Book Reviews

Scott Cowdell


From the very beginning of this detailed study of the work of René Girard in relation to the prospects of an ongoing secularized modernity, we are introduced to a somewhat bleak, somewhat hopeful vision for the modern world: ‘It is a fragile modernity, an incomplete secularization, and a dark future that Girard offers us. Unless we learn the Gospels’ lesson and draw back from the brink’ (p. 14).

The first few chapters of the book rehearse what Cowdell calls *La système Girard*: from the most basic mimetic (‘imitative’) desiring processes (put simply, wanting what the other person wants), to the true nature and significance of rivalry and scandal, culminating in the selection and sacrificial exclusion (or death) of a scapegoat in order to regulate the violent impulses of society.

Drawing upon a large and at times daunting pantheon of notable modern figures, Cowdell focuses attention upon a Girardian reading of modernity—specifically, the freedom and autonomy offered by modernity and the processes of secularization that are actually a further entrenching of the perils of mimetic desire. Violence, including self-violence, gives rise to more violence, often finding new and nefarious ways to conceal itself. It moves from mundane expressions (for instance, gossip, video games) to large scale, even global projects of terror.

Putting Girardian theories in dialogue with recent developments in cognitive neuroscience, developmental psychology and behavioural studies of animals, Cowdell draws our attention to the way in which Girard’s theories are less individualistic than modern psychological theories. This allows Girard a more nuanced account of modern forms of narcissism, or rather ‘pseudo narcissism’, since it is more a strategy for self-sufficiency, attainable through violent means, than a ‘metaphysical’ condition *per se*. Within this scheme everything seemingly reverts to its social-mimetic platform, including his interpretation of the breakdown of the boundary between ‘I’ and ‘you’. ‘We crave differentiation, and deprived of it we blame the failing institutions that once might have
delivered it’ (p. 35). Related to these ‘failing institutions’, then, come a host of social problems which Cowdell seeks to clarify within Girard’s work: the ambiguities within Girard’s comments on homosexuality, which tend to focus on forms of same-sex relations that develop at the moment when a rivalry between two persons becomes sexualized, a focus upon James Alison’s further development of Girardian thought ‘in a more explicitly gay-friendly direction’ (p. 41), and a rereading of Sadism and Masochism as extreme tendencies found within mimetic processes grown out of control.

Moving away from the rush of mimetic desire and taking up the mundane, ordinary responsibilities of life is the solution to such modern ‘madness’, Cowdell posits. And so, he takes up a summary and analysis of the scapegoating or sacrificial mechanism that permeate Girard’s analysis of culture and which functions culturally as the ‘center of signification’ for society (p. 61). Cowdell elaborates a good deal on how Girard sees this mechanism as a sort of evolutionary progress, an attempt to deal with what has resulted in the human species regarding our propensity to violence and our need to regulate it. Reaching back to what could be described as humanity’s first encounters with violence, he imagines how, when confronted with the violence of the sacrificial victim, ‘Its newness, terror, wonder, and incomprehensibility at the level of instinct combine to make this first cultural symbol one of prohibition [. . . ]’ (p. 62), one from which, in Girard’s estimation, all subsequent taboos and rituals spring.

Since this book undertakes to narrate Girardian theory in light of the historical evolution of humanity, Cowdell turns to the rise of a ‘false sacrality’ that comes about through the double process of sacralizing the victim of scapegoating and the reconciliation subsequently experienced by the community through their death. The book is at its strongest when immersed in the discussion of primitive rituals, ancient tragedies, and foundational persecution texts, for it is here that the clear lines of La système Girard are made bold: mimetic desire, scandal and crisis, the selection of a scapegoat based on their perceived difference, the exclusion or sacrifice of the victim, and the eventual concealment of the real violence which is done to very real victims. These various stages are unfolded with precision by Cowdell, who likewise points out how persecution texts, such as those inciting hatred against Jews or ‘witches’, are actually narratives that have, for their part, failed to actually become sacred—an increasingly modern phenomenon that speaks to the slow influence of the Christian message, and which is inescapably part of the processes of secularization that have taken place as a form of modern progress made against such violence. Such a ‘desacralization’ occurs, then, when myth is replaced ‘by an awareness of persecution’ in society (p. 81), something which is noted in