

'Oops! I Did It Again...' (1)

An introduction to the thought of René Girard via Britney Spears

Jim Grote

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Last summer provided me the opportunity to attend a conference at the University of Innsbruck devoted to the thought of René Girard. Theologians, psychiatrists, social scientists and professors of all persuasions lectured on the provocative, interdisciplinary theory of Girard. On the van ride from Innsbruck back to Munich where my wife and I would catch our return flight to the States, I had an engaging conversation with Father Aidan Lehané of the Holy Ghost Order, former headmaster of several Secondary Schools in Dublin. He lamented that Girard's thought was still couched in academic terminology and has yet to be made accessible to the average person or even to the average Secondary School student. While it may not be what Father Lehané had in mind, this essay is a fledgling attempt to remedy that situation.

What might René Girard have to say to Secondary School students? Or to the ordinary person not trained in theology, literary criticism, anthropology, or psychoanalytic theory? Quite a bit actually. As Girard is most well known for his theories about the violent origins of culture, to make his thought more accessible, it might be worthwhile to relate his ideas to popular culture in the West.

There is a humorous piece of graffiti in New York City that records a brief encounter of a newspaper reporter with the famous prophet of nonviolence, Mahatma Gandhi. Allegedly their brief conversation went as follows: Reporter: 'Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western culture?' Gandhi: 'I think it would be a good idea.'

If Gandhi had been observing Western culture in the summer of 2003, his comment would no doubt have referred to the televised, hyper-exposed and often reproduced kiss between Madonna and Britney Spears. The ubiquitous nature of the reporting mirrors the scandalous nature of the kiss. But, from a Girardian perspective, the scandal of the kiss has less to do with the pseudo-lesbian desire of the singers than the frustrated desires of the fans who make the scandal possible.

To help interpret the public's fascination with this kiss as well as to understand the violent undercurrents lurking beneath the surface of popular culture, the text of one of Britney Spears' biggest hit songs, 'Oops, I Did It Again,' is particularly useful.

Oops! I did it again

I played with your heart, got lost in the game
Oh baby, baby.
Oops! You think I'm in love
That I'm sent from above
I'm not that innocent.

Ms Spears condenses a number of Girard's books into a few snappy lyrics.

If one song, like one picture, is worth a thousand words, then Ms Spears condenses a number of Girard's books into a few snappy lyrics.

Girard's first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1965) provides a detailed description of 'getting lost in the game' of deceit and desire. Among five major novelists (Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust and Dostoevsky) Girard discovers a triangular structure to desire where the protagonists struggle with the growing realization that their deepest erotic aspirations are mere imitations of a lustful model or rival – hence the infamous love triangle. Or, as they say in Secondary School, 'It's either feast or famine.' You either have no romantic attachments or suddenly you're faced with several. Witness the basic plot of the T.V. show, *Dawson's Creek* and its countless teen movie knockoffs. The modern journalistic jargon of 'serial monogamy' and 'starter marriages' gives another contemporary example of the novelistic infidelity Girard examines.

Girard's latest work, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (2001), provides a detailed description of that arch-villain Satan who 'plays with our hearts.' Moving from an analysis of sexy classic novels to a book about Satan may seem like a stretch. But it was the recurring patterns of seduction in the novel that led Girard to take the idea of Satan seriously – not as a prudish rejection of the world or a projection of childhood fears, but as an explanatory (one is tempted to say, scientific) principle.

In fact, Girard argues that Satan is not a person at all, but a hollow abstraction, an 'absence of good' (St Augustine). Since the devil has no *being*, he 'must clothe himself in the semblance of being' and 'must act as a parasite on God's creatures.' The devil is 'totally mimetic, which amounts to saying *nonexistent as an individual self*' (Girard, 2001, p. 42). What does Girard mean by mimetic and how does this relate to the *nonexistent* devil?

Girard argues that Satan is not a person at all, but a hollow abstraction, an 'absence of good' (St Augustine).

Mimetic simply means imitating, copying or keeping up with the Joneses. As we shall see, imitation goes hand-in-hand with the triangular structure already alluded to. The devil is the personification of this structure. Possession by the devil need not entail the violent drama of Linda Blair projectile vomiting green pea soup in the *Exorcist*, or Jesus sending a legion of devils

into a herd of swine that rush into the sea to drown. Unfortunately for the histrionic among us, ‘possession’ tends to be a blander, everyday experience.

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We become possessed when we are discontent with how God made us; when we desire to be like another person – someone more dashing, glamorous, athletic or intellectual. Or, perhaps, when we are obsessed with our possessions. 12-Step literature refers to this state of possession by the name, addiction. According to this spiritual tradition, addiction can take many forms — alcohol, drugs, work, success and competition, money, food, sex, exercise, cosmetic surgery, excessive intellectualizing, religious legalism, general perfectionism. You name it; the list is endless.

This strange state of possession exhibits a kind of bi-polar desire. One pole is a free-floating desire that cannot attach to any object – unfocused desire. Examples might include anyone from a harmless flirt to a hardcore womanizer. The other pole is an obsessive desire that can only focus on one object – hyper-focused desire. This can entail anything from a jealous boyfriend to a compulsive stalker. Actually thing-possession and people-possession go together in Girard’s system. *We envy things because we envy the people who possess those things.*

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In order to unravel Girard’s insights, I will summarize five concepts integral to his system: 1. Satan. 2. Seduction. 3. Scapegoating. 4. Scandal. 5. Spirit.

SATAN AND A SERPENT’S TALE

It is probably not too strong a statement to say that, for Girard, envy is the original sin. ‘God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world’ (Wisdom 2:23-24). The famous story of Adam and Eve provides a dramatic account of how envy operates.

The drama begins in Genesis 2:18 when God tells Adam that it is not good for him to be alone – Adam needs a helper. In search for a helper, God creates a host of animals in what proves to be a fruitless attempt to provide a suitable companion for Adam (2:20). So, God creates Eve out of Adam’s flesh, and Adam is finally pleased (2:23). Having been passed over for promotion, the serpent is naturally envious of Eve’s special place in Adam’s life. The serpent initiates the drama of triangular desire by awakening Eve’s desire to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (3:6, 13). The serpent, through its own envy of Eve’s status as Adam’s helper arouses Eve’s envy of God’s status by assuring Eve

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The silence of the serpent speaks volumes.

that the fruit will make her like God (3:5).

None in this story are content to be as God created them. Traditional male-oriented interpretations of the fall that assert that Eve caused Adam to sin distort the biblical idea of the fall. Both Adam and Eve are infected by the desire of the serpent; the chronological sequence of the desire is insignificant. As the serpent is the subtlest of animals according to the Scriptures (3:1), the serpent's sin of envy is the subtlest of sins. Envy is an inherently confusing phenomenon since it entails *both* admiration and resentment. Jean-Paul Sartre describes this fundamental human passion succinctly. 'The best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project it is to be God.... Man fundamentally is the desire to be God' (Sartre, 1957, p. 63).

When God discovers Adam and Eve's disobedience, the accusations start flying. Adam and Eve rightly confess that someone else caused their desire. Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. Adam goes so far as to blame God for creating Eve and causing all these troubles in the first place. The silence of the serpent speaks volumes. While the serpent is never promoted to the position of Adam's helper, it enjoys plenty of poetic justice watching the downfall of Adam and Eve.

Just as the actors in this drama imitate each other's desire, they imitate each other's accusations. 'The devil made me do it!' '[God] said, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me and I ate"' (Gen 3:11-13).

The story of Adam and Eve shows how quickly 'acquisitive' desire mutates into 'accusatory' desire. Both processes reveal Satan's complementary roles of *seducer* and *adversary*, or more accurately, seductive and adversarial mechanism (Girard, 2001, p. 33).

It is important to note two things about this story. First, the seduction in the garden is not just about physical desire and sexual lust. Modern Scripture scholars have uncovered countless sexual metaphors in the garden story, the most obvious being the forbidden fruit itself. As Ronald Veenker points out, 'Fruit is the reproductive part of the plant – its sexual organs' (Veenker, 1999-2000, p. 58). However, while the forbidden fruit can legitimately be interpreted as a sexual object, given the serpent's insistence on the special powers of the fruit (God-like status, the knowledge of good

and evil), the seduction is clearly more 'metaphysical' than physical. The desire exposed in the Book of Genesis is spiritual competition.

Second, although the serpent's role of accuser is indirect, the serpent orchestrates the entire drama. And the title, 'accuser,' is technically accurate. The Hebrew, Satan, means 'the accuser before a tribunal,' in modern parlance the prosecuting attorney, the one responsible for proving the guilt of the defendant. Later biblical traditions (Rev 12:9 and 20:2) identify the serpent of Genesis with the Satan in the Book of Job whose role there is to prove Job's guilt (cf. Job 1:6 ff.). (The devil or *diabolos* in the Gospels is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Satan). By contrast, the Holy Spirit in the Gospels (*parakletos* in Greek) derives from the technical term for the attorney responsible for proving the innocence of the defendant.

Interestingly, Spears blends her roles of seducer and adversary into one role when she warns her star-crossed lover that she's not sent from above (i.e. she ain't the Holy Spirit), she's not that innocent. She in effect accuses her admirer of naiveté. He can't blame her for his predicament; he only has himself to blame. (*to be continued*)

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'Oops! I Did It Again...' (2)

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SEDUCTION AND MIMETIC DESIRE

No modern novelist expresses the problem of desire more succinctly than George Bernard Shaw. As he says, 'There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it.' To the extent that people are unsure of what will make them happy, they tend to experiment with their desire by focusing (often unconsciously) on objects that other people already desire. As the opening chapters of *Genesis* show, desire is contagious; people catch it like a cold. The erotic Gucci advertisements for Envy perfume portray this contagion in picture perfect form. In fact, the entire advertising industry is founded on the exploitation of borrowed desire. According to advertising guru, Jerry Thomas: 'Advertising can create a model people wish to identify with and imitate. The modeling instinct is one of the most powerful impulses in the psyche. Children model after their parents. Employees model after their bosses. We all imitate people we admire. Advertising can create images that trigger the modeling instinct. The Marlboro Man is a classic example.'¹

Advertising works because the structure of human desire is mimetic. How else can you account for massive consumer economies that generates mountains of 'status' products serving little or no physical need? This mimetic structure reveals what attorney and Girard scholar, John McGeeney, refers to as the 'dark side' of advertising.

The modeling instinct is particularly intense in love triangles. Consider the modern romantic novel, *Gone With the Wind*. Scarlett O'Hara is an earlier incarnation of the coquettish Britney Spears. The beginning of the story portrays her obsession with having the one man in her cloistered world that she cannot have — Ashley Wilkes. Scarlett's interest in Ashley reaches its apex after she discovers he is engaged to another woman. Scarlett professes her adoration of Ashley in an attempt to get him to call off his engagement with Melanie. This *ménage à trois* of Scarlett, Ashley, and Melanie awakens the desire of the rogue, Rhett Butler, for Scarlett. Ashley is the 'respectable' model that sparks Rhett's competitive desire to win the heart of an aristocratic woman. There's more than a little class conflict behind the scenes. Each movement of desire reproduces another.

1. Thomas, Jerry. "Why Advertising Works," *Business First* (September 9, 1996).

The modeling instinct is particularly intense in love triangles.

2. Girard, Rene. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 95

3. *ibid* p. 298

Like Britney, Scarlett is not really in love with a person but with the drama of being in love. Nor is the desire represented by Britney primarily physical or biological. As Girard says, 'Human desire consists of the grafting of mimesis on to instinctual [or biological] patterns and the over-activation, aggravation, and disorganization of the latter.'² Seduction is like a poker game where physical urges take the place of playing cards. In modern parlance, someone who is good at this game is called a 'player.' For a player, the thrill is in the chase. Girard explicitly likens seduction to gambling. 'Desire has its own logic, and it is a logic of gambling. Once past a certain level of bad luck, the luckless player does not give up; as the odds get worse, he plays for higher stakes.'³

Both poker and seduction involve a strategy of bluffing. The experienced seducer plays hard to get, making the other partner show his or her cards (that is, his or her desire) first. Whoever appears god-like, self-sufficient, and 'poker-faced,' making the other partner grovel, is the winner. (Note that while physical desire entails a loss of self-control, seductive desire seeks to control and manipulate someone else's desire.) As Ms Spears begins her song: 'I think I did it again, I made you believe we're more than just friends.' After defeating her lover, she confesses that she fell out of love with him because she got lost in the game itself.

The danger in the game of seduction is that the lover who first says 'I love you' risks having his or her desire imitated by the beloved. If the beloved mimics the desire of the lover and translates that statement into 'I love myself,' then the beloved will conclude that the lover is unworthy of his or her affections. The first confession of the lover bids up the value of the beloved to the point where the beloved becomes an unattainable obstacle to fulfillment. As Groucho Marx describes this dilemma, 'How could I be the member of a club that would have me for a member?'

The structure of mimetic desire involves a triangle of: i) the object of desire, ii) the self or subject who desires the object, and iii) the model who elicits the subject's desire for the object of desire in the first place.

object of desire.

model/obstacle subject/disciple

Seduction does not always require three players. Two may suffice, with the resulting triangle of the lover, the beloved and the beloved's body. The lover's desire is aimed at the body of the beloved (or

4. Girard, Rene. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1965, p. 159

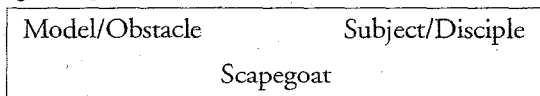
model). As soon as the lover reveals her desire for possession of the beloved's body, the beloved (model) copies that desire. 'He will desire his own body; in other words, he will accord it such value that to yield possession would appear scandalous to him.'⁴

Whenever people borrow desire, they remain in debt to the model of that desire. The desiring subject is the debtor and the model is the creditor. The subject 'owes' his or her desire to the model for it is the model that attracts the interest of the subject in the first place. And, like all creditors, the model cannot resist the urge to charge 'interest' on this desire. In effect, the model and subject become co-dependent on each other's desire and therefore obstacles to each other's desire. This co-dependency leads to a bitter frustration that seeks an outlet.

SCAPEGOATING AND GOSSIP

5. Grote, Jim and John McGeeney. *Clever as Serpents: Business Ethics and Office Politics*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997, p. 55.

One outlet is the phenomenon of scapegoating, which can be described as a kind of reverse triangle.⁵ While the conflict of the model and disciple cannot be resolved by sharing the same object of desire (which is the source of the conflict), it may be resolved or at least mitigated by sharing the same object of revulsion – the scapegoat. *Nothing unites people like a common enemy*. Hence the following triangle:



In an unconscious act of transference, the frustrated desire of the model and disciple finds satisfaction in an expendable victim who can be blamed for some extraneous problem, thus temporarily eclipsing the inexplicable conflict between model and subject.

This strange movement from imitative desire to accusatory desire results from the double bind that the disciple and model find themselves locked into. Since desire is mediated by the desire of another, conflict is inevitable. The disciple and model are jealous of one another at the same time that they need one another to bolster their own desire. For example, while Britney (the ultimate model) may be flattered by one of her teenage disciple's attention to her boyfriend (the object of desire), what happens when the boyfriend is equally flattered? In effect Britney imposes a double bind on her teenage 'wannabees.' She sends out mixed messages that say: (a) 'Imitate me! Desire what I desire!' and (b) 'Don't imitate me! Don't appropriate my object!' She wants her fans to aspire to her status, but not to the extent that they become successful competitors like Christina Aguilera.

Freud's famous Oedipus complex of mother (object of desire), son (subject) and father (model) reflects the same double bind. T.V. sitcoms regularly poke fun at Freud's notion that all boys want to kill their father and sleep with their mother. But behind this bizarre notion lurks a hint of triangular desire. The son's natural identification with his father puts him in a 'double bind.' He must imitate his father in order to mature, and he must not imitate his father in order to mature. The son's father sends him double-messages. 'You ought to be like your father.' And at the same time, 'You may not be like your father' (i.e. you can't sleep with your mother).

An employee that is too productive threatens the boss's status.

The double bind also forms the heart of office politics. The employee must imitate the boss in order to succeed, and the employee must not imitate the boss in order to succeed. An employee that is too productive threatens the boss's status. The boss is both the ticket to the top and the major obstacle to the employee's promotion or success. Similarly a productive employee helps the boss climb the ladder, whereas an unproductive employee reflects badly on the boss. The boss is constantly sending out double-messages to the employee: 'Be assertive. Don't be assertive.' 'Take initiative. Don't make a mistake.' 'Make me look good. Don't upstage me.' 'Take risks. Follow the rules.'

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In extreme cases, gay people have been murdered as part of this process.

The scapegoat functions as the release valve for all the pressure caused by these double binds. If two jealous guys cannot share the same girlfriend, they can at least share the same scapegoat (e.g. a revulsion toward homosexuals). The girlfriend drives them apart; the homosexual helps them to bond. In extreme cases, gay people have been murdered as part of this process. Another scapegoating example might be when several girls turn on one of the members of their group because of their mutually frustrated desire to achieve Britney-like status. As Mary Pipher says in her best-selling book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*: 'Many girls can describe a universal American phenomenon – the scapegoating of girls by one another. Girls punish other girls for failing to achieve the same impossible goals they are failing to achieve.'⁶

6. Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994, p. 68.

This phenomenon is so widespread that anti-bullying measures are now the rage in the American school system. Witness the tragedy at Columbine and other schools where bullied members repay their aggressors with gunfire. The phenomenon of bullying now has an official definition from the American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org). It is defined as a 'form of aggression in which one or more children repeatedly and intentionally intimi-

date, harass or physically harm a victim who is perceived as unable to defend himself or herself.'

Just as demonic possession need not be as extreme as its portrayal in *The Exorcist*, scapegoating need not be as extreme as the bullying that provoked the Columbine massacre. In fact, a subtler version of scapegoating can be witnessed in the everyday phenomenon of gossip. Gossip is a particularly appropriate example of scapegoating in Girardian thought because the Greek word, *diabolos*, used to translate the Hebrew Satan, originally referred to a slanderer or false accuser. The devil is the ultimate gossip. According to sociologist Donna Eder, gossip can be defined as 'evaluative talk about a person who is not present.'⁷ Since the person being gossiped about is not present, he or she is an easy vehicle for any group's negative energy. Absent people are safe targets – they are unable to defend themselves.

Ironically, the very secrecy of the gossip mill makes it a more powerful means of communication. Many seminars on how to supervise employees encourage managers to 'compliment your employees behind their backs' — a more potent compliment than complimenting them to their faces. Complimenting people behind their backs magnifies the compliment because the person being complimented senses the approval of a larger unseen audience. More people are involved in second-hand communication than in first-hand communication.

Similarly, criticizing people behind their backs magnifies the criticism, because the person being criticized senses the denunciation of an unseen and critical audience. Second-hand criticisms are more threatening than first-hand criticisms because the victim of gossip never knows how many people shared the criticism. Gossip betrays a triangular structure of:

- i) the victim being gossiped about,
- ii) the accuser originating the criticism, and
- iii) the messenger transmitting the insult second-hand.

The messenger mimics the accuser by relaying the negative message. The same basic structure is at work in the biblical garden story where Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent for their problems.

Direct communication is inherently more subdued than indirect communication. If you tell another man's wife that you are in love with her, there is no scandal because she is free to deal with the situation directly. If you tell your friends that you are in love with

7. Eder, Donna and Janey Lynne Enke, 'The Structure of Gossip,' *American Sociological Review* 56 (August 1991), p. 494.

another man's wife, then the object of your affections must not only deal with you but with the rumor mill you started. The pledge of your affection suddenly has an entire audience behind it. You have put the object of your affection 'on stage.'

8. *ibid* p. 495

In her studies of adolescent gossip, Eder observes that, 'The first response to an initial evaluation in a gossip episode strongly influences subsequent responses.'⁸ Adolescents may feel comfortable challenging the negative remarks by one individual, but not by a group. Therefore, the second remark in a gossip episode is crucial. If the second remark challenges the initial denunciation, other negative remarks tend to die off. If the second remark confirms the original denunciation, the group circles in for the kill and other negative remarks about the absent victim are almost impossible to stop. Paradoxically, Eder notes, 'Responses by even low-status group members can have considerable influence on the course a gossip episode takes.'⁹ This second-response technique can be an invaluable tool in lessening scapegoating whether in school cliques or in the workplace. (*to be concluded*)

9. *ibid* p. 485

'Oops! I Did It Again...' (3)

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This is the third and last article under the title, *Oops! I Did It Again*.

SCANDAL AND DESIRE

Scandalous desire has less to do with the skimpiness of Ms Spears' clothing than with the obsession of her fans. Any 'scandal' involving Spears depends on her fans' ambivalent feelings of admiration and resentment toward the model of their desire. According to Girard, the biblical notion of scandal provides the elusive link between the triangle of desire and the scapegoating triangle.

In the gospels, Jesus uses the Greek word, *skandalon*, in several perplexing statements. For example, he says that it would be better for a person to have a millstone hung around his neck and drowned in the sea than to scandalize a small child (Mt 18:5). Or consider his odd response to Peter's natural reaction to Jesus' prediction of his future suffering and death. Peter simply says, 'God forbid!' And Jesus replies, 'Get behind me Satan, you are a *skandalon* to me' (Mt 16:22-23). In yet another passage, Jesus tells his disciples that one of the main purposes of his teaching is to keep them from being scandalized (Jn 16:1). What is Jesus talking about?

The word *skandalon* means stumbling block, obstacle, snare or trap. A passage in the Hebrew Scriptures warns the faithful not to curse deaf people or put a stumbling block in front of blind people (Lev 19:14). Obviously either of these actions would be particularly nasty tricks to play on disabled people. A variation of the word *skandalon* refers to the stick or support in a trap on which the bait is placed, and which, when touched, makes the trap shut. In the Bible Satan is often portrayed as a setter of traps (e.g. tempting Jesus in the wilderness or tempting Adam and Eve).

But, as we mentioned earlier, Satan is not really a person but a metaphor for the trap of mimetic desire (the trap, the bait and the stick that supports the trap all rolled into one). For Girard, this trap is the futile game of mimetic desire. 'The *skandalon* is the obstacle/model of mimetic rivalry; it is the model in so far as he works counter to the undertakings of the disciple and so becomes a source of morbid fascination' (Girard, 1987, p. 416).

Mimetic desire is a trap because the model of desire inevitably turns into the primary obstacle to that same desire. Think of Spear's teenage fans and the 'double bind' she places them in.

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Behind Britney's snake-entwined, naval-exposing celebration of desire prowl two subtle prohibitions. To her male fans, she warns: *desire me, but don't touch me*. As John McGeeney observes, the stage is a sacred space or sanctuary to which fans are denied access. Bodyguards function as high priests protecting the inaccessible model of desire from the hysteria of the crowd. To her female fans, she cautions: *Be like me, but don't upstage me*. In the rare cases where a fan actually succeeds in achieving rock star status, the fan becomes a threat. Girard wryly observes that if we do not submit to the 'obstacle of prohibition' (i.e. thou shall not . . .), we will inevitably end up submitting to "the obstacle of the model" (Girard, 2001, p. 33). There is no free lunch in the world of desire.

As odd as it sounds, there is a prudish streak that is essential to Ms Spears' polymorphous sexuality. Her prudishness coupled with her promiscuousness creates a high-voltage scandal generator. Models attract scandals like lights attract moths. Everything Ms Spears does is a scandal. She dresses provocatively and she makes tons of money. But she's still the girl next door according to her family. She dates Justin Timberlake. She breaks up with Justin Timberlake. She's a virgin. She's no longer a virgin.

In general, Britney's unattainable status makes her more goddess than girl. Most girls, try as they might, won't achieve her status. But, consider a model that is closer to home and the violence of desire becomes clearer. For example, if the most popular girl in class stumbles in some social *faux pas*, she becomes an irresistible target for her envious admirers because they have a real shot at her status. As one reporter said about American celebrities, 'The only thing people love more than an idol is a fallen idol.'

The scandal of desire is the frustrated dream of divinity that goes with mimetic desire – the dream of being like Another. In Britney's musical confession she alludes to suffering from this scandal herself:

You see my problem is this
I'm dreaming away
Wishing that heroes, they truly exist.

There's no better description of the obsessive-compulsive nature of this temptation than the title of Ms Spear's song, 'Oops! I did it again.'

SPIRIT AND TRINITY

In conclusion, where do we find a solution to this eternal temptation to be like the gods? According to Girard, there is a creative

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and a redemptive side to mimetic desire. Girard clearly states, 'Mimetic desire is intrinsically good' (Girard, 2001, p. 15). After all, it is mimetic desire that draws people together in the first place and it is the mimetic aspect of desire that distinguishes human desire from animal instinct. No less an authority than the Greek philosopher Aristotle observed 2500 years ago, 'Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world and learns first by imitation.' The problem is not imitation, but acquisitive imitation.

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For Girard, the alternative to violent human triangles is the selfless and self-emptying divine triangle, the Trinity — a noncompetitive community of three distinct persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus gives his disciples a sermon on the Trinity in John 14-16. However, other passages in the gospels show this sermon apparently fell on deaf ears (at least until after the Resurrection). If anything, Jesus' continual reference to his Father in heaven may have provoked a bit of jealousy among his disciples.

The gospels abound with stories of constant jockeying for position among the disciples. All three synoptic gospels relate the story of the disciples arguing over which of them would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Mt 18:1-4; Mk 9:33-37; Lk 9:46-48). According to theologian, Raymund Schwager, behind this petty bickering among the disciples lies a more profound envy — the envy all the disciples have of Christ's relationship to his Father. Just as the serpent envies Eve's special place in Adam's life, they envy Jesus' special place in the Father's life.

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In each of these bickering episodes, Jesus pulls a child within their midst and admonishes them to become *imitators* of such little children, that is imitators without envy. The life of the Trinity is a life of pure imitation that does not produce rivalry. The Son is the perfect image of the Father, the perfect imitator of the Father. There is no jockeying for position, no hint of Jesus looking for a promotion and letting the Father take a turn at the dirty work. In fact he tells the disciples, 'The Father is greater than I' (Jn 14:28). As theologian and Girard scholar, James Alison, comments, "The Father and the Son are constituted by a simultaneous giving and imitating. It is this imitative love whereby the Father gives his likeness and the Son, who is that given likeness, imitates the Father, and the Father imitates the Son, and the Son the Father, and so on *ad infinitum* — which is traditionally called *perichoresis*" (Alison, 1998, p. 52).

In Jesus' sermon on the Trinity, the third person — the *parakletos*, the advocate or the defence attorney — proves to be the embodiment of the love between the Father and the Son. Jesus says that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends (Jn 15:13) and only after he provides an example of this love does the Advocate come on the scene so that humanity is not left orphaned. To quote James Alison again: 'Jesus' self-giving up to death is the exact image of the creative self-giving between Father and Son which eternally brings forth the Holy Spirit' (Alison, 1998, p. 201).

The Spirit then is the product of the imitative desire between the Father and Son. Odd as it may sound to modern ears, the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit or Advocate, is the fulfillment of desire. On the other hand, the non-person, Satan or the Adversary, is the frustration of desire. It may be a long road from an analysis of popular culture to a discussion of *perichoresis*, but Girard has provided the road signs for those willing to make the journey.

Introducing Girard by starting with images of Britney locking lips with Madonna is actually consistent with Girard's spiritual approach. Far from being a prudish rejection of desire, Girard's persistent probing into the nature of desire turns the romantic assumptions of popular culture upside down. His investigations follow a thesis first elaborated by the Eastern Church that proved to be highly unpopular in the West — that of *Satan duped by the Cross*. As he describes it, 'Christ is compared to the bait the fisher puts on the hook to catch a hungry fish, and that fish is Satan' (Girard, 2001, p. 149). Girard's thought itself proves to be subtle bait that provides a fascinating introduction to Christian spirituality for skeptical students and others currently turned off to religion in general. (*concluded*)

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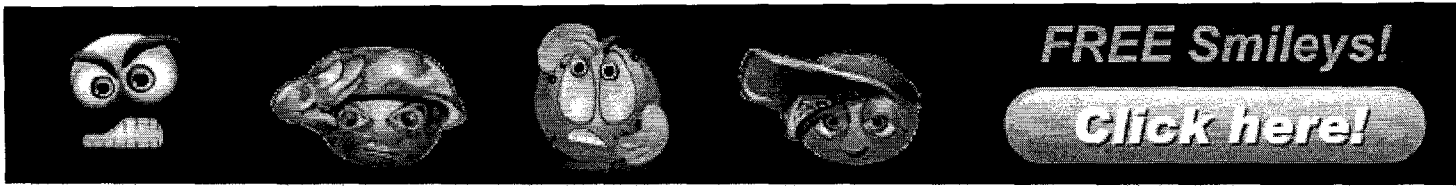
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BRITNEY SPEARS LYRICS

"Oops! ...I Did It Again"

yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah
Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah

I think I did it again
I made you believe we're more than just friends
Oh baby
It might seem like a crush
But it doesn't mean that I'm serious
'Cause to lose all my senses
That is just so typically me
Oh baby, baby

[CHORUS:]

Oops!...I did it again
I played with your heart, got lost in the game
Oh baby, baby
Oops!...You think I'm in love
That I'm sent from above
I'm not that innocent

You see my problem is this
I'm dreaming away
Wishing that heroes, they truly exist
I cry, watching the days
Can't you see I'm a fool in so many ways
But to lose all my senses
That is just so typically me
Baby, oh

[Repeat CHORUS]

Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah
Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah

"All aboard"

"Britney, before you go, there's something I want you to have"
"Oh, it's beautiful, but wait a minute, isn't this...?"
"Yeah, yes it is"
"But I thought the old lady dropped it into the ocean in the end"
"Well baby, I went down and got it for you"
"Oh, you shouldn't have"

Oops!...I did it again to your heart
Got lost in this game, oh baby
Oops!...You think that I'm sent from above
I'm not that innocent