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## René Girard: The Goodness of Mimetic Desire Study Guide, 2012

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# RENÉ GIRARD: THE GOODNESS OF MIMETIC DESIRE

## STUDY GUIDE, 2012

### Steven Alan Samson

#### Study Questions

1. Do followers of Christ renounce **mimetic desire** [imitative desire in which what is “desirable” is modeled by someone else as something good and worthwhile to have]? Girard addresses some misunderstandings here. First, human agency is real; Girard asserts **freedom of the will**. Martin Luther’s *Bondage of the Will* is mentioned in this context but this misses an important point. When Girard repeats Jesus’s statement that “scandals must happen (but woe to him who scandalizes one of these innocent ones), he is not suggesting a kind of determinism. We may choose. We have no excuse.
2. Is mimesis extremely seductive? What are our options with regard to mimetic temptation? What does Girard have to say about **renunciation**? [“Renunciation *of the will*” would not be the issue if the will were truly in bondage]. Although Girard contends the Puritans and Jansenists [like Blaise Pascal] went too far in renunciation, he rejects the notion of the 1960s counterculture that it is **forbidden to forbid** and the popular pseudo-Freudian idea that desire should not be thwarted (both notions were attacks on what the Bible teaches. See the discussion of Rom. 7 below. What does Jesus recommend to avoid violence?
3. The interviewer probes further by suggesting that mimetic desire is a **pharmakon** (a poison but also perhaps a medicine). Her question seems to allude to the Apostle Paul’s discussion of the dramatic dynamic between sin and the law in Romans 7. The law is good, but by revealing our sin, it stirs up desire (concupiscence) and sin kills us (Rom. 7:7-11). She then suggests that what must be done is not to abolish mimetic desire (as Jesus said about the law) but to fulfill it, by which she means transform or convert it. Girard believes the idea of renouncing desire is more Buddhist than Christian. What is unique about Christianity is that it wants to go back to the source: to the root problem. Here he alludes to his belief that religion and the state are, in their origin, based on violence and sacrifice. Elsewhere, he writes that the Bible reveals the truth about the things from the foundation of the world: that **founding murders** lie at the beginning of cultures, whether it is the death of Abel or Remus.
4. Girard contends that mimetic desire is an opening of oneself outward [cf. Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn on the importance of the romantic impulse]. In this regard it is related to the idea of *eros*, but it can be good or evil. Writers tend to focus on “hypermimeticism” (pathological and conflictual forms of imitative desire, such as jealousy and envy). Edith Wyschogrod’s desiring the otherness of the other resembles what Kuehnelt-Leddihn about the erotic dimension of life.

NOTE: Elsewhere, Girard contends that our behavior is not driven or determined by instinct. What are some of the implications of this difference? Being made in the image of God, we are drawn toward God or, sinfully, we pull away from God. Thus it is evident that our behavior is shaped by desires (rather than instincts) that we might classify either as worshipful or willful. As image-bearers, we are naturally drawn to images. We may be especially drawn to those images that most resemble the truth. But here we must be careful. Some images are counterfeit and

designed to lead us away from God. Mimetic desire in itself is good, but our desire may become imprinted (to use a biological term) upon the wrong object, resulting in idolatry and idol-worship, or turned in an actively destructive direction.

## Review

mimetic desire  
forbidden to forbid

freedom of the will  
*pharmakon*

renunciation  
founding murders