

The Way to More Insight and Personal Freedom

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*À René Girard, parce que sa pensée
me reconforte et me libère*

Years ago, before I read *Des choses cachées* and *Le bouc émissaire*, I sensed that somewhere a light was shining, although I was unable to find it.

I'll never forget the evening in France when all of that changed. I was visiting friends in the village of Roussillon near Avignon, the village where Samuel Beckett and his Jewish friend, the painter Henri Hayden, among many others, had hidden from the Nazis during World War II. My French friend, a clever, well-read woman named Cécile, stepped out of her farm library, held up a French volume bearing the well-known yellow cover of the publisher Grasset, and asked me: "Sonja, have you read this?!"

The book she held up was the first edition of *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*. I noticed the title and told Cécile that I had promised myself to read it, but had not done so yet.

"C'est merveilleux," Cécile exclaimed. "That is the first thing you need to do in the morning."

The year was 1980 or 1981. It was during one of those special evenings when Cécile and I, who since 1978 have met exclusively during summer vacations, were discussing, in the animated fashion of two students, our latest discoveries in the fields of literature and philosophy. On the porch outside, you could smell lavender, mint, and rosemary. The sky, even at night, kept

its clarity, and shone with a myriad of twinkling stars. To the left, in the near distance, were the gently curving slopes of the *Monts du Vaucluse* to the east of *Mont Ventoux*.

I did not postpone the reading. I bought René's book in the good bookstore in the small city of *Apt* nearby. During the following weeks, in my house in a nearby village, I was thoroughly absorbed by it. It was as though a gentle hand lifted a veil from my eyes, accompanied by a voice that whispered: "Open your eyes; this is the way things are."

I no longer needed to continue in darkness, always asking myself the same unanswerable questions. Since I was nine years old in 1945, the same litany of questions had remained before me: "Why the Holocaust? What went wrong in Germany? Why did ten members of my family have to be killed?"

They were loving and caring people. In 1930s Europe, they were trying to make the best of an already difficult life. A further question was this: why was I saved by a young German soldier who, on an evening in Amsterdam, June 20, 1943, against all expectations, did not deport my mother and her two half-Jewish children, my sister and me, to a "camp"? My father had already been forced to work for the Germans, far away from us.

Why had the soldier, bewildered and tired of deporting crying Jewish children and their despairing parents, told my mother about strange rooms into which gas was poured so that everybody in them died? According to Nazi law, he could deport our mother but not us. At the time, a secret order had already been issued that by 1946, half-Jews were also to be deported and killed.

With a mother's logic, she had begged him to leave because at nine in the evening her children needed to sleep. And if he deported her, she would have to take her daughters with her. He refused to go. My sister and I, who had already been sleeping when the soldier came, began to cry. Clumsily, I tried to dress.

The soldier put his rifle against the wall, sat down, took my three-year-old sister on his lap, stared at the tablecloth, thought it all over, told us to stop weeping, and told my mother that his sister had children like us. He was an uncle. From time to time, he said to my mother: "Na, kommen sie doch mit . . . mit." On hearing the word "mit" I cried harder, noticing in some way that the soldier was hesitating. But my mother repeated her "no" and repeated that the children must sleep.

After some time he stood up, felt in his pockets, tried to give my mother some money and tickets for food. But she refused. He took his rifle, said: "Na, Gutenabend," and went away. We listened to the sound of his boots stepping

slowly down the three stairs, the sound of the closing door. We were saved and had survived. But what had happened?

The next day, my mother ran with me to her oldest brother, who was living nearby. Her brother was married to a non-Jewish German woman, and so, for the time being, was officially protected by her. My mother told him about the rooms with gas in them, but he laughed. "How can you believe what a German soldier tells you? Gas is for the rats!" My uncle could not believe the truth.

In May and June 1945, when the photographs of the horrors appeared in the papers, my mother understood that the German soldier had warned her, hoping that she would spread the news. After the reaction of her brother, however, she had not dared to do so.

While reading the books written by René Girard, I understood that the young German had stopped being a soldier and had remembered that little children, like his sister's children, should sleep safely in their beds with their mother at home. He disobeyed his orders. For a moment, he became himself again. He stopped being an instrument of violence. I hope that this young German soldier found the peace he surely deserved. At this writing, my mother still lives. She is ninety-five years old.

This story reflects one of the reasons why the insights of René Girard remain such a comfort to me and why they set me free.

Over the years, from the '60s on, slowly I gained some understanding of the plight of the survivors. I began to understand what had caused most of the German people to change into a wicked and murderous army of executioners that obediently followed orders. Killing had become only one of the tasks within a satanic administration.

At the age of nine, in a childish way, I tried to comfort my mother, who, since the spring and summer of 1945, at the age of 33, had had to endure the fact that almost her entire Jewish family, as well as her friends, her schoolmates, and her neighbors, had been killed. One aunt, along with her twin daughters, by some miracle came back, thanks to "Philips's" list. Yes, the famous company, whose director was another hero like Schindler, and who, like Schindler, used his economic power to protect almost four hundred Jews.

But my joyful and witty cousins, deported at the age of fourteen years, were, three years later, at seventeen, forever changed into sick and traumatized survivors, suffering from the then incurable tuberculosis; I could deduce their nightmares from their shrill voices and their nervous laugh. Only recently I learned that, ever since 1945, they have had to take tranquilizers in order

to avoid depression and sleeplessness. It is so easy to traumatize a person in a short time. But a hundred years of understanding and comforting are not enough to undo it. At best, the pain can be dimmed.

I was, and remain, a witness to their suffering, and I have tried to understand over the years the full meaning of what was said to me time and time again: that I was so lucky not to have been in a camp. Indeed I was.

As a student of the French language and of literature at the University of Amsterdam in the '60s, I started reading the first publications about the Holocaust that I encountered. I was unable to answer my perennial questions: why was it that my kind grandfather, aged 72, my intelligent aunt Judith, aged 36 (who could never realize her dream to go to the university and study psychology), and my bright and lovely blond-haired cousin Ronnie, six years old, my first love, had to be killed like vermin, like rats?

I will never forget the moment when I read, in *Le bouc émissaire*, René's analysis of *Le Jugement du Roy de Navarre*. Since the Jews who were murdered could not have caused the plague, he understood that the famous medieval poet Guillaume de Machaut, a child of his time, had succumbed to the illusions of the murderers. In a flash, I understood the projection of evil onto the Jews who became scapegoats. Why had no one before Girard understood the complexity of the madness that made murderers of the plague-stricken inhabitants of the town of Troyes? The Germans had likewise been unable to perceive that the kind, sad old man who was my grandfather had harmed no one. He had struggled for long years to accept the death of his beloved wife Sara, and, from the age of 44, had raised his five young children on his own. Neither had the Germans been able to see that my aunt Judith, whom they had thrown into a cattle car, in the dark, deafened by the sound of the rattling wheels on the way to Auschwitz, had tried to overcome her despair and had scribbled with a pencil on a piece of paper: "To all my loved ones. They threw me in here. I do not know what will happen to me. Be brave, Judith." A farmer had found her note in his meadow and brought it to the minister in his village, who then secretly brought it to my mother, way back in the spring of 1943. At our dining table, they whispered about the little piece of crumpled paper with the last precious message of Judith. More than forty years later, I was able to write a poem about her life and her last message that contained no words of hate. Faithful to Judith's wish, we have been brave.

Years passed. News of the publication of the latest book written by René became for me a regularly repeated joy. I could visit the yearly COV&R conferences, where I met so many bright and enthusiastic men and women. Some became friends. I had the honor of meeting René Girard himself and

speaking with him. I was very pleased when I was invited to become a member of the René Girard Studiekkring linked to the Blaise Pascal Institute of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. We come together four times a year to report on our personal work based on the application of the insights of René Girard.

Meanwhile, I had been able to find words for the experience of the little girl I had been, surrounded as I was by the victims of war, victims who, without understanding what they did, had traumatized me. Without perceiving clearly what had happened to me, I had struggled for years to escape their world. Slowly, I became able to write down the essence of what my grandfather, aunt, and cousin and the world that had vanished in 1942 had meant to me. I could describe the distorted world of the survivors. I published this book, *Daglicht* (Daylight), in 1993.¹ I also described the scene with the German soldier, but, to my astonishment, no one reacted especially to that page.

After reading and rereading René's first books, soon followed by other publications of his as they became available, I could find words for my situation: I, the witness, also had to be the comforter of the victims. Thanks to the insights of René Girard over the years, I could free myself from despair and anger and develop compassion. Perhaps one day I will also be able to feel compassion for the murderers "who did not know what they did." I was saved by the young German soldier who had understood what he should not do.

The insights of René brought me more understanding, which even to this day shapes my thinking and my activities. While I was reading an essay about the work of the most famous Dutch writer, Willem Frederik Hermans (1922–1995), I noted the presence of the theme of "doubles" in one of his novels, a book that for a long time now has been considered the most outstanding Dutch novel of the century. *De donkere kamer van Damokles* is about a young man who, during World War II, carries out every order given by a man who resembles him, in the belief that he is working for the Dutch Resistance.² He liquidates every person he is ordered to kill without questioning himself in any way about these acts. At a certain moment, he starts murdering, without any order, anyone who might be an obstacle. On the day of the liberation of the Netherlands, he is arrested, and he finds out that the man who gave him orders was a traitor. This traitor had vanished without leaving any trace. The young man, guilty and not guilty, is accused of the treason he did not commit; he becomes the scapegoat, and he is shot.

As if by lightning, I was struck by this thought: if there are doubles in this novel, there must be "mimesis."

Some time afterward, I published my first article about Hermans' novel, which contained not only the doubles motif but also a complex mimetic process linked to the treacherous model/rival/obstacle who was nearby. A critic I know gave the text to Hermans, then living in Paris. Great was my joy when, three days later, I received a letter in which Hermans wrote of his astonishment at my findings but also of his approval. He understood the importance of what I had discovered. I found out that in his youth he had admired precisely the literary works of Cervantes, Flaubert, and Stendhal in which René Girard had discovered mimesis, namely, *Don Quixote*, *Madame Bovary*, and *Le rouge et le noir*. Some time later, Hermans used his influence with the result that I was invited to give a lecture on my findings at the University of Utrecht. More lectures at Dutch universities followed over the years.

A correspondence with Hermans, who in the past had complained year after year that his work was not well understood and was the object of misinterpretation, developed and continued until his sudden death in April 1995. The man whose intuitions about mimesis and the functioning of the scapegoat mechanism during a mimetic crisis had escaped the Dutch literary critics, the man whose work was for many years considered particularly difficult and in the case of some texts even incomprehensible, wrote me a moving letter of farewell.

The world described by Hermans in several novels and short stories, based on mimesis by naive young people riddled with characteristics that predestine them to be scapegoats during a mimetic crisis, revealed itself during my minute analysis and close readings of his texts. There is a strong connection with the "sacrificial" world of the French postwar theater of Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, and Jean Genet, a connection also confirmed by remarks by Hermans himself, published shortly after his death. In the meantime, my study of his work had developed into a dissertation that resulted in my doctorate at the University of Amsterdam in 2007.³ To my astonishment, even in recent years my Girardian analysis of the works of Hermans has met with some skepticism from those who have never read one line written by René Girard.

No words will ever express the extent of my gratitude to René, who had the courage to go on developing his thoughts even during the years when he was despised and humiliated and was becoming a scapegoat himself.

His method of analysis has taught me also how to read between the lines, how to decipher what may be hidden beneath the surface of an erroneous interpretation or a misleading representation of facts. This reading between the lines helped me when, after the publication of my first novel in 1985, I

became a teacher of creative writing at the Writers' School of Amsterdam. I could help students become aware of the feelings and experiences that lay hidden within their own words. Often, their own anxiety has made them cover up their personal truths. We unravel these truths patiently.

As the child of a Christian father and a Jewish mother who had both said farewell to their beliefs, I am not a Christian; but René Girard's analysis of Joseph's dream and Solomon's judgment in the Hebrew Bible and of the adulterous woman in the New Testament has made me more Jewish than before. I have come to forgive the victims who cannot understand that their distorted perception of the world harmed the little girl I was. I understand better the meaning and the far-reaching importance of the annual Jewish Yom Kippur.

I am sure now that the moment when I started reading *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, in the village near Avignon, where René was born, was one of the most important moments in my life, enabling me to become the person I am today, wiser and on my way to freeing myself from the past.

I know now that, from time to time, a precious person is born, one who helps humans in their difficult efforts to gain more insight into their often wicked ways and one who shows how we as humans can free ourselves of our rivalries and of our own satanic impulse to reject what we consider to be "strange." René Girard is such a person. He shows us clearly the path that leads toward more understanding and more compassion.

Let us continue following René, as if on tiptoe.

NOTES

1. Sonja Pos, *Daglicht* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1993).
2. *The Dark Room of Damocles* (Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 2007).
3. "Dorbeck is alles! Thema's, motieven en compositie in enkele romans en verhalen van W.F. Hermans gezien vanuit de theorie van René Girard over navolging, rivaliteit en zondebok-mechanisme," PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2007.

