

René Girard and the Epistemology of Revelation


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ABSTRACT René Girard never worried about clarifying the epistemological framework of his theories. Yet it is a necessary task, if only to answer the questions of method inevitably posed by the mixture of scientificity and religious conviction that characterizes his approach. Girard's use of the word "revelation" is paradigmatic from this regard. A philosophy of the event can provide an epistemological framework to unify the theological and anthropological meanings of this notion. On a phenomenological level, Divine Revelation is analogous to certain decisively meaningful happenings in our existence, or in history. The irruption of a radically new sense into a reality that does not contain it in any way is not an exclusive prerogative of religious experience. The schema of the meaningful event makes it possible to disclose the logic of the great Girardian narrative, whose key stages are revelations, in the sense of events bringing a new kind of meaning. The scenario of the emergence of culture described by Girard is event-driven, and the same logical schema underlies the Girardian interpretation of the Passion as an unveiling of human violence. In the same way Girard analyses conversion, in both a religious and a "novelistic" sense, as a spiritual event. Finally, his apocalyptic conception of history can be interpreted using this epistemological framework.

KEYWORDS anthropology; apocalypse; conversion; epistemology; eschatology; event; hope; revelation

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René Girard was neither a philosopher nor a theologian, and always wanted himself to be considered an anthropologist. Nevertheless, his work has profound implications for the understanding of the Christian faith. Assuming more and more openly the role of an apologist, he established, over time, some fruitful relationships with theologians, without giving up anything of the primarily anthropological character of his own intellectual approach.

With philosophy, things are more problematic. Girard, perhaps surprisingly, was never concerned with giving a philosophical status to his work, or even clarifying its epistemological framework. One can search his writings in vain for a precise answer, formulated in the language of systematic philosophy, to such questions of method, and concerning the status of discourse, as are inevitably raised by the interlocking of scientificity and religious conviction that characterizes all of his work.

This refusal to plead before the tribunal of philosophy is not simple negligence. As many quotes testify, Girard regarded philosophy with a critical eye, attributing to it, in a global and hyperbolic way, the narrow rationalism inherited from the philosophy of the Enlightenment. His deep conviction was that reason is too dependent on the violent origins of human culture to emancipate itself by its own efforts—hence, for example, its inability to identify the centrality of the victimary mechanism in major literary texts. Judging modern commentaries on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* severely, Girard argued:

Our own rationality cannot reach the founding role of mimetic victimage because it remains tainted with it. Narrow rationality and victimage lose their effectiveness together. Reason itself is a child of the founding murder.¹

The exercising of human reason cannot be dissociated from its cultural context, and, for Girard, culture is sacrificial in its essence, subject to the influence of a crowd which functions according to scapegoating mechanisms. Girard certainly did not deny science, but he thought that its development would not have been possible without a new way of looking at victimary practices:

The scientific spirit cannot come first. It presupposes the renunciation of a former preference for the magical causality of persecution so well defined by the ethnologists. Instead of natural, distant, and inaccessible causes, humanity has always preferred causes that are significant from a social perspective and permit of corrective intervention—victims. In order to lead men to the patient exploration of natural causes, men must first be turned away from

1. René Girard, *A Theatre of Envy* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 208.

their victims ... The invention of science is not the reason that there are no longer witch-hunts, but the fact that there are no longer witch-hunts is the reason that science has been invented.²

FROM ANTHROPOLOGICAL REVELATION TO DIVINE REVELATION

Whatever good reasons Girard had for challenging the pretensions of philosophy, they cannot invalidate the philosophical enterprise as such. Examining Girard's ideas from a philosophical point of view is an inescapable task, if only to clarify the epistemological status of the different languages and registers of argumentation he mobilizes. The question arises especially for the word "revelation," used by Girard in two hardly compatible meanings. When he speaks of "Christian revelation," he gives this term its usual theological meaning: that of a self-revelation by God giving access to truths that human reason is unable to discover through its own forces. In addition to this first meaning, Girard on many occasions uses the word "revelation"—or "unveiling," which is almost synonymous—in the sense of a discovery giving access to a rational understanding of anthropological facts.

Girard was not at all embarrassed by this duality—on the contrary. As we have just seen, the articulation of the two levels was perfectly clear for him: the anthropological revelation was made possible by spiritual revelation. Still, there is something unsatisfactory about this cognitive dualism. It is hard to see how such very different kinds of knowing can coexist without rivalry. A sort of meta-discourse is needed here, a framework of encompassing rationality that unifies these different forms of access to reality.

MEANING AS EVENT

Given the very logic of Girard's anthropological discoveries, one might well think that a philosophy of the event could provide such a framework. Before proceeding further, however, the limits of the present argument should be emphasized. First of all, it is based on a fact of experience, which is that all human existence is characterized by events creative of new meanings. Now on the one hand, this "logic" lies at the heart of the Christian message, which the idea of Revelation expresses perfectly, while on the other, applied to humanity's cultural and spiritual development, it underlies the mimetic anthropology of René Girard. It thus provides a suitable framework

2. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 204.

for thinking about both Revelation and related notions, such as conversion and apocalypse, as accounting for inseparable anthropological and spiritual realities. It must be made clear that the word “logic” does not refer here to hypothetico-deductive claims, but rather to the encompassing generative schema which seems to govern meaning as a process. This heuristic argument, based primarily on intuitive anthropological considerations, could presumably be extended in the direction of an onto-theology of the event by building on the Heideggerian conception of the historicity of Being, but this would need to be undertaken in the broader context of an in-depth confrontation between the thoughts of Heidegger and Girard.³

Let us start from the following observation: on a phenomenological level, Divine Revelation is analogous to certain decisively meaningful happenings in our existence, or in human history. The irruption of a radically new level of meaning, of a new dimension of experience, into a lived reality that apparently does not contain it at all is not an exclusive prerogative of religious experience. There is no shortage of examples of events that bring with them a new relationship to reality. Let us begin with a banal observation: the most significant things in our lives are the result of improbable circumstances, starting with the original and singular event of our birth, an event which, from the point of view of the one who was born, is an absolute beginning. It is, to use scientific language, a “singularity,” a singular point in the course of time, the creation of a new world of lived experience. The enigma of birth places the entirety of our existence under the sign of a radical passivity: everything is given without action or will on our part.

This basic example suffices to illustrate our constitutive dependence on what gives meaning to our lives: we live under the regime of the meaningful event. But we could illustrate this in many ways, with more trivial examples. All that changes the face of our lives—love or friendship, works of art, reading, scientific discovery or religious conversion—are somehow unpredictable. The most important and significant cannot be anticipated, and it is often in the light of this unpredictability that we read our past existence.

THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN REVELATION AS EVENT

As Girard himself pointed out, this recursive character of our interpretations—the fact that the past is always susceptible to re-reading in the light of a new event—is typical of Judeo-Christian Revelation: “In the Christian

3. See Anthony W. Bartlett, “A Flight of God: M. Heidegger and R. Girard,” *Revista Portuguesa De Filosofia* 59, no. 4 (2003): 1101–20.

world, it is always a question of re-reading not from the end but from beyond this end; in the light of this beyond, former perspectives are shown to be false.”⁴ The narrative of Emmaus provides a paradigmatic illustration of this statement. The central message of this text is about interpretation: the whole religious tradition of the Jewish people, and all that the apostles experienced during the life of Jesus, need to be read again in the light of the radical novelty of the Resurrection.⁵

It is no coincidence that the two major Christian feasts are Christmas and Easter. The birth and resurrection of Christ are the key moments of Revelation and the unsurpassable instances of the irruption of another life into human reality. All of the New Testament fits with this logic. For the people he meets, Christ manifests himself in unprecedented words and actions. Miracles are the archetypal example of an event that creates a break in the normal order of things, but the same can be said of forgiveness, since Christ himself draws a parallel between the power to work miracles and the power to forgive.

Particularly manifest in Christian revelation, this logic is already present in the Hebrew Bible. One of the major themes of Jewish texts is the law of anti-idolatry.⁶ While the idol is made by the “hand of man,” God intervenes in History in a way that is both concrete and extraordinary, especially through his “great deeds” of war. In rejecting idolatry, the Jews rejected the illusion of a transcendence only reflecting the self-transcendence of a human community—that is, if we follow Girard, the externalization of its own violence, which is properly an idol—to turn to a transcendence emerging through the true otherness of the meaningful event.

God did, and will do, “new things” (Isaiah) for His people: that is the founding belief of the Jewish religion. Hence the importance of memory and thanksgiving, forgetting and ingratitude being often at the heart of God’s reproaches: “They did not understand that I was taking care of them!” (Hos 11:3). Hence also the rejection of images: “Thou shalt not make for you any carved image, nothing like that which is in heaven above, or on the earth, here below, or in the waters, beneath Earth” (Ex 20:4).

Throughout the Bible, God manifests himself through extraordinary interventions and dramatic events, in the light of which prophets re-read and modified the pre-existing religious framework. Girard saw this as the

4. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 278.

5. See James Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim* (Glenview, IL: Doers Publishing, 2013).

6. See Sandor Goodhart, “René Girard and the Innocent Victim,” in *Violence Renounced. René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000), 213.

superiority of Jewish prophetism over Greek tragedy: an ability to interpret the unfolding of history in an innovative way, bringing out new religious perspectives stemming from successive crises that they held in their minds and never ceased to meditate upon.⁷

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF THE PARADIGM OF REVELATION

The idea of revelation meets the human experience of the meaningful event, a universal experience for both individuals and communities. The history of peoples, like that of individuals, is radically eventful. Great upheavals depend on individual initiatives that nobody could anticipate and they may reveal unknown aspects of the human condition. Meditating on the French Revolution in 1798, Immanuel Kant noted:

For such a phenomenon in human history is not to be forgotten, because it has revealed a tendency and faculty in human nature for improvement such that no politician, affecting wisdom, might have conjured out of the course of things hitherto existing, and one which nature and freedom alone, united in the human race in conformity with inner principles of right, could have promised. But so far as time is concerned, it can promise this only indefinitely and as a contingent event.⁸

Far from being limited to individual experience and history, this paradigm holds in a general way, for all areas of knowledge. The notion of *emergence*, so important for describing what happens when growing complexity gives birth to a new class of phenomenon—for example when life, that is self-organization, appears within the continuum of chemical processes—expresses the same idea of a phenomenological break within an empirical domain. But the idea of a break in a descriptive and operative register is equivalent to that of transcendence. A reality is seen as transcendent as soon as it requires a new mode of intelligibility. Accounting for it requires other words, other symbols, which are not simply defined using those employed to describe lower-level reality. The mathematical notion of transcendence perfectly illustrates this—indeed, so precisely that we cannot help but see more than a mere analogy there. A transcendent number, for

7. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 66–7.

8. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), 159.

example the number Pi (the relation between the circumference and the diameter of a circle), cannot be written as a finite combination of algebraic operations on natural numbers: it needs the use of a specific symbol (the letter Pi). Moreover, we need to broaden the scope of that which we have recourse to, so that it includes the abstract notion of infinity, to calculate and manipulate it.

Religious transcendence is a quite different thing, but very similar from a logical point of view. The unpredictable irruption of a reality from outside our usual empirical experience can be conceived as a particular manifestation of our dependence on events and facts that open up new perspectives on existence. The unification of different kinds of revelation under the sign of the meaningful event is not an enfolding of the supernatural into the anthropological, but a case of taking into account the fact that the human condition is open to a reality that overflows it. The experience of transcendence, understood in terms of how it relates to both the meaning of life and the understanding of the ultimate nature of reality as a form of radical rupture, is a constitutive dimension of the human condition.

Let us add that this novelty often emerges through pain. This is why the notion of revelation is closely related to that of apocalypse. The apocalyptic pessimism that has often been criticized in Girard can be seen as an epistemological principle, a particular expression of a general law which states that the meaning and value of a given reality are often perceived through the painful refusal of its negation. We are subject to a sort of privileging of the negative: what makes sense comes through evil and suffering.⁹ This idea underlies Girard's thinking, including his conception of art: "Art interests me (...) only insofar as it intensifies the anguish of an era. Only thus does it fulfil its function, which is to reveal."¹⁰

MIMETIC ANTHROPOLOGY, MEANING AS EVENT, AND THE CONCEPT OF REVELATION

The schema of the meaningful event furnishes an epistemological key to Girard: all the great steps of the Girardian narrative are revelations. For him, the passage from animal to man cannot be analysed in purely biological

9. See John, quoted by Proust and Dostoevsky, and by Girard quoting them: "If the grain of wheat fallen to the ground does not die, it remains alone; but if he dies, he bears a lot of fruit" (Jn 12:24).

10. René Girard, *La conversion de l'art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 15, my translation.

terms¹¹ as the result of a progressive evolution of the physiology and way of life of our distant ancestors. The appearing of culture, i.e. an extended capacity for symbolization, must be thought of as a discontinuity. The scenario described by Girard is event-driven: the symbolic order emerged from the resolution of mimetic crises, as the result of a phenomenon of mental polarization, the attention of the members of a group in fusion being focused on a victim, a “singularity” standing out in the continuum of animal life. In this narrative, the symbol emerges from peculiar situations that give birth to radically new mental functioning.

The same logical schema underlies the Girardian interpretation of the Passion as an unveiling of human violence. The death and resurrection of Christ together constitute the singular and unpredictable event at the root of an unprecedented cultural upheaval. For Girard, Revelation can be seen as an anthropological break, but it presupposes a supernatural event. The Girardian reading of the Gospels is underpinned by the conviction that the extraordinary intelligence of their authors as regards the meaning of the words and actions of Jesus, in contrast to the disciples’ pre-Easter blindness, would not have been possible without the unique and overwhelming spiritual experience of the Resurrection.

CONVERSION AS ACCESS TO A “DOUBLE PERSPECTIVE”

Just as with “revelation,” the question of a certain duality also arises in the case of the word “conversion.” Girard analyses his own conversion to Christianity as a spiritual event, but he interprets it in the light of a concept of “novelistic conversion” that is not merely a synonym for religious conversion. It was during his study of the European novel, which culminated in his first great book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*,¹² that he came to undergo a spiritual experience similar to the ones he had just identified in the conclusions of the great novels by Cervantes, Proust, Stendhal, Flaubert and Dostoevsky.¹³ The singularity of Girard’s spiritual and intellectual course

11. Paul Dumouchel, “An Essay on Hominization: Current Theories, Girardian-Darwinian Approaches,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, ed. James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 13.

12. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

13. “In autumn 1958, I was working on my book about the novel, on the twelfth and last chapter that’s entitled ‘Conclusion.’ I was thinking about the analogies between religious experience and the experience of a novelist who discovers that he’s been consistently lying, lying for the benefit of his Ego, which in fact is made up of nothing but a thousand lies that have accumulated over a long period, sometimes built up over an entire lifetime. I ended up

lies in the paradox of a religious conversion sparked, or at least stimulated, by reflection on an aesthetic and moral experience, while those who underwent the latter, the “novelists of genius,” mostly remained agnostic.

Deceit, Desire and the Novel is a reflection on desire and rivalry analysed through the lens of literature. Girard shows that the genius of the great novelists resides in their lucidity as to the nature of human desire. These authors, each in their own way, reach an anthropological truth, achieved through a great struggle against what Girard calls the “romantic illusion”—namely, the belief in the autonomy of desire. By the end of all of these books, the theme of conversion has shown up. Girard notes a striking similarity in the conclusions of the novels, which he interprets in terms of conversion: “All novelistic conclusions are conversions.” What is meant here by conversion is primarily an arrival at lucidity—a loss of those illusions which, until then, had kept the hero running. Confronted with the failure of their enterprises and the proximity of death, the heroes become aware of the vanity of their desires. They pronounce “words that clearly contradict their old ideas,” and disavow their model: “Don Quixote gives up his knights, Julien Sorel his revolt and Raskolnikov his superman.” Can we discern a religious dimension in this reversal? This is obviously something that would be legitimate for Dostoevsky and Cervantes, but much less so for the other authors concerned (Proust, Stendhal, Flaubert).

The case of Proust is the most interesting one. The author of *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*) does not seem to care about God: his only real concern is the process of creation. Yet literary glory is not his ultimate goal: he has the intuition of something beyond, which literature could approach without taking the plunge of religious conversion. The aspiration towards aesthetic triumph is not a matter of mere pride, in that it requires the author to inhabit a horizon of meaning that goes beyond his own person. This overcoming of self is typical of what Girard calls the “double perspective”¹⁴—that is, a *renewed* view of reality that superimposes itself in a critical way on that which the subject had before his or her “conversion.” It is as if the “convert” has reached a higher position, from which everything appears to him or her in a hitherto invisible relief. Now for Girard, this doubling in respect of how one regards things is typical of a religious conversion. He notes that he might well have compared the experience of novelistic

understanding that I was going through an experience of the kind that I was describing.” René Girard, *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 2014).

14. Girard, *La conversion de l'art*, 199.

conversion to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine—the first example of such a double perspective in the context of literary autobiography. And, above all, he observes that the Gospels themselves testify to a post-Resurrection transformation of the apostles' understanding of what they had lived through with Jesus: one which enables them to make a true account of it, without hiding anything of their own failures in understanding and behaviour. In the same way, through the eyes of his hero, the novelist sees what he or she did not want to see, and publicly acknowledges his or her blindness.

The notion of double perspective makes it possible to establish a link here with the schema of the meaningful event. Like a religious conversion, the novelistic conversion is a kind of revelation, seen as a gaining of access to a higher point of view. Looked at in this way, the analogy proposed by Girard would certainly seem to make sense.

APOCALYPSE, REVELATION AND ESCHATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Even before converting to Christianity, Girard had had, in his own words, an apocalyptic conception of history. This is a key feature of his approach, which he always assumed as a kind of profession of faith: “My thought has always been apocalyptic.”¹⁵ In many places, he makes extensive use of the word “apocalypse” to describe situations of rising violence and of social disintegration heralding catastrophes, but also the emergence of truth through such catastrophes. Up to and including his last book,¹⁶ this apocalyptic turn coloured his thinking and his conception of Christianity. The theme is present from *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* onwards—as one that is closely linked to that of conversion. The failure of metaphysical desire leads to a reversal, a revelation experienced through a series of dramatic events and in response to the approach of death: a “novelistic apocalypse” that prepares the novelistic conversion.

In the last chapter of the book, entitled “The Dostoevskian Apocalypse,” Girard shows how Dostoevsky portrays the catastrophic failure of desire, the march of his characters towards self-destruction, the complete disintegration of their pride, and the revelation to them of the truth.¹⁷ He notes that the metaphysical structure of Dostoevsky's novels “can always be defined as an apocalypse.”¹⁸

15. René Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2014), 72.

16. See René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversation with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

17. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, 256–89.

18. *Ibid.*, 288.

In a theological context, the word “apocalypse” evokes the violent irruption of God’s justice in order to put an end to human history. This is how the apocalyptic prophecies of the synoptic gospels have most often been interpreted. We are therefore potentially confronted with a new instance of the sort of duality that involves both the religious and the anthropological uses of a word. However, in this case, Girard cuts short any such dualism. For him, the violence evoked in the New Testament cannot be of divine origin. This would be contrary to the central Gospel message of the radical nonviolence of God, notably expressed in Matthew’s passage on the love of enemies (Mt 5:44–8).

Girard strove to show that, under the guise of divine violence, the texts “speak of a war among people, not of a war of God against humans,”¹⁹ reflecting Jesus’ awareness of the concrete historical consequences of His coming. By revealing the unjust and deceptive nature of a human order based on the externalization and veiling of violence, He could only weaken it, engaging humanity on a dangerous path that would force humans to choose between conversion and the unleashing of violence.

However, even if we admit with Girard that many of Christ’s words refer to human violence,²⁰ the question of the ultimate Revelation of God remains, inevitably linked as it is to the prospect of a completion of History.²¹ The epistemological framework sketched above makes it possible to put into perspective the difficulty that might arise should Girard be considered to have improperly downplayed the genuinely metaphysical dimension of the Apocalypse. It becomes possible to unify the different aspects of the same message: the announcement of a destructive exacerbation of human violence, the urgency of conversion and the prospect of an ultimate Revelation completing the Divine Creation. Whichever aspect one privileges, the future presents

19. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 48.

20. “You think that I have come to provide peace upon the earth. Not at all, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on, five in one household will be divided: three against two, and two against three. A father will be divided against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother, a mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (Luke 12:51–3). Let us add that an interpretation that emphasizes the inability of men to live in peace without sacrificial crutches coheres in its entirety with the words of Christ, who opposes his peace to peace “as the world gives” (Jn 14:27). (Both quotations from a new translation from the Greek by David Robert Palmer, <http://bibletranslation.ws/palmer-translation/>)

21. Ward offers the following comment: “Yet the ‘wrath of God’ is inescapably part of the apocalyptic language of the New Testament (for instance Revelation 15–6) and is arguably open to an interpretation that would be in accord with the more metaphysical dimension of Girard’s thought, expressed in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.” Bruce K. Ward, “Apocalypse: Hope Against All Hope,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, ed. James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 406.

itself as an enigma in which the only sensible attitude is hope, understood as a confident expectation of a way out through ascent to something higher. In his final book, Girard comments at length on Hölderlin's famous verse:

But where danger threatens
That which saves from it also grows.²²

This, I would say, concisely encapsulates the paradox of a “hope against all hope” that corresponds to the very essence of the apocalyptic disposition.

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22. Friedrich Hölderlin, “Patmos,” in *Poems and Fragments* (London: Anvil Press, 1994), 483.