

In contrasting Rene Girard's essay *The God of Victims*¹ with certain assertions found in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, I intend to demonstrate that Girard's position not only assumes the past influence of Nietzschean thought on society but that Nietzsche's critique of religion can be seen from a new, and I think more productive, perspective once Girard's socio-cultural theory has been taken into consideration. The basic point of Girard's thesis is that certain historical patterns reveal that human society has developed under the condition of a collective, although unwitting, worship of the "God of persecutors", whom Girard describes as more Demonic than Divine (p.108). Girard believes that the Logos of the God of persecutors has condoned and perpetuated a social and mythological cycle in the world, which consists in the accusation and persecution of an innocent individual by their community. This 'scapegoat' figure, often one who had previously been idolized by the group, is turned against and ultimately sacrificed in a process whereby the collective sense of guilt is unconsciously externalized and vanquished, allowing for at least a temporary reestablishment of social unity and harmony.

Girard finds this cycle modeled in Biblical stories such as 'Job' and 'The Passion', in which both Job and Jesus are 'victims' of social persecution who can nonetheless be understood as heroic outcasts whose integrity of Faith allows them to endure the sense of isolation so often experienced by those individuals who follow the true Christian 'God of the Gospels'. Girard has asserted that this God of the Gospels is in fact the "God of victims" and not the "God of persecutors" that actually reigns in this world (p.105). I would say, as I think Girard would, that both Job and Jesus are exemplary figures of a 'Postmodern' Judeo-Christian Faith inasmuch as they represent the strength of a Faith that can withstand the personal experience of persecution and the struggle to maintain belief in the face of having been apparently forsaken by one's God.

Girard picks up on the Judeo-Christian ideal of "turning the other cheek" as being a central message of the Gospels and the only effective countermeasure to the social violence engendered by the God of persecutors. According to Girard's theory, the violent mode of society has been perpetuated over the generations due to our continued mimesis of the attitude of vengefulness and the victor/victim

¹In [The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader](#), Graham Ward, Ed. Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997.

duality. Girard speculates that in the 'Kingdom of God' peace does not need to be established and enforced by violence but instead would be the result of violence having been rendered powerless through what he proposes is an alternative Logos of the Judeo-Christian model; that of "Faithful acceptance and noble resignation" (p.108).

Girard points out, furthermore, that the God of victims does not intervene on behalf of the scapegoat not because He is powerless to do so but because doing so would only fuel the cycle of persecution and thereby re-entrench the power play between the forces of 'Good' and 'Evil' as manifested in this world (p.106). In reading Girard, one can conclude that the strongest weapon against hatred and violence, rather than being more of the same, is in fact the surrender and forgiveness afforded us by the wisdom of the Gospel of Love.

Friedrich Nietzsche's criticisms of the Christian religion represent precisely the kind of perspective that Girard's essay attempts to illuminate but also to transcend. Because Nietzsche views passivity as a sign of weakness rather than of strength he has posited that Christian doctrine encourages its followers to belittle and victimize themselves; denying their potential for self-mastery by rejecting the human impulses of greed, jealousy, lust, and revenge, etc., and projecting their power outside themselves onto an illusory patriarchal God to whose authority they are therefore enslaved².

We must realize, however, that the God whom Nietzsche refers to here is the one whom Girard reveals to be the judgmental God of persecutors and not the forgiving God of victims. For Nietzsche, the ultimate ideal would be for individuals to reclaim ownership of their 'dark side' and to reevaluate the previously established moral division between 'Good' and 'Evil' (Ibid.p.3-4). Nietzsche believes that, rather than being "slaves" to the "herd mentality" of religious dogma (Ibid.p.162), we ought to become the "masters" of our own self-created value system by embracing the empowering freedom that only the "death of God" can yield to us³. According to Nietzsche then, it is out of the fear and guilt instituted by

²Nietzsche, Friedrich. Will to Power. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale, Transl. New York: Random House, 1967. (p.85-7).

³Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Madman* in The Gay Science. Walter Kaufman, Transl. New York: Random House, 1974. (p.18-19).

Christian Puritanism that we have denied ourselves the full spectrum of human existence and the freedom to exercise our own discerning judgment.

In this view, Evil is a threat to Good only so long as the two are seen in contrasting opposition to one another and thus, Nietzsche would no doubt argue, it is the belief in a Christian God that gives rise to and empowers a Christian Devil. This aspect of Nietzsche's thesis reminds one of Sigmund Freud's model of the psyche, in which the threat of a return to consciousness of repressed unconscious material constantly needs to be guarded against by the mechanistic agency of the censor. Freud of course understood, as did Nietzsche, that it is only by acknowledging and learning to integrate our unconscious material that we can become free of repressive neuroses. In the Nietzschean view, the 'repressed' that has been guarded against is the so-called Evil in us, which the 'censor' of the Judeo-Christian paradigm neurotically refuses to acknowledge as part of the reality of human nature.

Nietzsche proscribes "Amor Fati" (Love of Fate) for those who, in an attitude of "ressentiment", or resentment, refuse to embrace the chaotic fullness of life (Ibid.1967: p.542-3). Nietzsche feels that this attitude of resentment, which rejects the reality of life in this world, is furthermore responsible for the development of the idealistic notions of a paradisaical afterlife and eternal peace for the Faithful after the Last Judgment⁴. While Nietzsche's critique has been undeniably seductive to the Postmodern mentality and essential to the project of religious deconstructionism, I find that his anti-Christian arguments, which to many people have themselves become like an unquestioned 'gospel', lose much of their impact when viewed in the light of Girard's perspective.

Let us look at the issue of 'ressentiment' mentioned above. The image of Dionysus, the Greek god of sensual and irrational excess, who represents freedom, power, and celebration, Nietzsche holds to be a more ideal model for humanity than the crucified Jesus who demonstrates only pious self-restraint and the rejection of this life in favor of the Heavenly realm of Salvation (Ibid.1967: p.542-3). But would Girard not say that Jesus' surrender to suffering and death was the ultimate example of the courage to embrace life and fate in all of its terribleness?! Girard's essay challenges us to see that

⁴Nietzsche, F. Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist. R.J. Hollingdale, Transl. Middlesex: Harmondsworth, 1969. (p.39).

Jesus is not to be understood as a victim since, rather than blame his persecutors in a perpetuation of the destructive cycle, he chose instead to be filled with forgiveness towards them. He was able to do this because the strength and selflessness he found in his Faith in the God of victims, the God of the Gospel of Love, allowed him to accept his own horrific fate as being a meaningful part of the larger Good of this God's purpose. The eyes of humanity are usually blinded to this greater Good by all of the self-centered, cynical reactionism engendered by a misdirected Faith in the God of persecutors.

There is much wisdom in the saying "when you've got nothing, you've got nothing to lose". Girard's refreshingly subtle observation is that it is only in relinquishing our need for power that we become truly powerful. Having read Girard's essay it becomes apparent that the Nietzschean ideal of embracing our own 'power', inasmuch as this implies the perpetuation of violent conflict through retaliation, is not in fact an acceptance of power at all. It requires a constant struggle against the power of another in our attempts to maintain our own position and thus, in a model such as this, peace can only be an illusion, constantly under threat of a rebellion that is suppressed only temporarily by 'victories' that make even the victors into victims of the mimetic cycle of violence.

The Christian Salvation, which Jesus' example made possible, is not a denial of this life, or an escape from it, but is an experience (be it understood as a psychological or metaphysical one) that follows when we have so completely embraced this life that even the Evil of the world is accepted, by enduring it with the nobility of one who has transcended the immature need for blame and revenge. As I have mentioned, another main criticism of Christianity that Nietzsche avers is that its moral code promotes a "herd mentality" as opposed to an ethical self-responsibility. While such an observation may be valid to some extent, I would assert that this is not a fault inherent to Christian morality, or to any religious morality in and of itself, but that rather it is the result of a failure at the level of the individual psyche to fully appreciate and internalize the Judeo-Christian moral code.

Nietzsche felt that people were being 'brainwashed' into the Christian Faith and that the only way for us to be freed from this social imposition was for us to be made aware that God does not exist and that therefore there is no absolute power outside ourselves which will determine for us what is Right and Wrong, Good or Evil. Sadly, it is true that many people and organizations have been guilty of using

Christianity as a means to avoid making their own well-reasoned and empathetic ethical evaluations. It is so much easier to have blanket rules to apply when we are faced with our fear of the unknown. It is also true that Christian doctrine has been regularly misinterpreted and used to justify atrociously inhumane behaviors, which I am certain are completely contrary to what Jesus would have intended. In Girard's estimation, however, it is our own ignorance of the true message of Christianity that has caused us to behave badly in the name of this religion.

Unless the code of morality being imparted becomes a fundamental part of an individual's consciously chosen worldview there will always be a sense in which that person is a 'slave' to the externally imposed forces restricting them from discovering or expressing their own power. But so intent is Nietzsche on subverting religious Faith that he fails to recognize that there are those who do not merely behave morally out of unthinking deference to a greater power but instead truly believe that the morality they have discerningly chosen to follow is right and best for themselves. In my opinion, Nietzsche's reactionary attitude towards religion, like Freud's, results from an immaturity which resents and rebels against the paternalistic power that is seen to be imbued in the Christian God and Church. This issue finds its analogy, and perhaps even its roots, in the psychology of child development and parenting.

Until a maturing youth has been able to question, reject, and then purposefully re-appropriate for themselves the 'Law of the Father'⁵, he or she will feel the frustration of the parent/child conflict which, in essence, is the powerful/powerless dynamic of master and slave. The true nature of mature freedom is not to be found in the absence of all restrictions, but in the conscious acceptance of restrictions that can be self-imposed because they have been adopted according to our own thoroughly reasoned choices. It may be that this is the ideal which Nietzsche was hoping to impart to us but, if so, he seems to have lost sight of this aim and become entrenched in the mode of the rebellious teenager, who rejects

⁵This term, borrowed from Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, refers to the concept of cultural regulations and parental restrictions, which effect a negation of desire and introduce the developing individual to the symbolic (linguistic) realm of social order. (A.K.A.: "le nom/non du pere", i.e. the name/no of the father).

all parental values out of spite and without the wisdom to recognize that some of those values truly are in our best interest.

As Girard observes (p.113), we find today that the Modernist rebellions against traditional structures have gradually become the norm in our society. In fact, the Nietzschean reaction to the 'Christian herd mentality' has been so deeply entrenched in our psyches that whereas once Nietzsche stood as the outcast "madman" in the eyes of society, he would now likely be embraced as one of the mainstream majority. This being the case, it is now the anti-Christian view that has become the 'herd view' and the visionary brave soul who stands apart from the crowd to proclaim that God is not actually dead, but that in fact our relationship to God (as well as to ourselves and others) has been revitalized by our having been faced with this possibility.

It is clear that Girard recognizes this and that his essay is very much part of the Postmodern project of reasserting some of the traditional morals which, because they had previously been accepted out of fear and without question, were misunderstood, rejected, and never properly internalized within the social ethos. The morality of Jesus' and Job's God of victims is not that of going along with the herd, as Nietzsche interpreted it, but is in fact the path of the radical individual who is not swayed from Faith by their alienation and persecution by the larger communal group.

Jesus did not follow the social example of blame and violence; he did not fight his fate by retaliating against his persecutors or against a God who could allow such a fate to befall him. Instead he accepted, without resentment, the sacrifice his own life in order to exemplify his message about a *new* mimesis for the world, one that can potentially end the mimetic cycle of violent retribution by imparting to us the superior power inherent in the selfless humility and forgiveness of Love.