

The mystical moment in René Girard

René Girard is anything but a mystic. First of all, he is a theorist of conflict, of rivalry, of violence. Nicolas Cusanus' beautiful phrase, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of opposites, in Girard does not reflect mystical insight, but illustrates how two apparently very different people or parties come to resemble each other in their quarrels. They oppose and understand themselves as essentially different, but they shout in the same way, swear in the same way and end up killing each other in the same way. In the sameness of opposition – today we usually employ the word 'polarization' – Girard discerns the symmetry of violence, a phrase that in the mystical context of Cusanus evokes a completely different, often very serene and peaceful world.

The word 'mysticism' hardly ever occurs in Girard's oeuvre.¹ One of the few exceptions can be found in a conversation with Benoît Chantre in *Battling to the End*, in which Girard speaks, with regard to Friedrich Hölderlin, of 'mystical quietism'.² People who are both interested in mysticism and in Girard's mimetic theory regularly come up with the question: what has been written in this field? So yes, there are some works, but it doesn't amount to much. Girard himself writes about St. Augustine and Simone Weil, but he does not really descend into Meister Eckhart or the great Spanish mystics of the 16th century such as Teresa of Avila. There is no consistent body of knowledge that explains how mimetic theory and mysticism relate.

Nevertheless, Girard's theory certainly can offer penetrating insights in the field of mysticism. The conceptual framework, borrowed from Girard, that I have put forward in my book *The Crossing: Philosophical View of Psychosis* can largely be used to describe certain mystical phenomena and help to explain them.³ Many philosophers and psychologists would accept the idea that there is a lot of overlap between psychotic and mystical experiences. If we can say that in a psychosis the subject comes to coincide with the model, which gives rise to the megalomania which is so characteristic in many psychoses, something similar happens in mysticism in a more guided or controlled way. The mystic undergoes a contact with the divine, communicates with something transcendent and will be found groping for words to describe those experiences as much as psychotics do for theirs. When talking about god-experiences, model and subject are always very close to each other – as in the black god-experiences of ecstatic violence, as in the gray and swaying god-experiences of psychosis, and thus also in the white and luminous god-experiences of mysticism. And also, as to self-proclaimed mystics, one has to be vigilant for possible self-exaltations, something that so much catches the eye in psychotics.

For the central anthropological phenomenon around which the whole mimetic theory revolves, Girard uses different terms like 'sacrificial crisis', 'mimetic crisis' or 'crisis of differences'. For describing psychosis or mysticism I prefer this latter term. What happens in primordial violence on an anthropological level, happens on a psychological level in psychosis. The boundaries between Me and

the Other fade, the differences disappear, which now, instead of violence may result into euphoria. I have memories of intense feelings of love, of oneness, of how another person's thoughts or words lost all externality and turned out to be my own thoughts and words. A mystic may get a glimpse of the unity behind all things in the universe. As a psychotic, you don't get just glimpses, but you can stay on being 'at one with the world' for hours, for days even. Yet, in addition to all these beautiful mystical moods circling around in your head, the feelings of unity can also develop into curious, strange and sometimes even outrageous and dangerous behaviors.

How can we explain this? Let me focus on a peculiar memory that cropped up after having written my book. I remember I regularly went to the fast-food restaurant opposite the house of my parents, the place where I stayed during the days of my mental turbulences. If I think of how I thought about fast-food in that period, in my adolescence that is, I also remember that I looked down on people who frequented fast-food restaurants. When I entered these pleasure places myself, provoked by a strong desire for a hamburger, it almost felt as if I were sinning. The identity you are slowly building up as an adolescent may still be fresh and fragile, but already it is something you have been working on for years. A value system is emerging, a sense of good taste is emerging – a difference has arisen between 'the do's' and 'the don'ts', which corresponds to the differences between the people you admire and those who you look down on. The resulting codes of conduct then will support this fledgling, incipient identity.

At the time, being 19-year-old, the walls were only thin, and the masonry that held them together was half finished. Yet it were these constructs that started to crumble. What I had been trying to construct in my adolescent years – a difference of status between the cultivated semi-intellectual that I wanted to become, over against the common fast food restaurant visitors who indulge in hamburgers, special fries and whatever else can be savored in those places – was now giving away. My first hamburger was swallowed while reading Friedrich Nietzsches *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. I was imitating Nietzsche's prophet who descends from a mountain. As there are no mountains in Holland, I walked from my parents' house to the 'lowest' place I could find which was the fast-food restaurant.

There is an element of serenity in a descent like this, in the fading away of a difference. Like Nietzsche's Zarathustra I wanted to give, to love and to share. I reembraced what I had expelled. Something similar happens in mysticism. And, talking about serenity, let us have no illusions about mystics. The contemplative practitioner, sitting in a tranquil lotus position, thus suggesting a deep connection with the cosmos, may meanwhile in the stream of images in his secret mind's eye see a whole assortment of fast-food items passing by. If Teresa of Avila says that God also dwells in pots and pans, then there should be no reason why He should avoid the chip ovens and the frying pans of modern fast-food restaurants. Mysticism is related to how anything human may well up in my soul. Nothing human is strange to me... One may temporarily move beyond the world of judgment, of morality, of rationality, which results in feelings of being connected to others which sometimes can run very deep.

Madmen and mystics move into the same area, a place where differences disappear. Yet only the mystic knows how to return to the space that is protected by differences. There is no mad indifferention to be distinguished from mystic indifferention. Indifferention just is indifferention. There is no fake mysticism, there are only fake mystics. There's only pretending to have had mystic experiences in mimicking the stammering language of mystical discourse, with which you can maybe fool a crowd, but not a genuine Zen master. Yet, in madness, these same feelings of unity can lead to strange and disinhibited behavior. In my case, this disinhibition was largely limited to a markedly high fast-food

consumption. But there are certainly much more aberrant forms of psychotic disturbances and disinhibitions, in which people start to swear loudly, take off their clothes or start to indulge in erotic excesses. And yes, even everything you've learned in potty training is not guarded from the indifferentiation that psychotic feedback loops can create, wreaking havoc in what once was the acculturated Self. What in mysticism is a temporary exit from one's own identity, enabling one to get a glimpse of heaven, followed by a re-entry into a 'normal' grounding self, can lead in a psychosis to extreme forms of self-loss and transgressive behavior.

The mystical moment in Girard is also a moment in which the boundaries between Self and Other disappear. As far as I know there is only one place in his oeuvre in which Girard talks about this experience in terms of indifferentiation in an explicit way, which is the final chapter of his *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. I also pay due attention to these passages in *The Crossing*. Let me quote the crucial passage:

To triumph over self-centeredness is to get away from oneself and make contact with others but in another sense it also implies a greater intimacy with oneself and a withdrawal from others. A self-centered person thinks he is choosing himself but in fact he shuts himself out as much as others. Victory over self-centeredness allows us to probe deeply into the Self and at the same time yields a better knowledge of Others. At a certain depth there is no difference between our own secret and the secret of Others. Everything is revealed to the novelist when he penetrates this Self, a truer Self than that which each of us displays.⁴

Girard is talking about Marcel Proust here, but I claim, as I do in my book – Girard is much more talking about himself. Nothing human is strange to me, is what Girard is saying here, not even the herd behavior with which I have always thought I could distance myself from others. I, too, am mimetic. This is the touchdown – ‘at a certain depth there is no difference between our own secret and the secret of Others’. It is in this discovery I come closer to others as I also come closer to myself. I am not essentially different from others, neither essentially better, nor superior in whatever kind of way – there is a mystical bond between me and those others that I have looked down upon for so long. It is in this mystical experience – in which the dividing line between Self and Other is suspended – that something important happens. This is the moment when mimetic theory was born.⁵ We are looking at its cradle, or maybe we should its manger... Instead of developing a mystical teaching, Girard will remain an academic and will tell the world what he has discovered in this moment of insight, which is also a moment of intense liberation. I am not free from herd behavior, *nobody* is free from herd behavior. To tell the world, and to examine what the consequences of this discovery are, will be the mission to which Girard will dedicate his long career.

An important element in this mystical experience is the decoupling of pride and loneliness. To overcome pride is to approach the Other. We are not moralizing but pointing at a certain psychological effect that can make it impossible for you to connect with others in a normal human way. Just as I rediscovered 'the fast-food restaurant visitor in myself' during my psychosis, or just as Girard discovered the 'herd animal within himself' during what he came to reappropriate as his conversion, it establishes a truly equal

relationship between me and a substantial part of humanity. And, let's be honest, much of what people claim about being equal to others is lip service, or false modesty... Or as George Orwell put it: all people are equal, but some people are more equal than others.

If you have embarked on a journey of developing a sharper, more intelligent, higher, nobler identity, loneliness will grow accordingly. In some cases, this may lead to psychological heroism, as it did with Friedrich Nietzsche or with Martin Heidegger. In other cases, it may lead to a loneliness that in the end is hardly bearable anymore, as it did with Dostoevsky. Dostoyevsky's hero of the Underground has the motto: 'I am alone, and they are all together' – a phrase that is often quoted by Girard. It is in this enormous suffering – I would call it existentialist suffering – that pride can break, as happened with Dostoevsky and as happened with Girard. Whether it also happened to Marcel Proust, we still have to analyze carefully, because the readings that Girard offers, however insightful they might be, do not always excel in precision.

I want to end with another experiential expert, not in terms of psychosis or mysticism, but someone who is surely familiar with the endless loneliness that pride can give. It's a pop singer, Don McLean, who has written the unforgettable line – *You're deep inside the pride parade, but where do you belong?* When we lose contact with religious institutions that remind us that pride may be a sin, then pride may become a trap. [The Pride Parade](#) is also the title of Don McLean's song. The chorus of this song reminds one very much to Dostoevsky's Underground man:

*But your friends are together
Where the people are all gathered,
All along the road you traveled all your way.*

Maybe McLean has read Dostoevsky, maybe not. It doesn't matter, the experience is universal and has been undergone by thousands of people in thousands of variations. Sometimes, in a crowd, at a party, you can see a young man walking with an intensely sad face, so that the suspicion can arise he still has many lonely miles to go.

This line 'you're deep inside the pride parade, but where do you belong?' sums it all up. Some may proceed like a Nietzschean hero, or some may break down in the arms of Jesus. But in this song, it is a question: where do you want to go, where you do belong? These entrapments of pride and vanity, of envy and resentment finally are finite. There is a choice that can be made, a choice to get out. I don't know whether Don Maclean ever got religious, but when I hear the violins coming up at the end of his song – precisely at the line I am quoting and commenting upon – I sense that grace is coming...



¹ In most cases the word is used as criticism and spelled in English as 'mystique'.

² René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010, p.123.

³ For more information on *De overtocht*, see <https://www.bronnenpagina.nl/de-overtocht/english/>.

⁴ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire & the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1965, p.298.

⁵ In the last chapter of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World...* Girard returns to this experience described in the *Mensonge* and it is again Marcel Proust who provides the most important literary context. Girard there writes: 'Even in the field of physical research, which does not present the same obstacles to the progress of knowledge as the sciences of man do, those who make decisive intellectual breakthroughs always have a transition from one mental world to another; it is an event that later researchers, unable to understand how and why this happens, often characterize as "mystical"'. See the section under the heading "Sacrifice and psychotherapy". Translated from René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fonation du monde*. Paris: Grasset, 1978, p.518-523.