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René Girard: I See Satan Fall Like Lightning Study Guide

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RENÉ GIRARD: I SEE SATAN FALL LIKE LIGHTNING

STUDY GUIDE, 2003

Steven Alan Samson

CHAPTER ONE: SCANDAL MUST COME

- A. BIBLE'S ORIGINAL CONCEPTION OF DESIRE AND ITS CONFLICTS
1. The Genesis Fall
 2. Prohibition of Violence Against One's Neighbor
 - a. Second half of the Decalogue
 - 1) Tenth Commandment forbids a **desire**
 - b. Modern translations lead readers down a false trail
 - 1) Hebrew term translated as *covet* means just simply "desire" [Note Gen. 3:16; 4:7]
 - 2) Comparison: Desire of Eve for the forbidden fruit
 - 3) The prohibited desire is the desire of all human beings
 3. Condition of Man in the Absence of This Prohibition
 - a. Hobbes's "war of all against all"
 4. Consequence of the Assumption That Cultural Prohibitions Are Needless
 - a. Adherence to the most **excessive individualism**
 - 1) Presupposition: Autonomy of individuals and their desires
 5. The Bible Works from the Opposite Premise
 - a. We tend to desire what our neighbor has or desires
 6. Axiom: **Rivalry** Exists at the Very Heart of Human Social Relations
 - a. Corollaries
 - 1) If not thwarted, rivalry would endanger the harmony and even the survival of all human communities
 - 2) Rivalistic desires are overwhelming because they reinforce one another
 - 3) The principle of **reciprocal escalation** and one-upmanship governs this type of conflict [cf. Gen. 34; Judg. 1-21; 2 Sam. 13]
 7. Consequence: Small Ancient Societies Could Not Afford Indifference to the Threat of Runaway Conflict
- B. DESIRE AND THE TENTH COMMANDMENT
1. Heart of the Problem: Desire for What Belongs to the Neighbor
 - a. The lawgiver cannot enumerate all the objects about which men ceaselessly fight
 - b. So he turns to what is constant: It is clearly the neighbor who renders these objects desirable
 2. Revolution in Understanding: Desire Rests on a Third Party Who Gives Value to the Objects
 3. **Mimetic Desire**: Our Neighbor Is the Model for Our Desires
- C. THE RESULTING CONFLICTS
1. Thwarted Desire Tends to Become More Intense
 - a. Opposition exasperates desire
 - b. If imitation of the neighbor's desire engenders rivalry, rivalry in turn engenders imitation
 - 1) Appearance of the rival seems to validate the desire
 - 2) Intensity of the possessor's desire keeps increasing
 2. Quiet and Untroubled Possession Weakens Desire, as a General Rule

- a. Rivalry reawakens desire
 - b. The mimetic nature of desire accounts for the fragility of human relations
 - c. Idolization of the neighbor [through our desire] is necessarily associated with idolization of ourselves
3. The Conflicts Resulting from This Double Idolatry of Self and Other Are the Principal Source of Human Violence
- a. Adoration of our neighbor can easily turn to hatred because we seek to adore our selves
 - 1) Hence the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18).
 - b. Rivalries of desires tend to contaminate third parties who are just as addicted to the entanglements of mimetic rivalries
 - c. Intensity of mimetic rivalries can lead rivals to
 - 1) Denigrate each other (Ninth Commandment)
 - 2) Steal each other's possessions (Eighth Commandment)
 - 3) Seduce the other's spouse (Seventh Commandment), and
 - 4) Murder (Sixth Commandment)
4. Ten Commandment's Prohibition of Desire for What Belongs to the Neighbor Is the Key to the Violence Prohibited in the Four Preceding Commandments
- a. If we respected the tenth commandment, the four commandments that precede it would be superfluous
 - b. But it can not discourage *all* the rivalries of desire
- D. THE PROHIBITIONS OF ARCHAIC SOCIETIES
- 1. Twins (Doubles)
 - a. Their natural resemblance is confused with the **leveling effects** of mimetic rivalries [cf. identitarianism, egalitarianism, chaos]
 - 2. Antagonists Resemble One Another
 - a. Envy, jealousy, and hate render alike those they possess
 - b. Deceptive celebration of differences rages more than ever because real differences are disappearing
- E. REVOLUTION COMES TO FRUITION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT
- 1. What Jesus Asks Us to **Imitate** Is His Own Desire
 - a. His goal is to become the perfect *image* of God
 - b. He invites us to imitate his own imitation
 - 2. If We Imitate the **Detached** [Unselfish, Disinterested] **Generosity of God**, Then the Trap of Mimetic Rivalries Will Never Close Over Us
 - 3. Jesus Never Scorns the Law
 - a. It is necessary to begin with prohibitions in order to avoid conflicts
 - b. Their disadvantage is that they provoke in us a mimetic urge to transgress them [cf. Rom. 7]
 - 4. The Best Way of Preventing Violence Is by Offering People the Model That Will Protect Them from Mimetic Rivalries
 - a. But we must beware of false models of the "independent self"
 - b. The more "proud" and "egotistic" we are, the more enslaved we become to our mimetic models
- F. GOODNESS OF MIMETIC DESIRE
- 1. Without Mimetic Desire There Would Be Neither Freedom Nor Humanity
 - a. Consequently we are not guided by instincts fixed on predetermined objects; it enables us to escape from the animal realm
 - 2. The Essence of Desire Is to Have No Essential Goal
 - 3. Our Culture Is the One Whose Models We Imitate at the Age When Our Power of **Mimetic Assimilation** Is the Greatest
 - 4. Our Unending Discords Are the Ransom of Our Freedom
- G. HOW JESUS PUTS US ON OUR GUARD
- 1. **Scandals** Are Responsible for the False Infinity of Mimetic Rivalry and Its Spiral of Vengeance That Fuses Violence and **Contagion**

2. Jesus Especially Warns Against the Seduction of Children into the Infernal Prison of Scandal
 - a. The more innocent the imitation, the more easily scandalized the imitator, and the more the seducer is guilty of abusing his innocence
3. Human Communities Can Not Escape Mimetic Rivalries
 - a. **Mimetic Crises** Spread without Ceasing and Become Worse

Study Questions

1. **Desire and Rivalry** What is the Biblical conception of desire and its conflicts? What kind of desire is prohibited in the Tenth Commandment? What would happen in the absence of this prohibition? What reality is acknowledged by this prohibition? What then exists at the very heart of human social relations? What does the author mean by the principle of **reciprocal escalation**? (7-9)
2. **Origins of Desire** Who or what renders coveted objects desirable? Is this value objective [as in Locke's and Marx's labor theory of value]? Is it subjective [governed by my own desires or needs]? How do objects obtain their value? (9-10)
3. **Mimetic Desire** What intensifies a forbidden desire become and why? How do I become my neighbor's rival (even his double)? What role does idolatry play? How does this cult turn to hatred? Do the resulting conflicts indicate the existence of an aggressive drive? What would render the sixth through ninth commandments superfluous? What kind of rivalry is not discouraged by the tenth commandment? (10-12)
4. **Prohibitions of Archaic Societies** If we cut through some of the confusions, what core of understanding lies behind, for example, laws prohibiting twins? Speaking of twins or doubles, what is the effect of envy, jealousy, and hate on rivals? What is happening to real differences in our societies today? [Elsewhere, Girard comments on how an undifferentiated state characterizes a society in crisis. Pitirim Sorokin's "chaotic syncretism" is a very similar concept]. (12-13)
5. **The Imitation of Christ** What revolution is signaled by the tenth commandment? What is the basis of imitating Jesus? Why does it avoid the trap of mimetic desire? What is finally unsatisfactory about the prohibitions? What did the Apostle Paul understand [in his meditations on sin and the law in the Letter to the Romans]? What model does he offer? What is really at stake? (13-15)
6. **The Essence of Desire** What is paradoxical about the "essential goal" of desire? To whom do we become indebted? What would be missing in the absence of mimetic desire? What is the ransom (the price) of our freedom? (15-16)
7. **Scandal** What does a lame person resemble? How is it that rivals are always colliding with each other's shadows? What accounts for violence and mimetic contagion? What is meant by a stumbling block? Why cannot human communities escape mimetic rivalries? (16-18)

Review

reciprocal escalation
twins (doubles)
essential goal of desire

mimetic desire
imitation of Christ
meaning of scandal

tenth commandment
Paul on prohibitions
mimetic contagion