challenges the reader to discover the *interpretation* that makes revelatory sense of the event. The gospel's unique style, with its thematic circling and repetitions, moves the reader continually toward a breakthrough of insight: a semiotic communication of truth.

As I now want to emphasize, Girard himself demonstrates this semiotic approach. After having claimed the existence of a "true transcendental signifier" he makes no attempt whatsoever to vindicate it, referencing no tradition of philosophy, no seminal thinker, no conciliar authority, no papal edict. Instead, thirty-odd pages later, he announces "the real motor of the revelatory yet menacing dynamic which animates the whole of this civilization." What is it? It is the "indirect and unperceived but formidably constraining influence of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures."<sup>21</sup> And there it is! There is no other stated candidate for being a source of a "true transcendental signifier"

the Latin and postmodern epochs of Western thought, without perhaps realizing the full transformative consequences of his own argument.

20. "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words." Jacques Derrida quoting Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, 1, 16a 3, in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 11. For Augustine's landmark joining together of natural signs and writing, phenomena and words, in a general concept of *signa*, something which happened because of the direct impact on his thought of written revelation, see Deely, 214–24.

21. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 138.



than the biblical scriptures. A body of words, comprising 46 books in the Old Testament (Roman Catholic) and 27 in the New Testament, is the sole given basis for the colossal statement made so casually earlier on. And this corresponds precisely to the Christian logos, which has no special claim in Greek thought. Rather, what *does* have a special claim, in general human awareness, is the vitally creative semiotic tradition which gave us Joseph, Moses, the Suffering Servant, the Son of Man, Jesus. The logos of Christian faith is the product of a long semiotic struggle, comprising stories, law, prophecy, poetry and, last of all, the singular fact and figure of the cross. Girard emphasizes the crucial aspect: the Christian logos “must always have itself expelled from a world that cannot be its own.”<sup>22</sup> Another way of saying this is that the logos of Christianity is non-violent, is non-violence itself, and will never retaliate. It is precisely by being “driven out” that it reveals itself: a paradoxical, subversive, world-overturning revelation amounting not to the continually misrecognized double valence of the human good, but to a generative new human meaning.<sup>23</sup> But if this is the case, it suggests that the role of the Christian logos may also be expressed in terms of a deep subversion of metaphysical philosophy’s constitutive tropes.

As we may have already had cause to notice, the semiotic turn made by Girard through the “Judeo-Christian scriptures” is deeply consistent with his primary scene. Semiotics is at the basis of what we may call Girard’s evolutionary epistemology. Returning to examine this at a deeper level will now help clarify the philosophical questions with which we began and, in parallel, the theological issues we have arrived at following Girard’s unique trajectory. The body of the victim is the primordial semiotic event, including the transcendental ordering of the world. *Evolution and Conversion* reinforces this conclusion while slightly refining the account. Commenting on the emergence of ritual and sacrifice, Girard describes the repetition of the original killing as a kind of “staging.” The surrogate victim “is both a *real* new victim that has to be killed and a *symbol* of the proto-event; it is *the first symbolic sign* ever invented by these hominids. It is the first moment in which something *stands* for *something else*. It is the ur-symbol.”<sup>24</sup>

22. Ibid., 272.

23. The Logos “is expelled once again by the sacrificial reading, which amounts to a return to the Logos of violence” *ibid.*, 274. The controversial language of “sacrificial reading” in Girard can helpfully be substituted by “the Logos of violence.” There can be no discussion about a Girardian rejection of this.

24. Girard, Antonello, and Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion*, 107. This is slightly different from the earlier account, in which the original victim seemed to be the primitive signifier. Here it is the repetition of the original killing which brings about the true birth of human

In these few words, Girard gives us a generative semiotics, an account which describes the moment and the mode in which one thing arises as “meaning” by standing in for something else. At the same time, we have to understand that this is not any old meaning, any ordinary sign: the surrogate victim carries profound and essential aspects of conceptual structure with it.<sup>25</sup>

If we think of it in Kantian terms, we can identify this structure more precisely, developing our understanding of the evolutionary scene. We can say that the primary killing had the effect of supplying an abstract spatial and temporal *a priori*. Girard says this in so many words: “Because of the victim, in so far as it seems to emerge from the community and the community seems to emerge from it, *for the first time* there can be something like an inside and an outside, a before and after.”<sup>26</sup>

In other words, the victim supplies transcendental structure, and what Kant identifies as synthetic *a priori* concepts derive from the sacred abstraction. The non-instinctual attention of the first murder, practically mediated by the body of the victim and the signs spreading out from it, organizes human space and time. Kant, of course, did not think semiotically; he offered a metaphysics of human thought, a mental structure that is always already there. But it is useful to make mention of his philosophy because of its “Copernican revolution,” placing the movement of the human mind at the center of perceived reality. Girard must be seen as following in the line of this philosophy, but providing an even more original *a priori*—that of violence, or the original catastrophe. Subsequently, it is by and through

signs. Nevertheless, it is easy to see that the very first group victim had a built-in substitutionary effect, making it structurally open to further substitution, of “something standing for something else.”

25. It is important at this point to signal the thought of Eric Gans. His work is critical, because at an early moment, and in a decisive way, it established that Girardian anthropology demanded a theory of language origins. See Eric Gans, *The Origin of Language: A Formal Theory of Representation* (New York: Spuyten Duyvil, 2019). Gans shows that signification is an essential part of humanization, that there is in fact a primordial sign and we are existentially and cognitively linked to it. However, signification for Gans seems to arise almost spontaneously, as ideal and self-constituting, rather than organically out of the trauma of the victim. In Gans’ primary scene there is a moment of collective hesitation in the gesture of appropriation toward the object of desire, and it is this collective deferral of violence that becomes the original space of meaning. It becomes the first sign or signifier, one “directed both at the central object itself as the first ‘deity’ and at the other members of the group.” *Ibid.*, 18. Gans appears, therefore, as an inversion of Girard, for whom it is the victim itself which creates the attention and the sign. For Gans, it is the “signifying” hesitation or “linguistic” deferral of the primary group.

26. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 102, my italics.

semiotics or signs, derived from the body of the victim, that this catastrophic *a priori* is maintained as human thought. We can imagine, of course, that animals have spatial and temporal awareness, but Kant is right that the *conceptual* apparatus of these things is given its abstract or transcendental reality by the human mind. Girard demonstrates anthropologically how this came about, and he must therefore be seen in terms of the same Copernican revolution Kant began. Yet, of course, he carries us very much deeper, to the original catastrophe which breaks the hominid out from instinctual time and space into powerful conceptual-symbolic forms. Semiotics becomes, therefore, the radical science which enables us to trace a way back from Kantian mind to the Girardian birth of culture and thought. In parallel, the human conceptual apparatus can be seen bearing within itself, genetically and inevitably, its grounding in original violence.

But if, as Girard claims, the biblical logos enabled us to step outside, see this ab-original structure and, in contrast, to think creatively, it also suggests that the human sign system must have undergone a profound event of change, which we might call a de-coupling from original violence. To begin with, therefore, we can conceive of the biblical message (especially the gospel) as a second and equivalent catastrophe to the first: instead of breaking us out from the density of instinctual attention, via an unprecedented event of violence, the second catastrophe unlocks us from *a priori* violence through a revelatory event of forgiveness and non-violence. From that point on, the human sign system is both exposed and progressively translated via a radical re-signification away from violence. These two propositions together constitute the key claim and focal point of the present essay.

The work of Charles Sanders Peirce helps us track these possibilities in the developed terms of semiotic theory. Peirce was a nineteenth-century North American thinker who is recognized as the founding figure of modern semiotic philosophy.<sup>27</sup> He insists on the triadic structure of the sign—something for which he has various formulations, probably the most important being *object*, *sign* and *interpretant*. The sign on its own is not something that is self-evident, as a naïve one-to-one expression of human meaning would have it: object plus its sign. Instead, the sign always depends on a third which works to specify the sign, to give it its meaning or precise

27. Charles Sanders Peirce, 1839–1914. A major obstacle to Peirce's thought is that during his lifetime he published almost exclusively in scientific and scholarly journals and left us no representative volume or volumes containing his thought. Nevertheless, his semiotic inquiries continue to gain traction. The *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* were published from 1931–1958; vols. 1–6, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, eds., vols. 7–8, Arthur W. Burks, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

mental effect. Thus, a sign always has to be interpreted in some way. This suggests that meaning must come in the form of a general discourse, an open-ended process by which every sign needs another sign to elucidate and inform it. Peirce states this explicitly:

The meaning of a representation ... is nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series!<sup>28</sup>

This progression has also been named “infinite semiosis,” and might seem horrifying to any hidebound metaphysician. However, it also offers the possibility of shifts in meaning that can end up in a very different place from the original murder at the first birth of meaning. Girard uses the Greek tragedies to make his argument, telling us that poets like Sophocles and Euripides reached a certain degree of demystification of myth, although they drew back from the full consequences.<sup>29</sup> Another way of putting this is that the semiotic process brought them to an insight regarding the reciprocal human violence underlying the myths. If signs work thanks to progressively further interpretants, there is always the possibility of establishing meaning via other, more radical tropes, variously diverging from the very first case of the movement. It is here, then, that *prima facie* we may also situate the biblical record as a unique human workshop of trans-semiosis. After all, why produce a “book of books,” written over a period spanning a thousand years and more, recounting the continually fraught history of a people, unless the signs contained therein could give rise to new interpretants, and so on to further interpretants, until some dramatically new meaning would be achieved?

However, at the same time, the immense power of the founding *a priori* of violence cannot be underestimated. If human meaning is generated out of the proto-conceptual event of the guilty scapegoat, out of the phenomenological bubble formed by collective violence against a single victim, then it is going to be very difficult if not impossible to escape traces of its

28. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 1–8 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958), 171.

29. See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 84, 129, 204, 206.

constitutive power. This is where the force of the divine revelation is so important in the bible—it is only by means of a truly new transcendence, alien to our own genetic human one, that something genuinely new for humanity can be achieved (and not lapse back into the self-preserving platitudes of the poets). Human motifs of compassion and non-violence might occur as possible interpretants, but they could not establish themselves as generative meaning without the in-breaking of a thorough-going transcendence. So it is that we have an essential theological partnership of organic movement and divine interruption. But the accent lies with the latter, because, in the end, the original catastrophe cannot be overthrown without an equivalent yet opposite catastrophe, and it is impossible to conceive how human beings founded in the first could carry through the second. The possibility of new semiosis must work hand in hand with an apocalyptic in-breaking to bring about a transformed and transformative revelation. There is, therefore, an essential coupling here: of semiotic evolution and divine catastrophe.

Peirce, with his nineteenth century worldview, thought in terms of evolution. But some relevant remarks of his offer commentary regarding the actual historical dynamic of love, something he calls “agapastic development.” It is strange that he does not describe the process in semiotic terms, but rather as a “sympathy” of the mind—i.e. within an intellectual framing. Nevertheless, his remarks demonstrate how he sees love as an indicated outcome of the human process within the broad semiotic dynamic of his thought. Following through his remarks enables us to project the possible outcome of the peculiar Christian coupling of semiosis with catastrophe. Peirce gives three different pathways, and I include the whole passage because it shows how crucial the Christian story is to his reflection.

The agapastic development of thought is the adoption of certain mental tendencies ... by an immediate attraction for the idea itself, whose nature is divined before the mind possesses it, by the power of sympathy, that is, by virtue of the continuity of mind; and this mental tendency may be of three varieties, as follows. First, it may affect a whole people or community in its collective personality, and be thence communicated to such individuals as are in powerfully sympathetic connection with the collective people, although they may be intellectually incapable of attaining the idea by their private understandings or even perhaps of consciously apprehending it. Second, it may affect a private person directly, yet so that he is only enabled to apprehend the idea, or to appreciate its attractiveness, by virtue of his sympathy with his neighbors, under the influence of a striking experience or development

of thought. The conversion of St. Paul may be taken as an example of what is meant. Third, it may affect an individual, independently of his human affections, by virtue of an attraction it exercises upon his mind, even before he has comprehended it. This is the phenomenon which has been well called the divination of genius; for it is due to the continuity between the man's mind and the Most High.<sup>30</sup>

The first effect in a "whole people or community" could obviously describe the broad Christian church, or simply any society culturally affected by gospel-related signification. The second and third instances, however, are individual, and we see here the intellectualist approach, together with at the same time the crucial illustrative role played by New Testament figures—obviously Paul, and probably, in the third case, Jesus himself. What Peirce misses in his progressivist nineteenth-century way, and what Girard did not miss in his twentieth-century context, is the catastrophic nature of love. If biblical revelation has, in Girard's words, a "menacing dynamic," this is because it subverts and reverses the original catastrophe, and it is only by virtue of a new catastrophe that this happens. This is unmistakable in the actual event of the crucifixion and the accounts given of it in the gospels; moreover, the original ending of Mark makes plain how the empty tomb, as the first sign of the resurrection, was not felt initially as a triumph, but rather as a catastrophe (Mark 16:8). In the case of Paul, what happens to him is not so much a "development of thought" as a dramatic overturning of all that went before, and we only become capable of understanding it clearly when we recognize that it works as a constitutive reversal of the original catastrophe.

Paul is blinded by a light on the road to Damascus; he falls to the ground, and is then led by the hand into the city, remaining three days without sight while neither eating nor drinking (Acts 9:3–9). This is not a description of a "development," but of a traumatic personal experience, one that fits with a catastrophic occurrence. To us, it betokens that Saul/Paul's whole neurological self was brought to a halt—his apparatus for "seeing," and even living, cauterized and rendered non-functional in a searing manner by the Risen Crucified. Then, when "something like scales fell from his eyes and his sight was restored" (Acts 9:18), there was a re-constitution of the same apparatus, but on an entirely new basis. There is the possibility that Luke, the author of Acts, "wrote up" his account to give it extra dramatic impact, but it appears no more than what is warranted by the astonishing

30. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Evolutionary Love," *The Monist* 3, no. 2 (1893).

newness, radicalism, depth and rigor of what is present in the apostle's letters. Paul himself sums it up in the phrase "God ... was pleased to reveal (*apocalupsai*) his son to me" (Gal 1:16), and in that particular New Testament verb there is all the sense of the opening up of what was not seen or known before (cf. Rom 1:17 and 3:21).<sup>31</sup>

Paul is the great exponent of *pistis Christou*, of faith that is in or of Christ.<sup>32</sup> We can draw the various threads of our discussion to a conclusion by seeking to name this faith in terms of the anthropological catastrophe Girard describes, and its subversion and reversal by the catastrophe of the gospel. Faith is not intellectual assent to a list of metaphysical propositions; rather it is a new and constitutive relationship through, in and to Christ. If we are to understand it properly, it must be cast in parallel to the original anthropogenetic relationship to the victim: i.e. it needs to be understood as both forming a parallel with, and standing in place of, that relationship—neither more nor less. Only by doing this can we comprehend the drama that is at stake in the Girardian analysis of the meaning of humanity in the light of biblical revelation. Clearly, our relationship to the founding victim is not one of simple intellectual assent: rather, it is pre-intellectual, or proto-intellectual. It is, as Girard argues, a holistic response of the organism, creating a new space of non-instinctual attention. It is a neurological-cognitive "catastrophe" creating a transcendental of mind itself. Faith must intervene at the same level if it is to re-create the human *a priori* through a new *logos*. There has to be an event involving the risen non-violent victim able to evacuate the founding event of all violence and remake it through something absolutely and qualitatively new: something we call "love."

But how can faith bring this about practically in historically constituted human beings? How can it remake the primordial relationship on which actual humanity depends for its existence? As we have suggested, the infinite semiosis of human meaning will always allow new interpretants to arise. There is a built-in possibility of new thinking in human existence. Nevertheless, despite the functional openness of semiosis, a change in the root protocols of meaning seems impossible, short of a devastating

31. All scripture quotations, here and below, are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989.

32. See the liberation in meaning if we translate *pistis Christou* in, for example, Romans 3:22 and Galatians 2:16, as "faith/faithfulness of Jesus Christ"; cf. Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002); also N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 4, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), especially 836–45.

intervention precisely at that level. This is why the message of the gospel necessarily implies an in-breaking of new transcendence via the catastrophe of the cross. Only then, subsequently, on the basis of this preaching, may the new transcendental belong to the normal function of semiosis. The re-humanization of the gospel can only enter ordinary communication on the basis of the in-breaking, and it must return to it again and again to rediscover its revolutionary transcendental. Only this characteristic gospel dialectic can continue to produce genuinely new interpretants and the resulting human transformation.

Nevertheless, these interpretants *are* continually produced and enter into the normal structure of human meaning. Not everyone goes through the same experience as Paul, apostle to the Gentiles; not everyone finds themselves at the same or a similar crossroads of personal, religious, anthropological and revelatory crisis. Yet any and every human being is sensible to the semiotic shifts that come before them: any and every human being possesses a plastic neural truth capable of being modulated in new and further directions. That is why there is a multi-billion-dollar media industry constantly seeking to influence opinion, to mold popular sign-values among large groups of people. The catastrophic nature of the gospel works at a much deeper, long-term generative level, very different from the vast majority of media communication; but it does so work! We could say, then—in a parallel sense to Peirce—that a great number of human beings are assisting in bringing about a slow-motion catastrophe, spread over many centuries, because of the trans-semiosis of the gospel: the way in which broad segments of society are exposed, over time, to the non-violence of Christ. There is no guarantee of the success of this movement—it could, as Girard himself seems to conclude, produce simply more and more instability—but that cannot reduce our awareness and acknowledgement of the trans-semiosis itself as it stands before humanity, or of the wonderful challenge it represents. To create a new human *a priori* of compassion, peace, forgiveness and non-violence: this is a project consistent with biblical revelation in its whole sweep, and at the same time the minimum requirement for human beings to be, in existential fact, the children of God. Moreover, in terms of biblical language itself, it seems to me that the historical trans-semiosis at which we are assisting cannot fail, at least in some hidden, mysterious measure, to reach its goal: “(A)s the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return until they have watered the earth ... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Is 55:10–1). There is, after all, what might be called a semiotic



integrity to the Word of God—it cannot simply communicate a negative, destabilizing revelation; it has to create the semiosis for which it is intended.

Meanwhile, the many single individuals who place themselves in regular and intentional contact with gospel semiosis—i.e. those who study scripture, who go on retreat, who hear a transforming account of the gospels, who pray and nourish a new life around the sacramental signs—these are the ones explicitly modelling the biblical new humanity to which all people are called. Their lives are a mystery of faith/faithfulness lived in repetition of the self-giving non-violence of Christ. The fact that they are not guaranteed success does not take away the anthropological drama and wonder of what they are engaged in. Infinite semiosis finds itself in a continual ordinary encounter with trans-semiosis! Via its adherents, the catastrophic semiosis of the gospels exposes and displaces the original catastrophe and its violent *a priori* with a new human *a priori*. The transformation of our root sign system and the new humanity which flows from it is the meaning of Christ: it is the only way that faith can be in and of Christ, bringing us to the authentic space of his new humanity.

In sum, only such an account can both do justice to Girard's profound insight and offer today a dynamic new sense of the gospel within a world where the original human *a priori* is itself in terminal crisis.

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