

# How Girard Helped Me Understand the Distinction between Nature and Grace

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**ABSTRACT** Questions concerning the relationship between nature and grace, reason and faith are central to Christian anthropology. With philosopher/theologian Bernard Lonergan's essay "Natural Knowledge of God" as a starting point, these questions will be considered in conversation with the work of Rene Girard and theologian James Alison. Lonergan agrees with Karl Rahner that, with regard to these questions, dogmatic theology needs to be transposed into a theological anthropology. Given that Girard is an anthropologist of religion and culture who is open to theology, his work can be useful in effecting such a transposition. For example, Girard's thought can help us understand what Lonergan means when he writes: "I do not think that in this life people arrive at natural knowledge of God without God's grace, but what I do not doubt is that the knowledge they so attain is natural." Implicit in this statement is an awareness that "natural reason" needs to be freed of its biases before it can operate freely and "naturally." Girard's anthropological approach to the Bible helps to explain why this is the case.

**KEYWORDS** Alison, James; faith; Girard, René; grace; Lonergan, Bernard; nature; reason

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I begin with two questions that I have been considering for some time, and which I believe to be interrelated.

At the end of his essay, “Natural Knowledge of God,” theologian Bernard Lonergan writes: “I do not think that in this life people arrive at natural knowledge of God without God’s grace, but what I do not doubt is that the knowledge they so attain is natural.”<sup>1</sup> For many years I had a difficult time understanding this sentence. If the knowledge referred to requires grace, then how can it be natural? If a capacity is natural to me, then it should be able to be brought to fruition by drawing upon my own innate resources. If it is natural to me then where is the need for grace? Of course, to put the question in this way suggests a certain pre-understanding (or misunderstanding) of the relationship between nature and grace. It is not my intention here to delve into the intricacies of the Catholic tradition’s thinking on the issue of nature and grace. This is simply an attempt to indicate some ways in which my study of Rene Girard’s work has helped me gain some insight into these questions.

My second question emerged as a result of the connection between the question concerning nature and grace, and the related question concerning the relationship between reason and faith. The question was posed to me in an interesting way while teaching an undergraduate seminar dealing with the theme of faith and reason in the Abrahamic traditions. In addition to “Natural Knowledge of God,” we also read Lonergan’s “Doctrinal Pluralism.” We then read Girard’s book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* and several chapters from James Alison’s work, *On Being Liked* dealing with soteriological themes. In the course of the seminar one of the more intellectually curious students observed how: “Lonergan is the Christian theologian and yet he rarely speaks in explicitly Christian terms; while Girard, as a social scientist, claims to be adopting a scientific approach, while constantly drawing upon the Bible. What is going on here? And are their views reconcilable?” I believe this is a relevant question because it seems that while Girard has many admirers within Catholic theological circles, there are some who express a degree of wariness about whether his anthropological approach is reductionist or otherwise in tension with Christian theological claims.

For this reason, questions concerning the relationship between Girard’s thought and the Catholic theological tradition take on some importance—especially since Girard understood his anthropological perspective as capable

1. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Natural Knowledge of God,” in *A Second Collection: Papers*, ed. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 133.

of enriching theological reflection.<sup>2</sup> However, it should be emphasized from the start that Girard considers himself to be an anthropologist of religion, not a Catholic theologian. Nonetheless, he believes that his anthropological analyses of the gospels should not be separated from theology, and that theology can benefit from his analyses.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Girard has been quite clear that his thought should not be viewed as a comprehensive, dogmatic system. Instead, he sees himself as a researcher who has been gifted with several crucial insights, whose consequences he draws out and develops wherever they lead. To mention this is to be reminded of the dangers of criticizing a thinker for not working out detailed answers to questions he or she does not raise.<sup>4</sup>

In considering the questions at hand, I begin with Lonergan's "Natural Knowledge of God." There Lonergan reminds his readers that Vatican I, in defending natural knowledge of God, was speaking of a *quaestio iuris* rather than *quaestio facti*, a matter of possibility rather than a matter of fact. In Lonergan's reading the relevant conciliar document, *Dei Filius* "does not commit itself either to saying that the possibility ever was realized or to predicting that it ever would be realized." The Council's intention was to state that, *in principle*, human beings as human are capable of grasping a valid argument for God's existence. Lonergan goes on to interpret *Dei Filius* as indicating that "the potency in question is not moral but physical." Further, "it is not asserted that this light [of natural reason] is sufficient for fallen man to come to certain knowledge of God," nor is it asserted "that man without some tradition can reach the full development of his rational powers and so come to certain knowledge of God." What the Council condemned "was an outright traditionalism that flatly denied the possibility of the light of reason reaching certain knowledge of God."<sup>5</sup> Lonergan then goes on to specify some of the conditions that would have to be fulfilled in order for people to reach such knowledge. Among them, "[they] must have succeeded in avoiding all the pitfalls in which so many great philosophers

2. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 3, 190–2.

3. *Ibid.*

4. In this regard Girard has said "I am not necessarily hostile to all the things which I do not mention in my writing. The people who complain about not finding this or that in my books are the same, as a rule, who ridicule the excessive ambition of le système-Girard. What they mistake for an encyclopedic appetite is the single insight that I pursue wherever I recognize it and which is too alien to their way of thinking for them to perceive its singleness." Rebecca Adams, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with Rene Girard," *Religion and Literature* 12, no. 2 (1993): 21.

5. Lonergan, "Natural Knowledge of God," 118–9.

have become entrapped,” and [they] must resist their personal evil tendencies and not be seduced by the bad example of others.”<sup>6</sup> He is aware how the doctrine has fallen on hard times, and how the relevance of the kinds of distinctions it operates with has been called into question. Difficulties with this doctrine include an alleged “excessive objectivism” which does not take into account the concrete experience of human persons; its appeal to unnecessary, non-biblical distinctions such as faith and reason, grace and nature, supernatural and natural; and a general skepticism with regard to philosophical approaches to God, who many believe is best known through scripture and religious experience. Lonergan observes how “[a] contemporary would want to know what there is about this possibility [of natural knowledge of God] that makes any difference to human life or human society.”<sup>7</sup> This is, of course, a relevant question; one to which I will return toward the end of this essay.

By illuminating the human condition in the light of mimesis, Girard helped to clarify for me the importance of the distinction between matter of principle and matter of fact as it pertains to natural knowledge of God. By showing how we, as members of any given culture, are already shaped (or, more accurately, distorted) by the effects of the scapegoating mechanism, Girard describes the factual situation in which the pursuit of knowledge (including knowledge of God) occurs. We operate within societies already structured by both the effects of mimetic rivalry and the amelioration of those effects provided by the single victim mechanism. Girard shows how profoundly these practices skew every aspect of culture and society. They literally constitute the horizon within which human life unfolds. What we take to be normal, even rational, is already twisted by the effects of scapegoating. If at the origins of every culture there is an act of victimization, then every area of human endeavor will bear traces of this violent origin, including human understanding.

It is within this context that the following claim by Girard must be understood: “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 foundational murder.”<sup>8</sup> Girard is not here dismissing the role of intelligence and reasonableness in human life. He is arguing that understandings of rationality, as they arise within cultures, are largely oblivious to

6. *Ibid.*, 133.

7. *Ibid.*, 119–21.

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

their involvement in scapegoating practices. As an example, Girard mentions Plato's creation of the "myth" of philosophy's development after the death of Socrates. In his telling of the story, philosophy is absolved of any complicity in scapegoating. Ignorant Athenians may have demanded the death of Socrates, but philosophy, in its self-understanding, had nothing to do with it—its hands remain bloodless. Contrasting this attitude with that exemplified in the gospel Passion accounts, Girard writes:

[The] Gospel tells us there are moments in which there is absolutely no truth in culture; and I do not think any other source tells us that with quite the same conviction. There are some anticipations in Greek culture, in particular the death of Socrates, but in the accounts of the death of Socrates, philosophy always knows the truth, whereas in Christianity, the Christians themselves say "Peter, our leader, was ignorant."

Elsewhere, he makes a similar point:

Take the death of Socrates, for example. "True" philosophy never enters into it. It escapes the contagion of the scapegoat. There is always truth in the world; even though this is no longer so at the moment of Christ's death. Even his favorite disciples are speechless in the face of the crowd. They are literally absorbed by it.<sup>9</sup>

For Girard, the illusions of philosophy are the illusions of all those who would justify their own complicity in acts victimization by an appeal to reason. It is, of course, difficult to argue with those who are convinced, that, unlike their opponents, they alone are guided by a pure disinterested desire to know. Girard does not mean to disparage the use of reason; he is simply warning of the dangers of uncritically assuming that we are being reasonable and "objective" in our judgments, without expending the necessary effort to ascertain whether we are, in fact, being influenced by desires whose origins proceed from mimetic rivalry and whose distorting effects we are for the most part unaware.

Reason needs to become aware of its own scapegoating tendencies in order to be faithful to the exigencies of its own reasonableness. Their

9. Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 142; René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 105.

terminology may be different, but Girard's point here is quite similar to Lonergan's own emphasis on the debilitating effects of the biases on the human capacity for reasonableness and objectivity. The "narrow rationality" criticized by Girard would be just as roundly criticized by Lonergan. Reason needs to be freed from the biases in order to operate in an authentic "natural" manner. It is important to emphasize that neither Girard nor Lonergan is saying that reason is intrinsically or naturally corrupt. They both say that *in fact* reason frequently operates in a distorted fashion; but *in principle* reason, operating as it is naturally constituted, need not do so. Neither Girard nor Lonergan are in conflict with the teaching of Vatican I on natural knowledge of God. But if Girard is correct in his account of how humanity's reliance on victimizing practices distorts all aspects of culture, then reason is both unaware of and also powerless to remedy its predicament. Enmeshed in culture, it cannot free itself from its encompassing influence. Reason, as concretely operating within a community, shares, however unwittingly, in the lie involved in the "misremembering" of the community's victimary foundations.<sup>10</sup> Thus imprisoned, it needs to be freed in order to exercise its legitimate capacities, that is, in order to function naturally. Reason, thus liberated, would then become more capable of operating in accordance with its own innate tendencies.

With this in mind we can perhaps better understand why Lonergan hesitates to abandon the concepts of "nature" or the "natural":

Now I have no doubt that such words as "nature" and "natural," no less than object and verification, can be abused. But I also have no doubt that if we are not only going to speak about God's grace and man's sinfulness but also we are going to say what precisely we mean by such speaking, then we have to find some third term over and above grace and sin.<sup>11</sup>

James Alison has made several observations concerning reason and the natural law that lend support to Lonergan's contention that Catholic theology should not do away with the idea of nature. Reflecting upon the role of reason within mimetic theory he says:

Humans constituted by and living in the world of rivalistic mimetic desire are no less mimetically constituted in alterity than the revealer of the divine

10. James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 304.

11. Lonergan, "Natural Knowledge of God," 131.

beneficent mimesis: his human nature is the same as ours. This means that humans do not need to cease to be the sort of animal that they are in order to see the lie which has constituted us. Put in other words: we are capable of recognizing that we are wrong.<sup>12</sup>

To say that we are *capable* of recognizing that we are wrong is to maintain that human intelligence, despite the aberrations to which it is subject due to the effects of bias (in Lonergan's terminology) and the ongoing influence of structures of victimization (in Girard's language), retains enough of its original integrity to be able to understand its own distortions when confronted with them. Expanding on this insight, to say that *we* are capable of recognizing that we are wrong is to argue that our identity as persons is not erased by the process of liberation from the lies in which we have been ensnared. The process of conversion is a process of transformation, not annihilation of the self. But if this is the case, then the question arises as to what it is that our distorted humanity is a distortion of. To speak only in terms of sin and grace is to leave out that *from* which sin is a falling away, as well as the elevation of our human nature *toward* which we are ultimately intended to reach fulfillment in the love of God. The concept of "nature" is a way of trying to articulate this insight. Referring to the natural law as "an indispensable element of the Christian doctrine of creation," Alison makes the following point:

That is to say, it is our way of insisting that there is not an absolute rupture between that which we see here and now and that which is the divine plan for the fullness of creation. What is now, and what will be, have an organic relationship between themselves, and in principle we can learn from what is now something about its definitive plenitude. In other words, there is a trustable continuity between that which is in need of salvation and that which will appear once saved. This is the consequent way of saying that any attempt to speak about salvation as if it were the abolition of something disastrous and the inauguration of something totally new does not keep alive the necessary unity between our Creator and our Saviour.<sup>13</sup>

To "get it wrong" about ourselves and to be able to recognize this implies that we, at least in principle, possess the capacity for developing into persons whose humanity is not so distorted, and that there is a continuity of

12. Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 304.

13. James Alison, *On Being Liked* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 61.

identity between the person who can be brought to this recognition and the person who is transformed by this process. The “trustable continuity” of which Alison speaks finds an echo in Lonergan’s insistence that:

The intellectual, the moral, and the religious are three successive stages in a single achievement of self-transcendence; and so attempts to separate and isolate the intellectual, the moral, and the religious are just so many efforts to distort or to entirely block authentic human developmen.... The complete being-in-love, the gift of God’s grace, is the reason of the heart that reason does not know ... It is in this life the crown of human development, grace perfecting nature, the entry of God into the life of man so that man comes to love his neighbor as himself.<sup>14</sup>

However complex and nuanced the theology of grace may be in the Catholic tradition, for our purposes here we can understand grace as the experience of God sharing God’s own self with us in ways which free us and allow us to be the kind of persons God intended us to be. The terminology of nature and grace is simply another way of affirming the “trustable continuity” and the “self-transcendence” of which Alison and Lonergan speak.

In Girard’s work these same matters are handled within the context of his conception of mimetic desire. Girard does not generally use the term “human nature” when articulating his theory; in its place we find a focus on mimesis and its constitutive role in forming human identity. However, I do not believe Girard would have objected to the claim that it is the nature of human beings to be mimetic creatures.<sup>15</sup> To understand how Girard’s thought might relate to that of Lonergan on these matters, we need to consider the character of mimetic desire—whether it be understood as fundamentally good, bad, or neutral. An impression that some have garnered from Girard’s writings is that mimetic desire *necessarily* tends toward rivalry and conflict. That impression is, however, mistaken.<sup>16</sup> Girard has made it quite clear that mimetic desire is “intrinsically good.” By this he does not mean that it is never subject to aberration, but that it is the source of our freedom and of our humanity. He has further specified how “mimetic desire, even when bad, is intrinsically good, in the sense that far from

14. Lonergan, “Natural Knowledge of God,” 128–9.

15. Nikolaus Wandinger, “‘Concupiscence’ and ‘Mimetic Desire’: A Dialogue between K. Rahner and R. Girard,” *Contagion* 11 (Spring 2004): 153.

16. Girard has admitted though, “that occasionally I say ‘mimetic desire’ when I really mean only the type of mimetic desire that generates mimetic rivalry and, in turn, is generated by it.” Adams, “Violence,” 23.



being merely imitative, in a small sense, it's the opening out of oneself." In response to the question whether he intended this to be understood as openness to others, Girard replied: "Yes. Extreme openness. It is everything. It can be murderous, it is rivalrous; but it is also the basis of heroism, and devotion to others, and everything ... I hear this question all the time: 'Is all desire mimetic?' Not in the bad conflictual sense. Nothing is more mimetic than the desire of a child, and yet it is good. Jesus himself says it is good. Mimetic desire is also the desire for God."<sup>17</sup> Likewise, in contrast to rivalistic mimesis, there always remains the possibility for pacific, life-giving mimesis, embodied, for example, in the life of Jesus, who called upon his disciples to follow him in imitating his heavenly Father.<sup>18</sup> Where Lonergan speaks of human nature in terms of the capacity for self-transcendence articulated as intellectual, moral, and religious conversion, Girard uses the terminology of mimetic desire in order to speak of that openness which has its ultimate fulfillment in the love of God. If Lonergan refuses to abandon the use of "nature" because of its usefulness in clarifying the meanings of sin and grace, much the same can be said about Girard's use of "mimesis." To say that mimetic desire, "even when bad, is intrinsically good," is not to be caught up in a contradiction; rather it is a way of stating how mimetic rivalry as aberrant, depends upon a prior capacity that, however twisted it may become in practice, is constitutive of human authenticity.

Of course, mimesis can and frequently does go awry. The violence that has plagued human society from its beginnings has its origin here. According to Girard, human beings have devised means to counter and contain the violence that would otherwise destroy them and their communities; means that involve directing this violence toward a victim or victims who are thereby sacrificed for the good of the whole. This solution, however, comes with a price—blindness to the fact that culture depends on a mechanism of victimization in order to flourish. Scapegoating can work effectively only as long as the scapegoaters are blind to what they are doing. As this lie takes hold, humanity becomes incapable of understanding the truth about itself. Humans become prisoners of their own solution to the problem of the violence, unaware of their bondage and thus incapable of imagining an alternative.

Yet if we take Girard at his word concerning the character of human mimesis, this situation is not the result of an inherent tendency of mimetic desire toward violence. In fact, human beings have created

17. *Ibid.*, 24–5.

18. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 13.

a world in which they employ violent means to quell violence. Because such remedies are found to be effective (at least in the short term) they come to be taken as the acceptable and just means to preserve order. But in principle, mimetic desire is not so inclined—it is not the “nature” of mimetic desire to move toward violence. Through our practices we have been transformed into victimizers who are ignorant of our victimizing tendencies. Living in a state of misremembering, we become unaware of how we exist in a condition from which we need to be freed. Because it is a condition of ignorance, we are incapable of emerging from our blindness by our own means. Such a predicament requires liberation that we cannot accomplish ourselves. In theological terms, our fallen nature is blind and in need of God’s grace.

Grace enables us to move toward becoming our authentic self, or in other words, it is grace that restores nature. I believe this is what Lonergan has in mind when he says that “in this life” people do not come to natural knowledge of God without God’s grace, but that such knowledge, if attained, would be natural, i.e., knowledge attainable by us through the exercise of reason, had that reason not been distorted by bias. I would also argue that Girard understands the relationship between mimetic desire and grace in a similar fashion. If as Girard says, mimetic desire is in part a desire for God, then he too could affirm that “in this life,” i.e., the life constituted by the pervasive lie of scapegoating, there would be no natural knowledge of God without God’s grace, since mimetic desire has been diverted from its intrinsic openness and functions largely within a context permeated by a deep-seated lie. To understand something true about God, we need to get beyond our identification of the divine with transfigured violence, beyond our worship of the “violent sacred.” But humanity is incapable of doing this wherever reliance on the single victim mechanism and its accompanying “cover story” prevails. In getting it wrong about God, we also misunderstand ourselves. For this reason, God’s saving action is not only necessary for us to attain union with God in the beatific vision, but to allow us to be authentically human in this world. Alison makes the point well:

The mimetic anthropology also permits us to see how the “new self” is in fact both a new creation, but also the recovery of what we were originally supposed to be, such that the self formed by the desire of the world, although original in time, is not original in logic: for there to have been such a self, there was necessary the mimetic structuring of desire which was created in order to permit us to share divine life by possession. Our chronologically original state is a distortion of our ontologically originary state. The new self through faith

is not just a rescue job (saving us *from* the world) because the first try was a botched job. Rather it is the rescue *of* the first job (saving us *in* the world).<sup>19</sup>

On this point Girard has said “The idea of grace in Christianity or Judaism is precisely that the truth cannot be known by human means because it is always buried by the mechanism of Satan.”<sup>20</sup> “Satan,” for Girard, is the New Testament’s way of speaking about violent contagion and the means by which it brings about order through the mechanism of victimization—hence Satan’s titles as the sower of discord, the accuser, the prince of this world, and the father of lies. If humanity is indeed imprisoned in falsehood, then an inbreaking of some form of revelation is necessary if we are to understand our situation truthfully. In the conclusion of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* Girard writes:

Until now I have been able to find plausible responses to the questions posed in this book within a purely commonsensical and “anthropological” context. This time, however, it is impossible. To break the power of mimetic unanimity, we must postulate a power superior to violent contagion. If we have learned one thing in this study, it is that none exists on earth. It is precisely because violent contagion was all-powerful in human societies, prior to the day of Resurrection, that archaic religion divinized it ... The Resurrection is not only a miracle, a prodigious transgression of natural laws. It is the spectacular sign of the entrance into the world of a power superior to violent contagion.<sup>21</sup>

To postulate is not to demonstrate; what we have here is an inference which posits the reality of Jesus’ resurrection as the most plausible explanation for the exposure of scapegoating in the New Testament.<sup>22</sup> From Girard’s perspective, the anthropological insights contained in the Judeo-Christian scriptures point beyond themselves toward intelligibility and an intelligence that exceed the limit of human understanding:

There is an irreducible supernatural dimension to the Gospels that I do not wish to deny or denigrate ... The rationality I am disclosing, the mimeticism of human relations, is too systematic in principle, too complex in its effects,

19. Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 60–1.

20. René Girard, “Interview with Rene Girard,” *Anthropoetics* 2, no. 1 (June 1996): 5.

21. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 189.

22. John Ranieri, “An Epistemology of Revelation,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, ed. James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 176.

and too visibly present, both in the “theoretical” passages on scandal and in the accounts entirely controlled by it, to be there by accident. Nevertheless, this rationality was not completely devised or created by those who put it there ... At the text’s origin there must have been someone outside the group, a higher intelligence that controlled the disciples and inspired their writings. As we succeed in reconstituting the mimetic theory in a kind of coming and going between the narratives and the theoretical passages, the words attributed to Jesus, we are disclosing the traces of that intelligence, not the reflections of the disciples.<sup>23</sup>

In light of these passages it should be clear that Girard’s theory is in no way a reduction of the theological to the anthropological. He acknowledges the limits of an anthropological reading, and he shows how an “evangelical anthropology” opens onto theology: “There is an anthropological dimension to the text of the Gospels. I have never claimed that it constitutes the entirety of Christian revelation, but without it Christianity could scarcely be truly itself.”<sup>24</sup> The intelligibility taken up by theology constitutes a higher form of rationality which does not displace, but heals and completes that which it sublates. There is continuity between nature and grace, reason and faith. James Alison explains the implications of Girard’s approach:

What role is left for human reason within mimetic theory? Let us start by conceding that the understanding of original sin I have developed is radical. It posits that human culture was born from and tends to maintain its order by means of a lie—the *meconnaissance* of its victimary foundations. Furthermore, this lie was only really completely revealed for what it is by the death and resurrection of Christ. So far we seem to have a highly “supernaturalist” position.<sup>25</sup>

However, Alison argues that such a conclusion does not follow from Girard’s claims. It is the Christ event that enables us to understand how wrong we have been about ourselves:

Another way of saying this is that, having been able to see, thanks to the coming of Christ, what we were and what we are to become, we can also see that

23. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 162–3; See also Thomas F. Bertonneau, “The Logic of the Undecidable: An Interview with Rene Girard,” *Paroles Gelees* 5 (1987): 15–6.

24. René Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 163.

25. Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 304–5.

it has been within the abstract possibility of all (adult) humans everywhere to have come, no doubt through an arduous and incomplete process, to the perception of the victim and to have sided with him or her ... Girard has, notoriously, shown that such an insight did occur from time to time in certain great works of theater and literature ... His thought is able to be entertained within rational discourse by nonbelievers, because its anthropology and the embryonic theology which emerged in later works (to the annoyance of some who then accused Girard of crude apologetics) form a seamless robe.<sup>26</sup>

Neither Alison nor Girard can, with justice, be charged with fideism. Christianity affirms that one of the consequences of the resurrection is the writing of the gospels. Once written, these texts become available to anyone who can read or hear their message, independently of any faith commitment. Girard's claim is that these texts contain anthropological insights relevant to all human beings, insights that shed light on the origins of human thought and culture. This point is sometimes overlooked by both his defenders and his critics, who seem to think that by using the biblical text as an anthropological lens, Girard is somehow revealing his true colors as a theologian. In response to such misunderstanding it must be emphasized that throughout his writings Girard treats the Bible as a text accessible to anyone with eyes to read and ears to hear. Alison writes, "Girard himself insisted resolutely on the anthropological nature of his thought (he often refused the label of 'theologian' when it was given him). And yet he also claimed a complete lack of rivalry between the anthropological account he was giving and the traditional dogmatic claims of Christianity."<sup>27</sup> At no point does Girard's argument rest on a claim that the anthropological insights contained within the Bible are available only to those who have been illumined by faith. These anthropological insights are now accessible to all persons without any prior assumption of faith on their part. Because of the profound hold of the victimage mechanism in determining thought and culture, these insights may not have been widespread before they were articulated in the Bible, but once articulated they make available ideas which, in principle, are accessible to human beings as human beings. A reader of the Bible who does not believe in the resurrection of Jesus is still capable of understanding the anthropological insights conveyed through the text.

26. Ibid.

27. James Alison and Martha J. Reineke, "Introduction," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, ed. James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 171.

Within a Girardian context, traditional formulations of the distinctions between nature/grace and reason/faith are transposed in terms of the relationship between anthropology and theology, with Girard being content (for the most part) to leave the work of transposition to theologians. Lonergan is also interested in such a transposition. Unlike Girard he comes at it from the perspective of someone trained in scholastic philosophy and theology who is trying to move beyond the classicist assumptions of the tradition he has inherited. Lonergan sees the development of a theological anthropology as an important dimension of this movement:

I have been arguing that, because religion pertains to an authentic humanism, theology has a contribution to make to the humanities. But one could go further and argue with Karl Rahner that the dogmatic theology of the past has to become a theological anthropology. By this is meant that all theological questions and answers have to be matched by the transcendental questions and answers that reveal in the human subject the conditions of the possibility of the theological answers ... His position is that man is for God, that religion is intrinsic to an authentic humanism, that in theology theocentrism and anthropocentrism coincide. On this basis he desires all theological statements to be matched by statements of their meaning in human terms. His purpose is not to water down theological truth but to bring it to life, not to impose an alien method but to exclude the risk of mythology and to introduce into theological thinking the challenge of rigorous controls. I must not give the impression, however, that such a theological anthropology already exists ... But the mere fact that the proposal has been made reveals how closely a future theology may be related to the human sciences and the humanities.<sup>28</sup>

Lonergan does not only describe Rahner's proposal but later in the essay indicates his substantial agreement with it. It should also be noted how, when describing this task, Lonergan's emphasis lies on the movement from theology to anthropology. His concern is the contribution theology can make to an authentic humanism. He is not suggesting the development of an independent philosophical anthropology to which theological statements would then be related. The two-tiered universe envisioned by some earlier theologians, consisting of an abstract, philosophically elaborated pure nature to which a world of grace is related in an extrinsic, even arbitrary fashion is alien to Lonergan's vision. Rather, he believes that all theological statements need to be matched by statements of their meaning in human

28. Lonergan, "Theology and Man's Future," 147-8.

terms, a development that Girard would surely welcome. If Girard tends to place the biblical text in the forefront of his analysis, he is also careful to insist that, as an anthropologist he is interested in what the text can contribute, not only to his own discipline, but to all the human sciences. Likewise, if Lonergan concentrates on issues of method without focusing on the specific contributions of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, he argues repeatedly that it is a serious mistake to try to separate philosophy and the human sciences from theology.

To speak of philosophy, anthropology, and theology is one thing, but what about the role of faith? Perhaps Lonergan's most well-known statement in this regard is "Faith is the knowledge born of religious love."<sup>29</sup> Faith has cognitive value; it is not a discontinuous irruption into human life, but the knowledge resulting from the effects of God's love flooding our hearts. Faith can be understood as a form of knowledge because under its influence, the love of God illumines our hearts and minds, revealing possibilities for authenticity previously unimagined. Faith not only enlightens; it also heals and draws us into new ways of living which reflect a transformed relationship with God and neighbor. There is a striking passage at the end of his lectures *Philosophy of God, and Theology* in which Lonergan insists on a relational conception of the human person, and then proceeds to spell out the implications of this understanding in terms of the experience of God's love:

[The] person is not the primordial fact. What is primordial is the community ... The person is the resultant of the relationships he has had with others and of the capacities that have developed in him to relate to others ... Religious experience at its first root is the love of God with one's whole heart and whole soul, with all one's mind and all one's strength, and from it flows the love of one's neighbor as oneself. If persons are the products of community, if the strongest and the best of communities is based on love, then religious experience and the emergence of personality go hand in hand.<sup>30</sup>

Within a Girardian context, James Alison speaks of faith in way that resonates strongly with Lonergan's perspective:

What the mimetic anthropology suggests, then, is that in every case we are suggested into being and to a greater or lesser extent accept and are nurtured

29. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 115.

30. Bernard Lonergan, *Philosophy of God, and Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 58–9.

by that anterior other ... What I would like to suggest is that what we call supernatural faith works in exactly the same way, by the mimetic calling into being of new "selves." That is, what makes such faith possible is the irruption of an "Other" into our lives of a different sort than the somewhat nurturing, somewhat violent other which has formed our "self."<sup>31</sup>

In faith we encounter an "Other" whose very being is one of self-giving love, in relationship to whom we can begin to experience the "joy of being wrong" about ourselves, as well as obtaining a glimpse of what a life animated by love might look like for us. It is also an awareness that the Other who is calling us into life has nothing to do with death, and that such knowledge has profound implications in the degree to which we have allowed ourselves to live as if death is the defining reality for human persons.

Given this understanding of faith, it comes as no surprise to find that it is closely related to the idea of conversion. Those familiar with Lonergan's work are aware of the tremendous emphasis he places on the process of conversion. While Girard has not written extensively about conversion, it is nonetheless of central importance to his understanding of mimesis. To avoid the pitfalls of mimetic rivalry, it is absolutely crucial that we become capable of discerning patterns of victimization, not just in others, but in ourselves. To do so, our horizon needs to be expanded by the gift of God's love received and expressed as a grateful faith. James Alison refers to mimetic anthropology as "par excellence an anthropology of conversion." Faith, "because it is what permits us to live on the interface between the old other which formed us and the new other which seeks to form us anew, is intrinsically related to conversion."<sup>32</sup> It is clear that this is Girard's view as well: "The knowledge of mimesis is really tied to conversion. That is why the matter of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) is so important. A personal knowledge, fully rational and yet not always accessible to reason, is needed."<sup>33</sup> If in Lonergan's language self-transcendence reaches its fullness in the experience of religious conversion, for Girard the openness that is our mimetic nature can also be said to reach its fulfillment in communion with the divine Other.

Some may find the questions we have been considering here to be interesting but largely irrelevant to human life. Toward the start of this essay,

31. Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 57.

32. *Ibid.*, 62.

33. René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 268.



I cited Lonergan with regard to a hypothetical contemporary questioner, who, after reflecting on questions having to do with natural knowledge of God, faith and reason, and grace and nature, responds with another question—"So what?" A similar question might conceivably be directed at Girard's thought, by those who do not see what difference it makes whether he is truly an anthropologist of religion, or in fact a crypto-theologian, intent on having the Trojan horse of mimetic theory brought into the citadel of the social sciences. I would suggest that any response to these questions ought to highlight the notions of continuity and self-transcendence found in the thought of the thinkers discussed here. Lonergan has probably thematized the notion of self-transcendence more explicitly than the others I have considered, and in defending the relevance of the doctrine of natural knowledge of God he writes how:

The intending subject intends, first of all, the good but to achieve it must know the real; to know the real he must know what is true; to know what is true he must know what is intelligible; and to grasp what is intelligible he must attend to the data of sense and to the data of consciousness. Now this unity of the human spirit, this continuity in its operations, this cumulative character in their results, seem very little understood by those that endeavor to separate and compartmentalize and isolate the intellectual, the moral, and the religious ... But the fact remains that the intellectual, the moral, and the religious are three successive stages in a single achievement, the achievement of self-transcendence; and so attempts to separate and isolate the intellectual, the moral, and the religious are just so many efforts to distort or to entirely block authentic human development.<sup>34</sup>

This passage encapsulates much of Lonergan's project, and it is obviously not possible to rehearse the entirety of his thinking here. However, it will suffice to point out the emphasis on continuity as characteristic of the process of self-transcendence. This implies that the self-transcendence involved in religious conversion is not discontinuous with the stages which precede it, but brings them to their fulfillment. Describing religious conversion, Lonergan observes how:

It is, whatever its degree, a being-in-love that is without conditions or qualifications or reserves, and so it is other-worldly, a being-in-love that occurs within this world but heads beyond it ... Such unconditional being-in-love

34. Lonergan, "Natural Knowledge of God," 128.

actuates to the full the dynamic potentiality of the human spirit with its unrestricted reach and, as a full actuation, it is fulfilment, deep-set peace, the peace the world cannot give, abiding joy, the joy that remains despite humiliation and failure and privation and pain.<sup>35</sup>

Given that the human person reaches her or his highest level of development in this unconditional being-in-love, and that this peak in self-transcendence stands in continuity with every aspect of human authenticity, Lonergan does not hesitate to point out the abiding relevance of the idea of natural knowledge of God (as well as the related distinctions of grace and nature, faith and reason.) Acknowledging that there are those for whom “any thought about, any mention of, either theism or atheism is just meaningless,” and religion, at best “a comforting illusion,” he maintains that such “opinions involve a profound ignorance of man’s real nature, and such ignorance cannot but have a gravely distorting effect on the conduct of human affairs.” In affirming the continuity involved in self-transcendence, the doctrine of natural knowledge of God affirms this fundamental, “natural” openness to transcendence as the basis of human authenticity; “it means that God lies within the horizon of man’s knowing and doing, that religion represents a fundamental dimension in human living.”<sup>36</sup> Natural knowledge of God and the distinction between nature and grace do not in themselves constitute religious conversion—and Lonergan never suggests that they do. What he does point out, however, is how the human person is so constituted as to be intrinsically open to the mystery of love and awe we call “God,” that this capacity, when realized, is the key to human authenticity and progress, and that this openness is natural to us, rooted in our capacity for wonder and self-transcendence. Far from being arcane notions, limited to debates among scholastic philosophers and theologians, it would be difficult to imagine ideas with greater relevance for the future of humanity.

As a theologian (as well as a philosopher), Lonergan can speak freely of religious conversion as the love of God flooding human hearts; and as a theologian, he can also begin with the affirmations of his religious tradition (e.g., the decree concerning natural knowledge of God at Vatican I) in a way that Girard, as an anthropologist, cannot. Where Lonergan shows how theological doctrines actually correspond to genuine human development (hence his agreement with Rahner on the need for doctrinal statements

35. *Ibid.*, 129.

36. *Ibid.*, 130.

to be transposed into a theological anthropology), Girard begins with the anthropological and shows how, when pursued conscientiously (i.e., with an openness to the idea that scriptural texts such as the Bible might actually be bearers of anthropological insights), an analysis of scapegoating and cultural formation opens onto more explicitly theological concerns. But in general, Girard took care in his work not to blur these distinctions. In answer to the question, then, as to whether he is a social scientist who would reduce all theological questions to anthropological issues, or a closet theologian masquerading as an anthropologist, an honest reading of his work would lead to the conclusion that he remained an anthropologist of religion and culture throughout his career, but one who believed his analyses had theological implications which could enrich the discipline of theology. This is important to bear in mind, because if he is in fact a theologian, then he cannot expect his readers to accept him as a genuine practitioner of the social sciences. And if that is the case, it would severely undercut his ability to present mimetic theory as encompassing insights accessible to all, since as a theologian he would necessarily have commitments and assumptions which come from being a member of a particular community of belief. And such commitments would not be permissible in his capacity as a social scientist. In his life as a Catholic Christian, Girard would believe that God raised Jesus from the dead; but such a belief cannot enter into his work as an anthropologist or be taken as one of the assumptions upon which his theory rests. Consequently, it makes a tremendous difference whether Girard is an anthropologist or a theologian, because it has profound implications with regard to whom his thought is directed and with whom he can enter into conversation. Mimetic theory presents itself as a theory accessible to all on the basis of reason, without any acceptance of the Bible as divine revelation. In a contemporary context in which some (perhaps many) consider the terms “faith” and “revelation” to be synonymous with irrationality, Girard’s thought discloses the deep intelligibility and higher rationality to be found in the biblical text.<sup>37</sup> He frequently meets with criticism from those who think he cannot be a genuine social scientist if he insists in taking the Bible seriously as a source of anthropological insight; while on the other end of the spectrum are those theologians and religious believers who fear that his approach to scripture is reductionistic. Understood correctly, however, mimetic theory can be seen as a bridge, performing a mediating function between the social sciences and theology. In similar fashion, Lonergan,

37. I am currently at work on a manuscript which employs Girard’s thought to show how this same rationality is at work in the Qur’an.

Rahner, and Alison, as theologians, are interested in showing how doctrine can be related to the human desire for self-transcendence, and that revelation points to the fulfillment of human striving. Essentially, our manifest capacities for wonder, for moral reflection, and for loving, while sometimes distorted and misdirected, are fundamentally good and capable of being, not only healed, but divinized. There is continuity between who we are now and who we are called to be—and this continuity becomes manifest in the process of conversion, as our capacities for intelligence, goodness, and love are transformed, strengthened, and expanded, allowing us to become disciples striving to bring about the kind of world intended by God. Of course, none of this makes sense unless we are, in fact, related to God in such a way that “there is a trustable continuity between that which is in need of salvation and that which will appear once saved.”<sup>38</sup> But is this not precisely the underlying meaning and intention at the root of the distinction between grace and nature?

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