

Session III: “stand erect, and hold up your heads!”

Welcome to the final session of our reflections upon some of the key political theological themes in the work of Pope Francis, especially in *Fratelli Tutti*'s call for 'a new kind of politics'; and of René Girard, with his distinctive and disturbing insights into the darker side of human behaviour. It is great news that Pope Francis will make an appearance at COP26, and it will be very interesting to hear what he has to say, on this very significant occasion for the planet.

I have mentioned that Girard seems to be drawn to the 'dark side' of human nature, when he speaks of the dangers of mimetic desire: that is, because we copy one another in our desires, there is a possibility that our desires may converge on the same object. While this is fine as long as that object can be shared, trouble begins when it cannot be shared, and we find ourselves in competition with one another. Let me give the example of my friend, Robert. We share a passionate interest in all things Italian: we love Italian food, wine, opera, we go to Italian classes together, we head to Italy for our holidays. Our love of Italy and all things Italian is what cements our friendship ... until Robert introduces me to Lucia. Lucia is Robert's new girlfriend, she is from Milan, and she is absolutely gorgeous. And because I love the same things that Robert loves ... well, we now have a problem. Our friendship is ruined, as we have now become fierce rivals for the favours of this Italian princess. What is important to realise is that it is our shared passion, our common interests, which drew us so closely together, and which has now forced us apart.

[I should emphasise that this little story is entirely made up; Robert and Lucia are both fictional characters, but you get the picture].

So when Pope Francis speaks of 'social fraternity', or 'common home' and so on, there is a little alarm bell ringing. I have to confess that there are alarm bells ringing for me when Pope Francis speaks of a theology of encounter, but that is because of a childhood trauma, which I will share with you now. I must have been about six or seven when our teacher told us that she was going to encounter her friend in the park: could anyone tell her what 'encounter' means? 'Please miss', I said confidently, 'did you have a fight with your friend?' 'FIGHT!' said my teacher, 'I don't fight with my friends!'. She laughed, and the whole class laughed, and I was so humiliated, that here I am, over fifty years later, still telling the tale.

And I have forever carried a sense of injustice about that moment, because in certain contexts, 'encounter' *does* mean fight, or at least implies an unpleasant or negative experience. Armies, encounter, we encounter difficulties, or sickness, and so on. So I think that my childhood experience may have sown the seed for my interest, so many years later, in the work of Girard and his reflection on the 'dark side of life'.

The second part of Girard's theory, you will recall, is the phenomenon of scapegoating. When a society is in crisis, it manages spontaneously to find stability by identifying a marginal figure or group, and either expelling them or exterminating them. We know this: we know that this is what happened to Jews in medieval Europe and in Nazi Germany, and to witches in early modern Europe. *Die Juden sind unsern Unglück*: "the Jews are our misfortune". Any politician who wants to mobilise the people and unite them, knows that they need only point the finger at an individual or group, and say 'there is the cause of our misfortune'.

This is the human mess which Jesus enters into, and which he undertakes to sort out. This is the knot which he unravels, how our desires can turn ugly, and our fears and insecurities can lead us to the worst in ourselves. We have been inspired by the action of the good people of Glasgow who came to the rescue of the refugees being deported, people who insisted on *being a neighbour*. We recognise the rightness and the justice of their action; but so often crowds are drawn, almost magnetically, to behave in just the opposite fashion. Treating someone as a scapegoat is, if you like, the very opposite of being a neighbour to them.

Another image may help us: the Church is often thought of as a boat, and Francis has used this image, I think. As Christians we believe and hope that we are flowing with the tide, toward God. But a skilful navigator will also be aware of the cross currents, the eddies and the whirlpools which can pull the boat off course. Girardism, if you like, is someone who thinks about the undertow. And I think that is what I am doing in reading Pope Francis and his invitation to 'let us dream', to have confidence in the benign processes of history, alongside a philosopher who pays attention to the forces which can cut across, this and pull us into danger.

There is another aspect to Girard's thinking which I will mention here, and which in some ways seems to darken the picture even further. Girard's later writings i.e. since 2001, took an allegedly 'apocalyptic turn', culminating in his last book; translated in 2010 as *Battling to the End*.¹ For Girard, the atrocity of 9/11, and its aftermath, ushers in an era of an 'escalation to extremes': a globalized re-launching of the age-old dynamic of violence between nations and groups.

Girard argues basically, that we can no longer keep violence under control. The traditions of 'limited' warfare- that is, warfare restricted to a local theatre of conflict, with conventional constraints on weapons and tactics, and on categories and numbers of people put at risk- held sway in Europe up until the Napoleonic Wars. Since 1806, by contrast, we have seen an uncontrollable escalation of conflicts, in which the previously codified parameters of conflict and warfare have been increasingly erased. The fateful escalation of conflict between Germany and France in the nineteenth century, ushered in the modern era of actual and potentially unlimited violence: two World Wars, the Cold War, terrorism and now the 'War on Terror'. In the past we could speak of 'just war theory'; many theologians would now say that in the modern age there can be no such thing as a 'just war'.

¹ René Girard, 2010, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. East Lansing, Michigan State University Press. [French original, *Achever Clausewitz*, 2007]

The end-result of this escalation is that every citizen on the planet has been placed in the front-line; every one of us is a potential combatant. On this view, our situation is unprecedented, and immensely serious. In a word, 'apocalyptic'. The 'apocalyptic' strain is well captured in Yeats's famous poem, *The Second Coming*, written at the time of the Irish Civil War:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
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.

There are three aspects to our situation, which together justify the use of the term apocalyptic:

- Firstly, the senses of multiple crises, which are escalating in intensity: "wars and rumours of wars". Girard speaks of an 'escalation to extremes', a sense that we are at the point of no return. We are the first generations of human beings who have the capacity to wipe out human life altogether. This was evident to Girard during the Cold War, when the nuclear arms race was at its height, and people spoke of 'Mutually Assured Destruction' (MAD). But it also describes the ecological crisis, where we are now aware that we are heading towards a point of no return in terms of irreparable damage to our 'common home'; we have reached a 'tipping point'
- Secondly, a sense that human and non-human causality have become confused. Wars may be caused by natural scarcities, such as famine, caused by global warming and so on; they are also caused by corruption and greed. The pandemic is a good example of the way human and natural causes can get mixed up in time of crisis: COVID is a 'natural' event, but clearly human disrespect for nature plays a part as well. And its effect has been made much greater by selfishness and prejudice;
- Thirdly, the apocalyptic imagination can express itself in an intensification of the human tendency to scapegoat, to find someone to blame. One can also speak of the tendency to separate out the good from the bad, to classify ourselves into the saved and the condemned (an extreme literary example of this is the mentality of the 'Left Behind' novels, where the righteous are beamed up into heaven, leaving the unrighteous to suffer catastrophe here on earth. This separation of good from bad is sometimes known as the Manichean tendency, which sees the world as evenly split between good and bad forces. Augustine was seduced by this philosophy for a while. But to be a Manichean, to divide people up in this way, is to separate the wheat and the weeds in a way that Jesus warns us not to in the Matthaean parable.

So how should Christians behave, in this time of apocalypse?

The answer, according to Girard, and here of course Francis would agree, is to hold fast to the teaching of Christ. This means recognizing two senses of the word apocalypse: one is unhelpful and dangerous- the 'undertow'- while the other is more truly the mind of Christ. So we might want to think of 'good and bad apocalypse'.

Where the bad apocalypse feeds of our increased fears and violence, Jesus reassures us and tells us to keep calm, even to rejoice. In Mark 13, Jesus paints a distressing picture of what is going to happen, but he also declares that 'when you see these things happening you know that God is very near'. We are to take courage, to stand erect with our heads high. The true meaning of apocalypse is a joyful awareness that Jesus is approaching (the Book of `revelation ends with the words, 'Come, Lord Jesus').

But to experience the true apocalypse, to genuinely see our situation as one of hopeful celebration at the nearness of God, we need to resist the temptations of the false apocalypse, which only leads us to disastrous violence:

- **We need to resist** the spirals of violent escalation which can be so intoxicating. This means recognizing that violence is never cleansing or creative- not even when we call it 'divine retribution'. Escalating violence in the hope of solving a situation is like taking bigger and bigger doses of a medicine that simply isn't working;
- **We need to resist** the temptation to conflate human and natural causes. Our default position is to find a human cause, to find someone to blame- a scapegoat. Sometimes we just have to listen to the science, and not read masks, lockdowns, vaccines- or even the virus itself- as evidence of malicious human beings. Identifying human responsibility is not the same as playing the blame-game.
- **We need to resist** the Manichaean impulses within us and within our communities; the urge to identify in- and out- groups, as good and bad, righteous and unclean. Our fears and uncertainties will pull us toward this kind of thinking, but we need to hold back- just as the servant has to hold back from pulling up the weeds and wheat together. This holding back means giving God time to do His work, since 'time is greater than space'.

The gospel, in other words, can 'inoculate' us against the wrong kind of apocalyptic thinking. Here I think, Pope Francis and René Girard would find themselves in agreement (finally!).

Michael Kirwan SJ