Chapter 15: 
Christian and Jew at the Origin

Eric Gans

Since the most obvious difference between René Girard and myself in the religious sphere is that he is Christian and I am Jewish, I have often thought that this contrast might be a privileged way of minimally describing the difference between our respective anthropologies. Girard’s anthropology is demonstrably Christian. This is true both on the surface, where he explicitly presents Jesus’ revelation as incapable of a naturalistic/anthropological explanation, and in depth, where his anthropology of violence calls for a specifically Christian mode of nonviolence as its solution. But in what sense is generative anthropology, which takes no obvious religious stance, “Jewish”? Should it be seen despite appearances as a redefinition of the essence of Judaism, of the sort that various Jewish thinkers through the ages, say, Spinoza or Hermann Cohen, have attempted?

Whatever generative anthropology has to say about Judaism, a fundamental claim of “Jewishness” can be made only in reference to the originary scene. Where we situate this “Jewish” element will then constitute an “ultimate” statement about the limits or parameters of anthropological discourse in general. Which is not to say that such a statement would suggest, against the very principles of generative anthropology, that the originary hypothesis derives from a more general religious understanding. The point should rather be to show that the fundamental “Jewish” intuition gives a different, and hopefully clearer, picture of human origin than its “Christian” variant.

But the historical derivation of generative anthropology from Girard’s original insight should not for all that be consigned to the realm of accident. Indeed, Judaism and Christianity have evolved in tandem for two millennia. Thus it would be preferable to understand generative anthropology as a return to the Jewish origins of Girard’s Christian thought, a return accessible only from
within the revelatory space of this thought itself. Only after pushing the original Jewish insight into the originary scene to the paradoxical (Christian) point where God becomes capable of human incarnation, which is to say, loses nothing of his essence by living as a mortal, does generative anthropology return to the simpler Jewish separation between man and God. No doubt the Trinity embodies both these conceptions of God, as well as their mediation through the “spirit,” which is in effect language/representation. But a return to the Jewish perspective implies a rejection of the Christian Trinity, or rather its transcendence within the sphere of Jewish thought. It is as though the intellectual experience of the Christian Incarnation constituted a demonstration that, only once historically instantiated, could be treated as ontologically unnecessary. Once Jesus demonstrates (for the world, not necessarily for himself) that one can understand the human as if it were the divine (in Girard’s terms, as a divinity devoid of sacrificial or “supernatural” violence, hence less powerful in worldly terms than a human being), then one need not project the human back onto the divinity supposed to be its creator. John’s in the beginning was the Word would be returned to its obvious anthropological meaning: with the first word, the human emerged, rather than: God had the Son with him from the beginning. Or in even simpler terms, what we return to is the undecidability of God creates Man/Man creates God.

But is this “Jewish”? In the United States today, Jewish publications such as Commentary on the right and the Forward on the left express anxiety concerning the “secular” Jewish population, composed of those like me who may strongly identify as Jewish but do not observe Jewish ritual or attend synagogue services, often not even once a year. Yes, these people are Jews, but what happens when they intermarry? What about their children? It seems that the self-identifying and above all self-perpetuating Jewish community is increasingly composed of the orthodox, often “ultra-orthodox,” who tend to have many children and to live lives dominated by Jewish law and custom. If this is a harbinger of the future, it may be that “secular Jews” will largely disappear, and their importance qua Jews in our intellectual life will die out. For the moment, however, I think the secular-Jewish perspective that gave us Marx, Freud, Einstein, and so many others still has a way to go.

In this perspective, the originary hypothesis in its minimality should provide a test case of the minimal core of Judaism, particularly in contrast with Girard’s earlier and simpler version of the hypothesis. In a crucial sense, Girard’s hypothesis depends on a Christian act of faith in the Christ-emissary victim as the Word to guide the process of “hominization” that in generative anthropology is accomplished by the emission of the sign. What then in Judaism in its most minimal form has the Christ-Word taken the place of? Or should