

***THE THIRD LEG OF REVELATION : SEMIOTIC RE-BIRTH***

ANTHONY BARTLETT

The subject of this paper is ecclesiology, but it takes a long arc toward it. I want to ask what do the insights of Girardian anthropology mean for the role and identity of “church”? What might church mean in a post-Girardian universe? But to approach a coherent answer I must first lay out what I see as crucial implications of mimetic theory for the general question of human meaning. I will frame the inquiry within the Girardian and biblical claim that the figure of Jesus has altered the constitution of the human world. After I have done this I will be able to pose some critical questions on the meaning and practice of church.

---

Let me begin with Jesus! Not religiously, but humanly. How did he make sense of his world? Of course the scriptures and his Father, they were everything for him. They gave an incomparably profound meaning to the totality of his lived world and his personal response within it. But beyond that, in relation to the public world which he had in common with others? What was his basic method of understanding the way meaning is communicated? How did he understand meaning as a mechanism? What was his practical way of making meaning? Without saying that Jesus had a theory of truth, in the Greek way, it’s easy to formulate an answer. Just looking at his parables we can see how he had an intense grasp of narrative and metaphor, that he understood communication as story and sign. Jesus’ parables, his *mashal*, his likenesses or metaphors have at once an economy and depth of tone which make them stand up as stories even today. We can say therefore that most of the time Jesus was not arguing eternal truths but producing narrative signs that “troped” or turned human meaning for his listeners. In developed Girardian terms (which we shall return to shortly) it suggests he was constructing changed human meaning.

As we know John’s gospel uses the word *semeion* (sign) to describe the wondrous deeds or miracles for which the synoptics use the word *dynamis* (power or acts of power). It is speculated that an earlier form of John’s gospel was a “Book of Signs” or *semeia*, because of the

enumeration of the first and second signs at 2.11 and 4.54. It is likely, however, that the final author had a broader concept of sign than simply miracle. In the dialogue in chapter six the overall “bread of life” discourse is probably intended as the answer to a question from the crowd, “What sign are you going to give us...so that we may see it and believe it?” (6.30a). Jesus’ crucial *sign* is a human nourishment or “bread” which is life for the human system and which he himself is. This broader interpretation—of the whole of Jesus’ life as sign—is reinforced at 20.30-31, coming after the narrative of passion, death and resurrection, where it says Jesus did many other signs but “*these* are written so that you may come to believe...” (my emphasis).

In this perspective we can say the whole of Jesus life was a sign or a semiotics, a form and a making of meaning. Returning to the synoptics we find the same question as in John, now addressed by scribes and Pharisees: “Teacher we wish to see a sign from you.” (Matthew 12.38, parallel Luke 11.29). Jesus’ answer is “No sign will be given to (this generation) except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” In Matthew the same saying is repeated twice, the second time shortened to “the sign of Jonah,” and in this instance Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and Saducees for being able to read signs of the weather (the semiotics of a red sky) but not “the signs of the times.” I believe this is a historical saying, for reasons we can’t go into here, but basically it meant that Jesus saw his fellow northern prophet’s sojourn in the depths as indicative of his own life and indeed its final sign value. The prophecy of Jonah—the biblical book—is already a *mashal*, a sign, and Jesus appropriated it in that quality. Read overall as a whole story (as Jesus, a master story-teller, surely would have read it), and not in the reductive way most commentators seem to do, it speaks of a prophet entering the depths of chaos and violence and from those depths bringing a history-shattering message of healing and peace. It’s a deep, abyssal, world-overturning sign, in the clear sense of overturning the violence both of the Ninevites and also of Israelites. To anticipate the goal of what I’m presenting, I believe, in Girardian terms, the sign of Jonah is a seeking out of the generative spaces of human meaning to reconfigure them there in their depths. Or, to steal, invert and subvert Clausewitz’ terrifying saying: if “War is a continuation of politics by other means” then the sign of Jonah is in fact the construction of humanity by other means. Jesus *is* humanity by other means.

---

But what then is a sign? I have understood it generally as a form or making of meaning, but can we investigate further so that our understanding of Jesus-as-sign is more fruitful and powerful? The philosopher of language, Ferdinand la Saussure, is seen as a seminal figure both for structuralism and deconstruction. His book *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique générale*), compiled from notes taken from his lectures between 1906 and 1911, and published posthumously in 1916, has had enormous influence.<sup>1</sup> What Saussure did was argue very successfully that there was no necessary connection between a signifier (the sound-image part of a word or sign) and the concept. Different languages use all sorts of sounds for the same concept, and then use the same sounds for different concepts. This suggested in turn that it is the sound-image in fact which makes the concept appear, not the other way round, and it does so within an already integrated system of language which, so to speak, makes room for the word. If I say the word “cat” it means all sorts of things, tabby cats, calico cats, tortoiseshell cats, big cats, little cats. We can never chase down the ideal cat. How we successfully communicate is we produce a series of differences through language, exactly as I did, that helps us generally to mean the same thing. Thus language is a closed system in which meaning is produced by internal relations of signs and difference between signs. When we speak we are always applying the whole system, not a one on one indexing. Language is an abstract system internalized by a particular speech community. Born into that community we receive their language system passively and so are able to speak with our neighbors.

Now before we vanish down the rabbit-hole of structuralism and deconstruction I should point out immediately that Girard says something very similar to this, and indeed essential to his hypothesis. I will come to it very shortly, but I want to underline my key point here: influenced by Saussure’s semiotics the “sign” today is much bigger than it used to be! We are living in a world where signs have increased their significance over pure things to the point perhaps of parity if not greater value. (This is true also in the physical sciences: one of Einstein’s many reported pithy sayings is: It is the theory which decided what can be observed...) Generally if our language has no sign for something then it does not exist. A naïve world of “things” exists

---

<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand la Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (*Open Court Classics*) (Paperback), (Open Court:1998)

for us only because the grid through which we see them and make them seeable has vanished from our sight.<sup>2</sup>

Added to this philosophical background and to back up the contemporary urgency of the sign there is the actuality of the sign-world in which we live and move and have our being. Today we are drowning in an ocean of signs. According to studies the average city dweller sees upwards of 3000 advertisements in a day.<sup>3</sup> These are signs which reference some object but it is never simply the car or the shampoo that we are being told to buy. It is a meaning internal to the whole system of those 3000 signs, and made up of beauty, success, power, status, meaning itself. Girard says—and I can't help but interject him here--“The consumption society has become a system of exchange of signs, rather than an exchange of actual objects.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, those 3000 daily signs are interchangeable with each other, and purchased by money which is another “sign” in the total system, having the same ultimate value of beauty, power, success, meaning. Thus when I walk down a city street or go into a mall I am negotiating to get a sign, not a thing. And that is not all. To these advertizing signs we have to add other media like T.V. and Internet. According to the A.C. Nielsen Co., the average American watches more than 4 hours of TV each day. I would guess that Internet is getting up in that range, perhaps as an alternative to T.V., perhaps alongside it. And Internet now has given us the possibility of living entirely within digital signs, avatars or second lives, forms of virtual existence. We hear of people who even meet, marry and divorce through these online virtual lives.

In light of all this I would suggest that our very humanity is being changed without us even noticing it. We live within a sea of images or signs, print, electronic and digital, in which our minds and relationships are being absorbed and evolved. It is a kind of hyper-semiotic evolution: as opposed to when the fish crawled out of the sea and developed lungs instead of gills, we are sinking into a sea, an ocean of signs. And instead of the lungs of metaphysics we are developing the gills of semiotics. We live and breathe signs. To underline this “sea change” I would suggest

---

<sup>2</sup> Bob Dylan's song “Man gave names to all the animals” seems to give the naïve view and fit the name to the concept: “He saw an animal up on a hill/chewing up so much grass until she was filled/He saw milk coming out but he didn't know how/ Ah, think I'll call it a cow.” But, on closer view, the first human speaker is already in language and creates the concept with the sound-image among a series of differences. Everything's in the “Ah,” the bursting forth of language.

<sup>3</sup> Lasn, Kalle in: *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America* (William Morrow & Company; 1st edition: 1999)

<sup>4</sup> Rene Girard with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion, Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: T& T Clark, 2007), 80

here a quick reflection, anticipating the final question of this presentation, which is the challenge this situation presents to traditional churches. For centuries church architecture was very much a comparable saturated sign system in the West. It constituted the dominant day-to-day human world of signs. The boast of the most economically developed Christian landscape in England's Middle Ages (Norfolk) is that from one church tower you can always see two or three other towers (659 in all to be exact), in their distinctive half-flint decoration. This level of concentration is very probably also the case in most North American cities. But unlike the structuring power of the physical churches in medieval Norfolk who cares? Who sees them as equivalently significant with those 3000 other daily signs around, and the internet on my Blackberry? Now our minds are not inundated by church architecture but by an infinity of electronic signs as an end almost in themselves.

---

What then is the role of the gospel in this ocean of signs? In Girard's latest systematic treatment of mimesis, *Evolution and Conversion, Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, he is in conversation with two other scholars Pierpaolo Antonello and João (zzhwao) Cezar de Castro Rocha. It is interesting because his partners confront Girard with contemporary scholarship in areas parallel to his hypothesis. One important area is the evolution of language and sign systems researched by evolutionary scientists and social biologists. Girard's dialogue partners say that in *Things Hidden* Girard gave a "naturalistic explanation" of the "emergence of the symbolic sphere" and "[t]his crucial aspect of the evolution of human culture has been underexplored in your theory ever since."<sup>5</sup> I very much agree. If Girard's general description of the birth signs and symbols is correct then this has huge implications for philosophy of mind which as yet no one has worked out at all. It also has huge implications for the concrete meaning of revelation which of course is deeply implicated through Girard's work, but again this is not worked out in more specific, attentive detail. That, however, is what we are trying to do a little here.

Girard may not have pursued this area, but as always he has provocative things to say. For example:

---

<sup>5</sup> *Evolution and Conversion*, 96-7

Symbolicity is essential. Scientists have the tendency to overlook the emergence of symbolism as the force behind the discontinuity between animals and humans. [Another way of saying this is they overlook the emergence of the abstract sign.] Usually, evolutionists minimize symbolism or try to derive it from purely physiological origins. For instance, the authors that I read try to explain language purely from the evolution of the brain, while the ethologists emphasize too much the common ethological roots, as they don't see the fundamental leap (if one wants to avoid saying 'break') between human and animal culture, which is indeed triggered by the emergence of the symbolic sphere. In order to have symbolical power you must have an origin of it, and to me that is the scapegoat mechanism. In this way, one can explain how the increase in symbolical power is tied to ritual. This demands what philosophers used to call a 'totality', so those things within the totality can refer to each other, and therefore acquire meaning, through indexation and through analogical, metonymical and metaphorical connections between elements of the totality.<sup>6</sup>

This seems to me very little different from what Saussure is saying. Language is a totality, and difference and significance emerge within that totality. This makes Girard join the cast of usual suspects, the postmodern thinkers who understand that we are drowning in the sign, and the enormous relevance of the sign for contemporary culture and human existence. As the title of the particular chapter in *Evolution & Conversion* says it, we are the "Symbolic Species." There is of course also a very important difference. Girard is not just giving us the synchronic character of language. He is providing a diachronic account of utmost singularity. The sign leaps out of the void as a totality ready-formed in the event of the founding murder. Nothing else makes sense like Girard's hypothesis of both the insights of contemporary semiotics and the logic of evolution, the origins of the species. In the beginning was the sign!

There is of course, therefore, a center to the symbolic system, the systemic catastrophe, as he calls it.<sup>7</sup> But progressively the center disappears. "As a matter of fact, the centre should disappear, so that communication might be developed through increasing levels of complexity." Then Girard goes on at once. "A symbolic system functions in this way. It can be decentred but it

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 104

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 109

is originally centered. That is why I don't agree with Derrida when he says that structures are *always already* decentred.”<sup>8</sup> In other words the human sign system progressively loses the sense of its center until the point where you get to a thinker like Derrida who claims as a matter of principle the system has no center. But Derrida does recognize the “other” of the system, which may very well be another way of saying the same thing.<sup>9</sup> What is essential at the moment is that the missing center is provided in the overall method of Girard's work by the revelatory power of the bible and in particular the gospel narratives of the passion and death of Jesus.

So at once we arrive at critical point or intersection of this essay. If the center of a decentered sign system returns to view as a catastrophic act of violence, but does so through the gospel message of the Crucified, what does this mean for the root dynamic of that sign system? Put another way, if the center has returned, so that via Girard's analysis we now reflectively know it, it can only be because of the infinite nonviolence and forgiveness of the Crucified—not the mythic misrecognition and collusion with violence which obtained before—and so the question arises again, but this time with more urgency, what does that mean for the human sign system? Surely it means that our totality of signs themselves are radically infected with the peace and forgiveness of the gospel, and, despite appearances, those 3000 advertisements we see daily are at some latent level a disclosure of the transforming love of Christ?

Let me try to explain more. The originating event was a murder. In *Evolution and Conversion* Girard recognizes that chimpanzees engage in forms of collective violence and ritualized hunting.<sup>10</sup> He speculates that their brain size is probably not developed enough to reach the level of the symbolic. I would add that the mimetic capacity is sufficient to produce crisis and displacement on a victim, but not enough for the victim to be one of the chimpanzee's own (I have not seen that documented), nor, alongside this, to allow for the neural empathy that can assimilate the full dimensions of the scene. For the founding murder to work as Girard describes it a chasm must be opened up in the hominid brain, a bottomless pit of terror. (This is a continuation of the critical degree of mimetic capacity exceeding instinctual drives.) The

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 107-8

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1993) for the recognition of the migrant, the stranger, and foreigner as “the other,” and the “Messiah” as the coming of the “other” in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> *Evolution and Conversion*, 105

violence of the war of all against all and the resulting murder create an absolute horror which is then immediately filled with the infinite strangeness or wonder of the resulting peace. It is a qualitatively absolute event, a singularity or black hole in the continuous space of instinct. The existential chasm must then be locked somehow in the hominid brain as the place where the symbolic can take root.

Indeed Girard tells us that the opening in the field of animal awareness creates the first non-instinctual attention, and the ritual repetition of the event is the first true symbol.<sup>11</sup> Thus the totality of the symbol which Girard insists on (and Saussure confirms) will first depend on the boundless space opened by the event. Only a boundless space can produce a totality and the infinite multiplication of meaning it allows; anything else would only add particular to particular as in partial animal attention. We have thus arrived at the birthing emotions of meaning. The space carved out in the density of animal sensation consists of the depth of these absolute emotions. They should not really be called emotions (these are culturally mediated); they are closer to the existential moods of dread and the terrible identified by Kierkegaard and Heidegger. But even those human moods are linguistically defined. Something even more primitive is at play. A New Testament name would perhaps be the powers, or elemental forces. Now—and here at length is the crucial point—those elemental moods of anger, horror and strange peace are at the very hidden root of symbolism. But if they are now also revealed or disclosed in our time because of the demystifying power of the cross, it means that somewhere at the base of our sign system there is an alternative set of primordial emotions. Only an absolute difference within the space of the absolute can isolate and identify these emotions, and to do so within our sign system—as Girard work shows—means that it is in fact working there. In short the Crucified’s release of forgiveness, nonviolence and love into the world constitutes a new singularity at the base of human meaning, a new in-filling of that absolute space first opened by murder. The very engine of symbolism and sign-making has been reconstituted and changed at its core.

Every time, therefore, we produce a sign in the post-gospel world the two primary psychic processes of meaning-creation are in flux, one with the other. The fundamental gospel dynamics of forgiveness, love and peace are infecting and transforming the traditional mythic dynamics of

---

<sup>11</sup> Rene Girard with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 99; and *Evolution and Conversion*, 107

anger, murder and death. It is possible to argue this at much greater length, but the point must stand here to allow us to move to the goal of this paper. Suffice to underline it with a passage from the New Testament, from Paul to the Galatians. I would claim that what Girard has shown us is that the shift from the elemental powers (*stoicheia*) to the Spirit is happening now not just on the individual level (if it ever really did) but at the level of meaning, of the production of signs.

While we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law [the elements], in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ (Galatians 4.3-6)

We might paraphrase, therefore: “We were enslaved to violent roots of meaning, but now God’s Son has provided us with a new semiotic birth based in infinite trust, forgiveness, love. Abba!” (Remember Dylan’s “Ah”!) We are assisting therefore at a radically new human meaning, really a new womb of meaning, a womb of new meaning. If we then look at Jesus’ actual practice, his table fellowship, his healings, his action in the temple, and above all the death and resurrection, he was already doing this, and doing it consciously. “The only sign that will be given you is the sign of Jonah,” a reconstitution of the depths. In the apocalyptic discourse in Matthew Jesus also says: “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory” (Matthew 24.30). This suggests the arrival of the sign before the actual parousia. It is the sign—the semiotic rebirth given us by Jesus—which will make the people of the earth at least mourn and regret their violence, prior to the full coming of the Son of Man.

So, finally, we can ask the question to which all this has been leading: what does this mean for “church?” Church is the body of people intentionally gathered around the person of Jesus, around his gift of the Spirit. In order to protect the at once simple and complex meaning at the heart of this gathering—i.e. the truth of revelation, a number of sources of revelatory authority have been invoked. On the side of the broad Catholic communion there is tradition, the sense of the content of faith which has been handed on by the community through the centuries. A distilled legal form of this is known as apostolic succession, the unbroken continuity of bishops

reaching back to the apostles providing guarantee of revealed truth. On the Protestant side there is of course *sola scriptura*, the “apostolic succession” of the biblical writings providing authoritative truth in the so-called plain sense of the words. The Anglican tradition adds a third leg to the stool, “reason.” This is vague as it stands: there are many and various formulations and results of “reason.” Richard Hooker, to whom the principle is first attributed, seems to have meant a logical negotiating function when certain matters were not clearly settled by scripture, or when scripture itself had to be understood or applied to a specific situation.<sup>12</sup> The Greek word normally translated reason is *logos*. Girard of course makes a classic case for the profound difference between the Greek Heraclitean *logos* and the *logos* of John. And the *logos* here is just a more traditional way of understanding Christ as meaning, viz. a principle of meaning. But understanding Jesus as a semiotic rebirth of humanity is much more urgent and systemic, and would elevate the Anglican concept of “reason” into an historical agency: the immanent role of Christ in culture, the way indeed the gospel is influencing and re-shaping the roots of human meaning.

But if this is the case—and I believe I have demonstrated from a Girardian point of view, the radical infection of our meaning by Jesus—then immediately it constitutes a contemporary source of revelation, parallel to tradition and scripture. It destabilizes, and makes enter into new and mediated relation, the twin warring authorities of scripture and tradition. Most of all it means that Christians can conceive of themselves as immanent in the world and its emerging Christ-based meaning. The sources of Christian truth include the human world itself under the impact of Christ. But how may we access that?

The phenomenon described as “emerging church” is to some degree reflective of this third principle. I will use it as a reference point without wanting to be an apologist for this as a movement in its own right. It is far too amorphous and plural to warrant any kind of general theological endorsement.<sup>13</sup> But that in its way strengthens the point. What we seem to have

---

<sup>12</sup> See Book V *The Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*: “What Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience are due; the next whereunto, is what any man can necessarily conclude by force of Reason; after this, the voice of the church succeedeth.” Cf. Richard Hooker and Richard William Church, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity* (Paperback) (BiblioBazaar, 2009)

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (London: Paternoster Press, 2004), 69-70: “An apparently spontaneous phenomenon ... without central planning, coordination, or consultation. Loose networking, shared stories, 'blogging'

represented here is a spontaneous move to cultural immanence, under an unspecified and theologically undefined attraction. Postmodernism and the radical openness of postmodern thought are normally taken as a key stimulus. But I would suggest the deeper underlying dynamic that I have outlined, derived from Girardian anthropology. It is not just an attitude of anti-systematic or non-propositional openness to the other which is at play, but a birth of meaning in the culture which is inherently Christological. General descriptions of “emerging church” use words like contextual, organic, synthetic, incarnational, and of course non-institutional. I would argue that underlying this turn to immanence is the semiotic rebirth I am describing. People with greater sensitivity to the culture, pastors, leaders, activists, suddenly realize that the figure and meaning of Christ is somehow more vitally or currently present “out there” in the world than in the interior of church organizations and buildings.

Allow me briefly to lay out then three characteristics of an “emerging church” from a mimetic theory perspective. I will not go into great detail, because the point is not another church-growth blueprint, three points to a thriving congregation. It’s to allow your own minds and creativity to work on the basis of the changed focus that I have tried to give: to begin the journey. The three characteristics are: the reading of scripture as semiotic reprogramming; the shift from violence, not as a pacifism or a morality, but as new humanity based in a Christ mysticism; and the off-center location of where this is played out, in terms of time/place/social setting.

Let me elaborate a little, in reverse order. A church grouping seeking to respond to the new meaning Christ has brought into the world will look for spaces that are themselves significant of cultural immanence. Unofficial spaces, ordinary public spaces, community centers. These spaces will feel more or less completely porous. People do not have to make any religious pre-agreement to walk in, or feel any exclusion from walking out. Examples might include: community centers, unused store fronts, private function rooms in bars, hotels, unused storehouses, theatres, clubs, people’s homes. It’s not impossible of course that an energetic creative pastor could turn the actual church building into a space of cultural immanence, through the use of media, informal placing etc. But there will still be a lot of the old signs around,

---

on websites and developing friendships were all that connected otherwise isolated initiatives ... The churches that have emerged in the past few years have been remarkably diverse ...”

including the actual building. True immanence comes in a neutral space where it can arise as a theme in and for itself.

The shift from violence is neither an anti-rivalry morality or a pacifism, although it might involve these things. It's not primarily a mode of dealing with mimetic interference in language or relationships, nor is it first of all a political issue of the avoidance of war. It is first of all a relationship with Jesus at the root of our world of meaning, neither more nor less, affecting our relationships in and as community. It will be a matter of a catechesis or catechumenate in the intra-worldly meaning of Jesus and a mystical relationship with him in this sense. Our humanity is not able to restructure itself out of its own tools and devices, only by a constant living attention to the source of new humanity.

Finally, in consonance with this, the reading of scripture, together with the celebration of sacrament, will be consciously pursued as semiotic reprogramming. This means drawing forth from scripture constantly the humanity-changing meaning it generates, rather than the metaphysical or legal formula of doctrine or salvation. It will be a pro-active and educative use of scripture and staging of sacrament, allowing the immanence of Christ to provide the interpretative frame. I would see it as equivalent to early-church catechumenate, but now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where you are not introducing people to a completely new concept, for the sake of spiritual salvation, but introducing them to a world deeply affected and changed by Christ, for the sake of a new humanity.

I think the consequences of this would be immense. It would not simply be emerging "church," but a fulfillment of the prophet's vision: *For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 11:9