

Violence, Victims and the Divine

Day 1

Acknowledgement

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THE STORY OF GEOMANKAZIALAND

Once upon a time some relief and development agencies came from nearby countries to assist the people of Geomankazialand. There were four agencies and they set up in different geographical regions. And they worked well and happily. Until...

After some time of successful programs, the agencies all began to expand their work into neighbouring communities. Soon they began to bump into each other at the borders of their operations. This led to some arguments and disputes over which agency should be allowed to operate in the overlapping zones.

The agencies held meetings. Borders were agreed. Agreements were reached and written down. The new rules about the borders succeeded in keeping disputes to a minimum and the agencies worked well and happily. Until...

Agencies began to work on community problems that were connected across communities. One agency wanted to dam a river that flowed through all communities. However, the change in water flow would have an impact on the downstream communities. The downstream communities were angry and the agencies agreed with their concerns. Disputes and arguments arose again.

The agencies held meetings. Functions were agreed. One agency was nominated to supervise water projects for the whole region. Another agency was designated to work on road construction in every community. The new rules about functional allocations succeeded in keeping disputes to a minimum and the agencies worked well and happily. Until...

The four agencies discovered they had different ways of operating and different cultures. One agency was Christian, a second was Muslim, a third had northern European humanitarian roots, and the fourth was a for-profit organisation contracted by a foreign government. As they worked in their new functional roles across all communities, the agency people began to clash over the different ways they worked.

Some agencies did not like the way the Christian people wore their religious symbols in their logo. Some agencies felt that the way the Muslim people dressed might be offensive in some communities. Some agencies said the expensive four-wheel drive motor cars of the for-profit organisation were inconsistent with development aid. Some agencies disliked the failure of the humanitarian agency to integrate spiritual development into their work. Disputes arose. Meetings were held but new rules were hard to create. Often the meetings just seemed to make the disputes worse. Until...

The Big Z, a big international agency based on a faraway continent full of rich donors, suddenly arrived in Geomankazialand. The Big Z had lots of money, many log frames, and university trained workers. They worked quickly and skilfully and were soon getting in the way of the good work that the original four agencies were doing.

The original four agencies, now known as the OFA, held some meetings and shared their many complaints about the way that the Big Z was intruding and upsetting their good work. The meetings were loud and angry. Something clearly must be done.

At the last and noisiest meeting of all, the leader of one of the agencies stood and addressed the meeting.

“The problem is the Big Z,” she said. “We have to get rid of the Big Z.”

Everybody cheered her speech. They all knew she was right.

She went to the government and complained long and hard about the way the Big Z was upsetting everybody and destroying the good work of the OFA. The government was sympathetic and ordered the Big Z to leave the area entirely.

As the Big Z vehicles drove out of Geomankazialand there were cheers and celebrations, especially from the staff of the OFA.

The leader who had taken their complaints to the police was hailed as a heroine. Indeed, at the next meeting of the OFA it was agreed that she be given an award. It was to be called the Aid Worker of the Year Award.

The AWY Award soon became an annual award, bestowed with great ceremony and celebration on whomever within the OFA had done most for advancing the work of development in Geomankazialand.

End of story.

Let us turn now to Scripture and read Numbers 25:1-13

Numbers 25:1 While Israel was staying in Shittim (The Acacia Grove), the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ²who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. ³So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

OK, so the LORD is angry. What is the solution?

⁴The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD's fierce anger may turn away from Israel."

So, there's the solution. Kill all the leaders. Impale them in the Sun. Their deaths will be an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the Israelite men who slept with the ladies from Moab.

⁵So Moses said to Israel's judges, "Each of you must put to death those of your men who have joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor."

Wait a minute. This is not quite what the LORD asked for. He only wanted some leaders impaled in the sun. Moses seems to have got himself a bit carried away. He's decided that everyone must die.

But suddenly something happens to upset the instructions given by the LORD, AND the instruction just given by Moses.

⁶(Just) Then an Israelite man brought to his family a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

Monumental bad timing this. At the very moment when everyone is upset about the improper sexual liaisons and probably terrified at the prospect of so many having to be murdered, this unfortunate man walks by with one of these foreign women on his arm. What happens next is fascinating...

⁷When Phineas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand ⁸and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear through both of them -- through the Israelite and into the woman's body.

So Phineas son of Eleazar decides to take matters into his own hands. How DARE this guy commit the very sin that has angered the LORD so much that everyone has to die. I'll show him!! So he charges off and skewers the pair of them through the stomach. Not surprisingly, they die.

But did you notice something? I stopped half way through verse 8. Look what we read next.

Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; ⁹but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000.

The plague? Where did this come from? Nobody had mentioned a plague. A plague that had killed 24,000 people! Completely unmentioned until this moment. What does this mean? It seems to mean that killing the Israelite who brought in the foreign woman at this inauspicious moment caused the plague to stop. Really? Is that how it works?

Well, apparently, yes. That's how it works. Read on.

¹⁰The LORD said to Moses, ¹¹"Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them, so that in my zeal I did not put an end to them. ¹²Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. ¹³He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites."

Because Phineas has defended the LORD's honour, the LORD makes a covenant of peace. Not only is there peace, there is no plague, and Phineas and his descendants get to be priests forever. I presume that is a benefit, not a curse.

The Surrogate Victim, Victimage or Scapegoating

I believe there is an event behind this story that has nothing to do with the LORD changing his mind, nor about Moses redefining the punishments that the LORD commanded. The event behind this story is an example of how the ancient world tried to get rid of violence. And there was, and still is, a mechanism that is commonly used in society. Rene Girard names this the *surrogate victim* mechanism. Or simply, the *victimage* mechanism, or, to use the language of Leviticus 16—the *scapegoating* mechanism.

Here's how it works:

Societies, today and in the past, develop prohibitions, taboos, laws to keep violence under control. For example:

- You must drive on the left side of the road. Such a rule prevents chaos and violence on our roads.

- You must pay for a service or goods you receive. Such a rule prevents chaos and violence in our markets.
- A man shall not kiss the lips of a woman who is not his wife. Such a rule prevents chaos and violence in our homes.

There was such a law here. Don't have sex with the Moab women. And in all societies, these laws are *enforced* (I use the word intentionally) by violence, or the threat of violence. In modern societies we have laws and police to enforce them. The idea is that there is one kind of violence which is bad violence - namely, the violence of lawbreakers. And another kind of violence which is good violence - namely, the violence of lawmakers and authority. You don't have to be a trained anthropologist to see how this good/bad dichotomy can get out of hand. For example in Nazi Germany. There were obviously many who believed, sincerely believed, that it was morally right to kill Jews for the greater good of the Reich.

Now everything goes along peacefully so long as nothing upsets the delicate balance between good and bad violence. But then along comes some crisis. An authority falls. A government collapses. A disaster strikes - an earthquake, a famine, a flood. Or, perhaps, a plague.

Suddenly, violence is uncapped. The lid is off. Violence explodes. It's everywhere. It becomes a war of all against all. No-one describes this situation better than W.B. Yeats:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*
W.B. Yeats

Now at this point, ancient society discovered a mechanism to sort things out. It is this mechanism that René Girard describes as the victimage mechanism. And it works like this:

The violent crowd finds someone to blame. This happens because someone in the crowd points an accusing finger. Usually, perhaps invariably, at someone who is somehow different from the rest of the crowd. The old widow who lives on the edge of town - she is *obviously* a witch. The refugee who just arrived in town - who *obviously* carries the plague germ. This person gets pointed out and someone accuses them. And suddenly everyone agrees.

The focus all their violence on that one victim.

They attack and perhaps murder that victim.

And then something amazing happens. What happens is that the violence within the group drains away. It drains away through the murdered or beaten victim.

The group is convinced that the victim is the cause of all their troubles. And now their troubles are gone. The plague that killed 24,000 stops. The wicked witch is dead. Peace reigns.

End of Day 1

Violence, Victims and the Divine

Day 2

Acknowledgement

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Mark Mason was a Seattle based journalist who, during the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, went there to study Islam. In Kabul he discovered some things he did not expect to discover and when he came home he wrote the following story.

On Friday afternoon prayers, the public authorities in Kabul staged the stoning of adulterers and the hand chopping of thieves. These punishments take place at the city soccer stadium recently restored with United Nations funds. An hour before Showtime a crowd had already queued up at the entrance. There were fathers bringing their sons to view their first public hand chopping. Religious leaders arriving to see the word of the Koran faithfully carried out. And hundreds of vendors who had a grand opportunity to hawk their goods amid the burgeoning crowd.

A flood of spectators poured into the arena like a human wave, scrambling for the best seats. Within 20 minutes it was a capacity crowd of 35,000 ecstatic Afghans.

The infield began to fill up with what looked like Taliban VIPs and I spotted several more white-turbaned Mullahs along with my teacher. They sat on blankets chatting nonchalantly and drinking tea.

Finally, a handful of soldiers opened a car door and a young man, about 20 years old, stepped out.

He stood still for a moment then turned slowly in a complete circle as if to take in the scene. He appeared resigned to his punishment. The carving took several minutes. Time seemed to stop. I surveyed the crowd. Some men sat with their children and pointed to the scene on the arena floor as a warning against the consequences of thievery. The hand came off, fell to the ground, and the MC picked it up. He held the dismembered appendage by the right index finger and as blood dripped from his wrist he spoke into the microphone and the crowd came alive cheering and jeering.

The pale, unconscious criminal was thrown into the back of a truck. As the vehicle paraded around the stadium the stands emptied onto the field. The crowd chased the makeshift ambulance shouting and screaming one last taunt at the public enemy who had gotten his just reward. His crime—stealing a pack of cigarettes.

Now that purports to be a judicial affair—a matter of justice. Crime results in punishment. You don't have to be an anthropologist to see that it is more than that. It is a ritual, a public ritual. A blood ritual, a blood sacrifice. And it had certain effects on the community. It brought the community together in a very powerful way. It allowed the community to experience an enormous amount of collective self-righteousness. And how much moral energy had to be expended in order to experience that amount of self-righteousness? The answer is NONE. In other words, an enormous amount of moral self-righteousness without being morally inconvenienced whatsoever.

Gil Bailie wrote *Violence Unveiled*, one of the more accessible books that discusses the ideas of René Girard. In 1999, Gil had the job I have this week. Leading a spiritual reflection stream at a

conference for World Vision people from the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Yesterday I used some of his material. Today I rely on his analysis of this report on the hand-chopping.

I want to assert that Mark Mason's story is structurally identical to the Passion story. Here's how he goes about explaining this.

First of all, as we discussed yesterday, there's always friction and violence in our world. Conflicts and resentments happen. We are made that way. We rub up against each other. Somebody kisses the lips of someone else's wife. Conflict comes. If you want peace, you have to DO something with that hostility.

The STANDARD way is as we heard yesterday. You have to move it outside the system. To find someone outside the system to whom you can direct the violence and UNITE in directing it outside the system.

This means that an enemy is needed in order to create peace. You have to have someone on whom you can vent all your animosity and violence. We have an intuitive sense that, if we are going to have peace, and maintain peace, we have to have somewhere to put the animosity.

THE DEVIL

Now, this has to do with the Devil. I want to talk about him in anthropological terms.

First, the Devil has two faces. Two modes. The first is the *diablos*. The word means to *slander* or literally *throw something across*. So the *diablos* creates a division, or a differentiation. Creates some kind of conflict. And then the *diablos* causes this conflict to fester and get worse.

It gets to a certain point, a certain threshold, and then the *diablos* changes hats and becomes Satan. Satan is the second face of the Devil.

The word Satan means *the Accuser*. If you ever find yourself in a world that is full of tension and animosity you will discover that if someone makes an accusation there is something about it that satisfies you. Everybody in a crisis ridden society is hungry for a good solid authoritative accusation (for someone to blame) because it clears the air. As soon as you hear that accusation you tend to want to embrace it. This is the fallen part of us.

Well, if it works, all that animosity is moved towards the one who is accused. And the violence is vented on that One. And all the rest enjoy a period of peace. Now Jesus asks pointedly, "Can Satan cast out Satan?"

And the answer is "Not intentionally."

That is, Satan only pretends the casting out of Satan. Satan shows up to say "There's Satan over there. Let's cast him out." He is (instead) coming to recommend his services to us as the one who can restore order, by making the accusation. By discovering exactly who the culprit is.

In Kabul, (if we may use some New Testament language) **Satan made the cigarette thief to be sin and by that expedient took away the sins of the world.** Well, not the world, but 35,000 ecstatic Afghans. Do we see the pattern?

Now an important question – How does the crucifixion fit?

Paul tells us in 2nd Corinthians 5:21 that God made Christ to BE sin even though he knew no sin.

So let me describe, using Gil Bailie's anthropological approach, the Crucifixion.

The first thing out of John the Baptist's mouth in the Gospel of John is "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the Sin of the world." John 1:29. **Sin Singular.** Does the Lamb of God take away

the **sins** of the world? Well, if you look around you today you might think he's not done a very good job. Sins are everywhere. So what does it mean?

Let's think about sins plural. From an anthropological point of view they are the things that will precipitate a social crisis. All tribes, all cultures, have had taboos and laws and codes and prohibitions against the things that will cause all hell to break loose. The Decalogue, the 10 Commandments in the Old Testament is a classic example. You don't kill, and steal, and sleep with your neighbour's wife. You don't do all those things because they are bad, God doesn't want you to do them. But also, you don't do them because if you do them it's the first class way of starting a social crisis. And the ancient world was much less effective in stopping a social crisis than we are, so they were very careful to avoid starting one. If you start a social crisis, pretty soon it gets out of control.

Now I want to describe such a social crisis. What I want to do here is draw a picture of a whirlpool—a vortex. At the top of the vortex is everyday rivalry and competition. Somebody rubbed up the wrong way. Someone gets a promotion. Someone resents that someone who got the promotion. Rumours and gossip start. People get more and more worked up and ... you get the picture.

At first the vortex is such a wide arc you hardly even notice it. And then it takes on a seriousness. It starts to get more intense and at a certain point somebody will make an accusation with a degree of authority. And that accusation will be received by other people caught up in the vortex. With great gratitude. Because it will seem to clarify the situation. And the social system then becomes technically Satanic because the word Satan means *the accuser*.

Then it begins to really move. And two things happen simultaneously. The first is people lose their lucidity. They lose their ability to think clearly. They really think all these slogans they have been saying are really true. They really do believe the widow is the cause of all their trouble. She's really a witch. They really do believe that the plague is caused by this poor guy who procured himself a Moabite mistress. They really do believe that the problem is the Jews, or the Roma, or the Palestinians, or the Israelis. They develop ears that cannot hear and eyes that cannot see.

The other thing that happens simultaneously is that they become convinced that they have never been **more lucid**. They believe that their minds have never been so clear. Now these are two very dangerous things taken together. As this thing begins to swirl down towards its climax the accusation becomes more emphatic and narrows down and finally lands on one person or one sub-group.

But the delusional system is meantime working overtime so that the whole system falls into a social black hole. No light comes out. In a social black hole something happens and what you get out is a rumour a myth. What you hear later on is that some monster was killed. Or some witch was apprehended. Or that the Axis of Evil was destroyed. You get something, but it's not light or truth.

On the other hand, what happens in that black hole at the very bottom when all of that sinfulness turns into violence and all of that violence is expended on one person or one small group, something miraculous happens, which happened in Kabul. All that sinfulness is instantly turned into righteousness on the cheap. Without anybody having had to experience any pangs of conscience. So that's really a great social mechanism!

It is the world's way of taking away the sins of the world.

JESUS

OK. So what does the Cross have to do with that?

Does the Cross fit the condition in which we find ourselves, anthropologically speaking?

Well, let's ask God. So here is an intra-trinitarian dialogue between the Father and the Son.

They are looking over the balcony of heaven into this human condition. They are shaking their heads and they're saying, "We gave them a beautiful creation and they do this? We sent them the Law and this is what they do. Now the Law should keep them from doing that. The purpose of the Law was don't do those things because you will go crazy. You will flush away your sins on the back of some person. You will lose your human dignity. You'll live in a delusion. You will be idolaters. And murderers. Don't go there. The Law was meant to stop that.

"And then we sent them the Prophets and they were the very ones they did this to. *Can they name a single prophet their ancestors have not persecuted?*

"So," the Father says to the Son, "there's nothing for us to do than for you to go down there and rendezvous with them at that place, you don't have to go all over, you don't have to chase down every sin, because Sin runs downhill like water, we know where it's going to show up sooner or later. Bottom of the vortex. This is the way that humanity takes away its sins, on the cheap.

"And don't come home, until they hear the Cock crow. Don't come home until they wake up. Until they realise what they are doing."

So Jesus, the obedient son, goes and there he is. The crowd have got him. They have glazed eyes. They don't know what they are doing. They are angry. Fists in the air. **Crucify Him!!** And if you and I were there we would look out at the crowd and say *These are ravenous wolves*. Jesus looks out and sees lost sheep. So he says, *Father forgive them for they know not what they do. They are in a black hole. They don't have a clue. They are lost.*

THE REACTIONS: THE CENTURION AND THE MOB

Now if you were in a helicopter looking down the vortex there are two groups of people who you would think are not going to see what Jesus is really doing. The mob and the pagans. The pagans because they have no preparation. They have never read Jeremiah, 2nd Isaiah, the Psalms. By Jewish standards they were ignorant. So they are not going to get it. And, of course, the mob is not going to get it because it's a mob, their brains are full of red mist, and at the same time they are convinced that they have never been as clear minded. Well, Luke tells the story, and he tells us this.

When the centurion saw what had taken place he gave praise to God, (this is very important), and said, "Truly this is an innocent man." Luke 23:47

Oh-oh! Innocent man? Somebody has noticed that this is an innocent man. The one thing you cannot notice and still enjoy the social benefits of this mechanism is the innocence of the victim. And here, this Centurion has seen it. Something MOMENTOUS has just happened. How could he have seen it? Did he have a transcript of the trial? What does he know? The answer is that he really knows nothing except what God has shown him.

First, it says he gave praise to God. So, unlike us most of the time, the Centurion realises that his insight into this had nothing to do with how smart he was or how moral he was. It was a revelation. An epiphany. So he gave praise to God for it. And said, *this is an innocent man*.

This mob phenomenon we're describing, this mechanism, is capable of obscuring any mere moral innocence. If this mob got hold of Mother Theresa they could believe in a heartbeat that she is a witch. So mere moral innocence is not enough to shatter the system. It took **ontological** innocence. We had to have help from outside. *He is like us in all things but sin*. And because of THAT innocence the system was shattered.

Now the next verse in Luke (remember I said pagans won't get it).

When all the crowds who had gathered for the spectacle (the spectacle that is supposed to gather everyone together into unity – the Afghans pouring into the arena) saw what had happened they threw their hats in the air, had a celebratory parade and went home arm-in-arm singing the national anthem. No. That's how it is supposed to end.

How it ended was they turned around and went home beating their breasts. And beating the breasts here doesn't mean contrition, it means confusion.

Most commentators see people beating their breasts and blithely presume they suddenly realised they had participated in something wrong. Well, that's right. They had. But wait a minute, that realisation is remarkable because it is all wrong. People who participate in such events are supposed to be unified, together, delighted. All their sins have been dumped on that man on the cross. They should be delighted. Instead they are confused, perhaps reproaching themselves. Perhaps having a moral awakening, although not enough to understand yet what they experienced.

The coming together, the unity of the mob that is supposed to happen – the opposite happened. They went away. This is the beginning of the end of conventional culture. If you define conventional culture as cultures that rely on this victimage mechanism to generate and regenerate social solidarity.

Now, I said that sins are those things that start the social crisis. John the Baptist said the SIN of the world. The Sin of the World is what happens down there at the bottom of that vortex. The SIN of the world is the way that this mechanism takes away the sins of the world on the cheap. Jesus takes away the Sin of the world, and after he has done that, the sins of the world become a really big problem. Because we don't have a very good way, any more, of getting rid of them on the cheap.

So we find ourselves in the 21st Century, surrounded by sin, bombarded by violence, recognising victims left, right and centre. And I think it's a good thing. Am I nuts?

Well maybe. Certainly a fool for Jesus.

If we read the Passion of Christ through an anthropological lens we come to the conclusion that Christianity exists to foster another kind of culture. One not dependant on the victimage mechanism and scapegoating to rid itself of sin and violence.

Friends, we are engaged in a huge anthropological experiment in another kind of communion.

Rene Girard writes that the New Testament "is the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world." Gil Bailie, writing in *Violence Unveiled* (1995) says the central event in the New Testament is "a public execution, an act of official violence regarded as legally righteous by the political authorities and as a sacred duty by the religionists."

Did the people who killed Jesus think he was innocent? No way. They were certain he was guilty. The political authorities were certain they were legally right. The religious authorities were certain they were within God's will. Caiaphas avows that "it was expedient that one man die for the people" thus stating the victimage mechanism with perfect precision.

Jesus was a scapegoat. And in most respects, the crucifixion of Jesus is not dissimilar to the official murders of thousands of victims before or since. Yet in one respect it is very different.

"The Gospels tell a perfectly typical story of victimisation with astonishing insight into the role religious zeal and mob psychology played in it. Most importantly, and contrary to all myth, the story is told **from the point of view of the victim** and not that of the religious community of persecutors" says Gil Bailie.

The voice of the victim is heard. We see the innocence of the victim. And the victimage mechanism is unveiled.

Once we see how the victimage mechanism works, it does not work too well any more. It is as if our minds have been "infected with a demythologising virus that the Gospel has let loose in the world." (Bailie).

And so we have been living these past 2000 years in a time when the victimage mechanism, upon which culture has relied for its security, is being systematically subverted by the message of the Cross. The revelation of the Gospel makes us aware of the innocence of victims and it deconstructs the justifying myths, rendering them impotent.

I leave the last word to Gil Bailie—“ Empathy for the victim and the need for our rituals of victimisation are incompatible. Sooner or later one of them will have to prevail over the other.”

Tomorrow I would like to explore what this might mean for Christians in the present Millenium.

END OF DAY 2

Violence, Victims and the Divine

Day 3

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The Dancing Man Video

The Dancing Man Video can be found on YouTube. Search for "Dancing Guy Sasquatch" for many versions.

Today I want to introduce you to another part of the theory of René Girard. It is the theory of Mimetic Desire. There is a unique and fundamental characteristic in the way God has made every human being. A unique and fundamental characteristic that reveals what God had in mind when he created us.

Let me tell you two stories that illustrate what Mimetic Desire is:

The Rock Story

Let's assume I am wandering around the market here in Bethlehem. I'm wandering around kinda aimless. I'm avoiding the clothing shops because I don't look too good in those long dresses. I'm staying away from the food stall until later, for reasons of weight. I've bought olive wood souvenirs on all of my last ten visits to Palestine, so I'm not too interested in buying any more.

Then I find myself standing in front of the rock table. The rock table has a wide selection of similarly sized polished rocks, but in a range of colours.

I have nothing to do, so I randomly pick up a rock, inspect it and put it back on the table. After looking at a few rocks, a red rock, a green rock and finally a blue rock, I decide that I already have quite a lot of perfectly good rocks at home and I decide that I don't need another one right now.

I put the blue rock back on the table and am about to move away from the table when someone comes up beside me and picks up the blue rock I just put down.

I pause in my departure from the table and observe that he is looking rather admiringly at the blue rock that I had just put down. And as I watch him I realise that actually, that blue rock does look rather special. I realise that although I do have a blue rock at home the one this fellow now has in his hand is a rather better shade of blue than the one I have at home. I realise that I was mistaken to have so quickly discarded this blue rock. I realise that I had been a bit too offhand in my approach to the rock table moments before. I should have been taking more care. I would have realised that this particular blue rock is actually a very fine example of the rock genre. This blue rock would be a perfect addition to my rock collection.

I want that rock.

Now, I have a dilemma. How can I get the rock, when he's got it? But, you see, I know something about human behaviour, so I nonchalantly pick up a red rock. Admittedly, it is not as fine a rock as the blue one, but I hope it will serve the purpose. I notice out of the corner of my eye that the other rock aficionado has seen me pick up the red rock. I pretend to consider the red rock admiringly. I do it in a way that I know he can see my facial expression of intense admiration. Then, with a sigh I put the red rock back on the table. I hope my sigh communicates to him that this red rock is greatly to be valued, but unfortunately, I am too poor to acquire something of such great value.

I nonchalantly stroll away from the table, keeping him in my vision out of the corner of my eye. And, you know what he does?

Yes, he puts down the blue rock, and picks up the red one. This leaves me free to appear to have second thoughts about the blue rock. I move in for the kill, cool as a cucumber I pick up the blue rock and take it to the shopkeeper.

Have I described a human interaction with which you are in any way familiar? Of course, I have. Everyone identifies with that story, because every one of us shares a common human characteristic. A characteristic that God has created within every person. A characteristic that God has created with some purpose in mind.

What I have described is given a number of names. Mimetic desire, triangular desire (triangular because there are three objects involved—in the case of the blue rock there is me, the other customer and the blue rock), or borrowed desire. It is called borrowed desire because I borrowed my desire from the other customer's admiration. I showed no desire for the blue rock. But when someone else showed desire for the blue rock, I borrowed his desire so I could want it myself.

This phenomenon is rooted in imitation. René Girard, has articulated this concept in a way that has the power to revolutionise our self-understanding as humans. Better than that, it helps us to understand God's purpose in creating us the way he has.

The basic idea here is that all humans are terrific copycats. In the best sense of copycat, of course. We are great imitators of one another. We are excellent mimics. We copy each other.

This is the foundation of all human learning. Children learn to speak by imitating the sounds their parents make. We learn how to value things, by imitating what other people value.

The Child with a Toy

Some of you look a little unsure. Let me give you another example.

Our daughter, Melanie lives in the United States. And a few years back she came and visited us in Australia, with her two children, our grandchildren, Sophie and Emily. At that time Emily was 2½ and Sophie just one.

By 5 o'clock in the evening, any evening, every evening, our family room resembled a toy shop after it'd been trashed by a herd of rampaging cattle. The room is wall-to-wall toys. There are bits of Lego, stuffed animals, Bananas in Pajamas books, and actual Bananas in Pajamas. From one wall to another the room is ankle deep in children's playthings. You can't see the floor and occasionally the one year old disappears under the taller mounds of fluffy toys.

In the middle of the room Emily, aged 2½, picks up a single teddy bear dressed like an Austrian peasant. She cuddles it to her chest and starts to sing an unrecognisable lullaby.

Two metres away, her sister, Sophie, aged one, wobbles into the room. Sophie now has the choice of 3,279 excellent toys to play with.

Which toy does Sophie want to play with?

Everyone knows which toy Sophie wants, because we all understand this basic characteristic of human behaviour. We recognise imitation and borrowed desire because it is in our blood. It is part of the way God made us.

Borrowed Desire

Borrowed Desire, or Mimetic Desire, has a number of characteristics.

First, it is triangular. There is Me, the object, and the person who models desire of the object for me.

Second, once we begin to desire what the other person desires, we reject any notion that the desire originates from the other person. That is, we co-opt the model's desire for the object as if it were originally ours. I am desiring the object, we say. It was my idea in the first place to desire the object.

Third, mediation comes in two forms. Or perhaps, we should say it sits along a spectrum. Some of the people who model desire for us are far distant from us, or far above us. We may choose to buy a certain fashion because a film star is seen wearing it. The film star models desire for the fashion, but the star is so far away from us that we cannot have the object. We cannot go to the film star and try to steal their clothes. We cannot fight them over the object.

But many of our mediating models are people quite close to us. Now there arises a problem. If there is only one object, and we both desire it, only one of us is going to win. Worse, if the person modelling desire for us already has the object, we will see them as a rival. We will have to work out ways to take the object away from the one who possesses it.

This, suggests René Girard is the source of the whirlpool of anger and rivalry and social crisis we talked about yesterday.

For example, how many times has the romance in a marriage been reignited by the fact that another person shows an interest in one partner? Married couples can tend to take each other for granted after a few years. But let someone else appear to be flirting with my wife, and she becomes suddenly more desirable. Girard would say that the flirt who is desiring my wife, is modelling that desire for me. And I will borrow it, because I love her.

I read a story of a woman who spent years restoring an old house in Melbourne. She had put her life and creativity into it over more than ten years, but she and her husband were finding themselves getting too old to look after it. They decided it was time to move. To sell the house and buy a small apartment. They put the beautiful old house on the market and looked forward to getting a good price. Of that, there was no doubt.

People started to come through on inspections. Without exception they admired the wonderful way the woman had restored the old home. They praised its beauty in every room.

After two weeks of a constant flow of prospective buyers the woman realised that she had never intended to sell the house. Indeed, she had always known that the house was far too wonderful to give up. She took the house off the market.

Rivalry and Borrowed Desire

I could spend a whole hour talking about how borrowed desire leads to rivalry. And how rivalry leads to social crisis. Put simply, if two people desire the same object, there's going to be a dispute.

If two people desire the same woman, there's going to be trouble. Maybe a duel.

If two people desire the same house, someone's going to lose.

If two people desire the same land, there is going to be an Intifada.

Mirror Neurons

The Mirror Neurons video can be found at

http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/vs_ramachandran_the_neurons_that_shaped_civilization.html

René Girard developed his ideas about borrowed desire from literature not science. He published a series of books from the 1970s onwards in which he described borrowed desire with reference to the great literature of people like Proust, Dostoevsky and Shakespeare. He had no scientific basis for his theory. It was a theory based on observation.

Then in the 1990s Italian researchers, as far as we know unaware of Girardian theory, made the discovery that Ramachandran describes in the video.

What to Imitate?

God has made us, in the best sense, to be copycats. We form and shape our personalities through the observations and interactions we have with others. We watch one another, and we copy one another, and we model behaviours for others who are watching us.

When we entered those dreadful, so-called orphanages in Romania 20 years ago, we found children of 4 and 5 years of age who had never learned to hug or express pleasure. Because they had never seen anyone else do it.

That experience taught me that so much of what we take for granted in human behaviour is learned. It is learned by imitation. It is learned by copying. It is learned by following others. It is learned by following others who show us the way to be human.

God made us this way. And he made us this way for a purpose.

God made us to be imitators, to be copycats, to be followers. God made us so that we would look for models to copy, leaders to follow, mentors to be apprenticed to.

Why did he do that?

...

When Joshua was near the end of his life, he stood in front of the assembled tribe of the children of Israel and addressed them.

He reminded them of everything that God had done to rescue them from slavery in Egypt. Everything God had done to bring them through the desert. Everything God had done to bring them back home to the land of Israel.

And then he said, "Now revere the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD."

"But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

I believe this is the question we are asked every day. Which God are we going to serve? Whom do we follow? Who is our model for the way we want to become as humans? Whom do we choose as models to imitate?

"Keeping up with the Joneses" is just one form of human imitation at work. Do we establish our neighbours as the ones we choose to copy? Do we copy our friends?

Are we allowing the lesser god of advertising to be our model? Remember that Eve did not recognise the desirability of the fruit until the serpent pointed it out to her. The serpent mediated her desire. Eve borrowed her desire from the serpent. The entire advertising industry is based on exploiting borrowed desire. Television advertising proves that you do not sell your product by saying much about the product itself. Television advertising works by showing us attractive people using and enjoying the product.

We want to become like the people in the ads. And we'll buy the products to do it.

Is this what God intended when he made us to be such good imitators?

Joshua's challenge to the children of Israel is still the challenge for us today.

Choose whom we will serve?

"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of your ancestors, or the gods of the people in whose land you are living."

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. Will we copy the same gods that society has traditionally followed? Will we copy the same gods as the people around us? Who will be our models?

Joshua is asking his people whether they have grown up. Have they matured? Are they smart enough to see that what they did as a child in imitating their parents, now needs to be transferred to some new object, some new model, some new example to follow. Who will it be? he asks.

And then he himself provides a model to follow. "But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

This is the same thing Paul said many years later. In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul demonstrates clearly that he understands how God made us to be copy cats. And he shows he knows how this can be a good or a bad thing.

Paul is confident to hold himself up as a model. He talks about the way he behaves himself, how he works to support himself, and then he says in 2TH 3:7 & 9 "For you yourselves know how

you ought to follow our example. We did this ... in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow.”

But be assured that Paul does not hold himself up to be the perfect example. He does not want anyone to imitate him fully, except in one respect. When writing to the Corinthians he makes this clear. 1CO 11:1 I think it's one of the most important things Paul ever wrote. *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*

This is why God made us the way He did. We were made to follow Christ. Our perfect example to copy is Jesus, for he shows us God.

We were created by God to be copycats. We were created that way for a purpose. And that purpose is to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our model. Jesus Christ is the one worthy of our natural imitating responses.

We were created to imitate Christ.

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. As for me and my household, to the best of our ability we shall serve the Lord.

A-men.