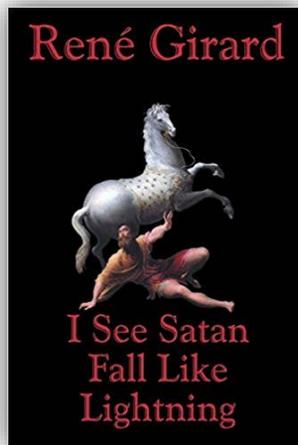


BOOK REVIEW

I SEE SATAN FALL LIKE LIGHTNING

By René Girard

Reviewed by Sara Cook



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René Girard has authored many books that present and explain his ideas of mimesis, mimetic desire, and the violence of scapegoating. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, however, delves deeper into the relationship between these cultural phenomena and the Gospels than the other books, and underscores Jesus's influence in the shaping of the human experience. Mimesis is the human predisposition to understand our world and learn of it through mimicking others. Mimetic desire is a deep-seated need to be like others that we see as superior or powerful. It is a cyclical process and revolves around a need for adapting to coveted models of experience, success, and dominance. Girard's foundational theme is that a substantial amount of political and religious violence stems from the mimetic desire cycle which infects our social constructs and produces cultural and social stress. The mimetic cycle coupled with these unattainable models of success produces a sort of seduction of individuals that Girard explains as the wheedling in of Satan himself. When opening this door to coveted desire, we allow Satan to work his way into our lives and influence them by manipulating us into actions that subconsciously we know are unjust. There is also a narcissistic element

present in mimetic desire that requires us to imitate others that have what we want, or live the ways we want to. It is a subliminal "keeping up with the Jones" scenario that persists to the point of sacrifice and/or violence. This in turn also feeds into manipulation by Satan. Girard refers to Satan as a "parasite on God's creatures" and "the father of lies" (42). He becomes a roadblock, not allowing us to progress towards a resolution, but also not allowing us to turn back. Individuals become stressed, sensing no viable options to relieve the stress of mimetic desire from which they suffer, and find solace in one another's increasing rage. They seek out reasons and motivations for such cultural and social stressors and hastily attack those who seem to represent a threat. Girard's notion of scapegoating then manifests in the form of accusations against vulnerable populations of people or individuals perceived as outcasts or misfits in some way.

Enter in the redemptive power of Christ through the *kerygma* as a nonviolent way forward to combat the violent cycle of mimetic desire. Christ, and his subsequent crucifixion for the absolution of our sins, liberates us not through violent means, but through supplication and grace. Jesus becomes the figurative Lamb of God led to the slaughter. Girard points not just to the story of the crucifixion to highlight this point, but also speaks to other stories from the Bible, such as those of Joseph, Job, Cain and Abel, wherein the underlying theme is "overcoming of mimetic desire and violence through nonviolence of love and forgiveness" (xviii). The Gospels reject this violence of scapegoating and the "illusions of myths" that reveal the deceptions of 'satanic accusation'" (173). Here we find one of Girard's strongest points, "Christianity does not yield to ulterior motives of resentment in its concern to rehabilitate victims. It is not seduced by a contaminated charity of resentment" (173). Christianity works above culture to rectify the violence found deep-seated in humankind.

Girard's ideas of mimesis, mimetic desire, and scapegoating violence persist in current cultures worldwide and by example through the accusations of witchcraft in young children found in parts of the Congo in Africa. Priest, Ngolo, and Stabell's work, "Christian Pastors and (Alleged) Child Witches in Kinshasa,

DRC," (2020) examines child witchcraft accusations and the consequent repercussions of such actions. The continuous memetic desires that begin the cycle of cultural stress exploding into violence resulting in a social desire to alleviate stressors through the accusations attributed to these young marginalized victims plays out in various forms. Most noticeably, these cultural stressors are actualized through a series of events seemingly benign, such as "underemployment, poverty, family conflicts and breakups, medical crises, high levels of violence, and elevated emotional distress", but escalate from individual stress to community stress and then depend on some sort of climax towards a breaking point to alleviate the stress. (Priest et al. 2020, 2-3). We see members of these communities in the Congo working to reason out the mimetic desire and violence which they are subjected to in ways that place blame on some supernatural affliction. They choose victims to scapegoat based on vulnerabilities. As Girard explains, they choose "someone who is weak or in some way marginal enough that the community can eliminate him or her without fear of reprisal" (xii). Children become the mark of such social agitation and stress, as they are the most vulnerable of populations available for such persecution, especially those who have been orphaned and have no others to stand for them against the accusations. Accusations stem from subjective events and actions that are not easily substantiated, but the communities are under such strain as to accuse their victims with little to no verifiable proof. "Children with physical disabilities," "unusual behaviors", and "disapproved characteristics" are often the target of these allegations primarily because of their difference in physical or social disposition (Priest et al. 2020, 3). One of the most disturbing developments in Priest et al.'s work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the substitution of the Church and its leaders for traditional healers and prophets. The church has embraced the violence of scapegoating and continued the mimetic cycle of desire found explained throughout Girard's work. The leaders of the churches in the DRC have found ways to employ methods devised by traditional healers to obtain confessions of witchcraft and to prosecute those they accuse. As Priest suggests, "churches . . . play a central role in influencing people's understandings and ideas about child-witches, and their responses to children perceived to be witches" (2020, 9).

Fortuitously EPED, *l'Équipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse*, stepped in to demonstrate the importance of positive methods in reacting to child witchcraft allegations. Through their efforts, in collaboration with others, EPED has been effective in facilitating change in the region plagued by accusations of child witchcraft by embracing the nonviolent

peaceful practices of Jesus and Christianity. Through the work of EPED, there are cases of significant paradigm shifts in some people's understanding and reaction to child witchcraft accusations along with the trauma associated with these allegations. They have begun to substitute better models of how to discover the real causes of societal stress and unfortunate life events than placing blame on children. Church leaders and community members in these areas of the Congo have begun to adapt to this new shift, and understand and accept their new role of protector as opposed to their old role of accuser. The pastors as well as the members of the EPED underscore the importance of the acknowledgement that this child, once accused of practicing witchcraft, is in fact just that, a child. They are the silenced innocent marginalized ones, previously abused and neglected for adult benefit; but we can see a real tangible change on the horizon, wherein their church leaders through God's love and grace lift up these children.

Girard would immediately recognize the plight of those in Africa tangled in the vicious cycle of mimetic crisis whether they are the victims or the accusers, but would be appreciative of these attempts to rectify the situation and place emphasis back on Christ's nonviolent methods for reconciliation. For as Girard explains in his conclusion, there are two ways to respond to the mimetic cycle:

1. We don't detect the mimetic snowballing because we participate in it without realizing it. In this case we are condemned to a lie we can never rectify, for we believe sincerely in the guilt of our scapegoats. This is what myths do.
2. We detect the mimetic snowballing in which we do not participate, and then we can describe it as it actually is. We restore the scapegoats unjustly condemned. Only the Bible and the Gospels are capable of this. (183)

I am thankful that those working with this situation are taking the second approach and restoring peace not just to those accused, but also to the families who have willingly and sometimes unwillingly cast their children into the streets for fear of witchcraft and for what this second approach can bring to their households.

Reference

- Priest, Robert J., Abel Ngolo and Timothy Stabell. 2020. Christian Pastors and Alleged Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 4(1):1-51.



Sara E. Cook is a student in the MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology program at Eastern University. She has research interests in climate change, environmental and symbolic anthropology, theological stewardship, superstitions and lore, and Viking history.

Author email: sara.cook@eastern.edu
