“What had seemed bitter for me had turned into sweetness”: Exploring Early Franciscan understandings of scandal and René Girard’s concept of Skandalon.

Introduction

Our contemporary ecclesial context is one marked by scandals. ‘Scandal’ carries a variety of meanings which may include ‘a stumbling block to faith; anything that brings discredit upon religion; injury to reputation; a false imputation; malicious gossip; slander; a disgraceful fact, thing or person; a shocked feeling’. A traditional category in moral theology and in canon law, ‘scandal’ has been, for several decades largely neglected in theological discourse. Even as the theological concept of scandal has been in decline, the problem of scandals within the Church has increased. At the basic level of defining or identifying what gives scandal there is disagreement.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines scandal as ‘an attitude or behaviour which leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbour’s tempter. He damages virtue and integrity; he may even draw his brother into spiritual death. Scandal is a grave offence if by deed or omission another is deliberately led into a grave offence’. The manifest avoidance of inclusive language in the Catechism’s definition could itself be viewed as scandalous. The nature of scandals within Church and society is not, therefore understood univocally. The meaning of the term ‘scandal’ has been stretched well beyond the traditional categories of moral theology and its use in the ecclesial context has become imprecise, ambiguous and problematic.

The New Testament concept of skandalon carries the sense of a stumbling block, a ruse, a snare or a trap. It may indicate a trap or stumbling block which leads a brother or a sister into sin. It may also indicate a trap or stumbling block which I construct for myself; a trap of my own devising. Traditionally, moral theology has distinguished between active and passive scandal. Scandal may be passive, if one takes offence from conduct which is good under every respect. This was the case of the Pharisees, who were scandalised over the doctrine and beneficent activity of Jesus.

In this paper I wish to draw attention to the risks of ‘being scandalised’ and to explore the question of desire as it relates to scandal.

Early Franciscans and the Question of Scandal.

The Early Franciscan Tradition and the recent work of cultural theorist René Girard provide us with structures and contexts in which we may explore the passive and subjective aspect of...
scandal: ‘being scandalised’. Of particular interest is the work of Franciscan scholar Joseph Chinnici.\(^5\) Chinnici, an acknowledged authority on the Early Franciscan movement, was Minister Provincial of the Franciscan Province of Santa Barbara, California from 1988 to 1997, a period during which revelations of historical sexual abuse within the Province became known and were the source of egregious scandal and hurt. In his leadership role within the Church, Chinnici witnessed what he describes as ‘a hardening in the divergent sides represented by victim advocacy groups and those within the leadership of the Church fearful of public scandal and committed to the protection of its hierarchical structures’. Questions of scandal, public humiliation and shame prompted Chinnici’s return to the Franciscan sources to begin a reflection on what Chinnici described as a much deeper and more general struggle, ‘touching the affective level, the level of desire, love and the will’.\(^6\) Our capacity to relate and to form trusting and respectful relationships which can withstand the occurrence of scandals is fundamentally a matter of our desires.

A result of the recent abuse scandals, Chinnici notes, was the sundering of relationships of trust within the Church. A healthy reciprocal exchange between the hierarchical structures of Church and society and participative communal structures were impaired or undone as scandals emerged. As scandals multiplied and deepened a situation developed wherein the language and practice of mediation disappeared.\(^7\) In his search for shared ethical spaces which can help heal and reconcile a scandalised community, Chinnici looked to the Franciscan tradition of *fraternitas*/fraternity. Early Franciscan theology assumes the desire for fraternity, understood in the context of Christ as brother and further assumes the co-existence of vertical and horizontal, hierarchical and participative structures within fraternity. The desire for fraternity, to love and to belong is endangered by a rival desire for power as personal possession, for personal aggrandizement and domination of others and, for St. Francis, ‘not to know this drive was not to know oneself as a penitent’.\(^8\) As Chinnici notes, being a penitent in the Franciscan model involved a constant attending to this desire for power, and inspired the emergence of a variety of con-fraternities, shared, mediated spaces between clergy and laity, rich and poor, learned and uneducated, where all could learn self-mastery and ‘constructively intersect their lives and concerns’.\(^9\)

**René Girard.**

Chinnici’s reflection grounds the problem of scandal in the affective categories of Franciscan theology, specifically our desires. This focus on desire has resonances in the work of the French-American cultural theorist René Girard. Girard’s mimetic theory gives a central role to desire, connecting desire and being. Beginning in the field of literary criticism, Girard consistently contested the idea of *innate* desires, which he associated he associated with the ‘romantic lie’ in literature. Great literature and great writers understand that desire is essentially mediated or borrowed. I always desire what others desire and I desire it *because* the other desires it. The passage from the ‘romantic lie’ to the novelistic truth involves a

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\(^6\) Ibid, p. 91.

\(^7\) Chinnici, p. 95.

\(^8\) Ibid, p. 108.

\(^9\) Ibid.
painful existential collapse or, properly speaking, a conversion, on the part of the author. In this conversion the author comes to accept that his or her desires were always borrowed. We borrow other’s desires in the furtive and anxious hope of shoring up our own fragile sense of being. Our fragile identities are constructed by our constant raids on the desires of others and ‘in a world that places a premium on originality and authenticity, the most shameful thing for the Self may be to admit that it “imitates constantly, on its knees before the mediator”’.10

Girard extended his hypothesis to account for the survival of our species, in spite of our potentially self-destructive form of desiring. In the advanced stages of mimetic rivalry when, potentially, entire communities are drawn into a frenzy of rivalrous desire, the accumulated conflicts are transferred onto a random and dispensable person or group; the scapegoat. In expelling the scapegoat, the community is miraculously released, temporarily, from the mimetic frenzy which threatened its existence. When the community exhausts its accumulated conflicts on the random surrogate victim, it achieves a new social differentiation, a new story or myth to explain who they are. This identity, Girard explains, is necessarily fragile and insecure, since it amounts to the arbitrary differences the community adopts in the aftermath of a violent expulsion and rests on the uncertain foundations of a surrogate victim’s tomb.

Girard came to use the New Testament term *skandalon* to describe the early stages of mimetic conflict when a model and a subject borrow desire: the subject becomes fascinated by the model and borrows his or her desire in the hope of securing, not merely the desired object, but the greater being associated with the model. The model, in Girard’s words, ‘shows his disciple the gate of paradise and forbids him to enter with one and the same gesture’.11 In this way desire becomes the stumbling block. What Chinnici describes as desire for fraternity and a competing desire for power over others can be compared to Girard’s idea of good and bad mimesis. According to Girard, if we imitate Christ’s desires we will overcome the scandal or stumbling block of rivalrous desire. This is ‘good’ mimesis and it ultimately our only hope of avoiding *skandalon*. For Christ only imitates the Father and is not anxiously competing with us for being; Christ can be our model but will not become our rival.

**Meeting the Leper: A Franciscan Approach to Scandal**

Chinnici and Girard note the role of desire in what we call scandal. Both are also aware of the patterns of exclusion which often accompany being scandalised. Both Girard and Chinnici pay attention to the scandalous figures, whose exclusion secures or shores up our weak identities, specifically, the leper. Chinnici observes that lepers of the thirteenth century endured not only social exclusion but also moral judgement. Their presence represented a threat to social order and they fall within those categories of groups and individuals which Girard notes are particularly vulnerable to scapegoating in times of social crisis.12 Girard also notes the link between the contagious nature of mimetic violence and societal fears of all infectious disease.

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If, as Paul Ricoeur has noted, the Good is commonly understood to be attractive, the transmission of evil is commonly described in biological terms such as ‘contamination’, ‘infection’ and ‘epidemic’.\(^\text{13}\)

According to Girard, in primitive social groups any change in the status of individuals was, potentially the cause of a mimetic conflict. The passage from childhood to adulthood, from virginity to sexual union, from pregnancy to childbirth, from health to sickness and from life to death, were potentially destabilising to the social order and were thus hedged round with various prohibitions, rituals and taboos, protecting the community from sudden outbreaks of conflict. Violent conflict was viewed as something contagious and imminently communicable, indeed a type of infection.\(^\text{14}\) Those who, for whatever reason were considered unclean or infected were also considered potentially dangerous and for the sake of the community, they were, by unanimous agreement, excluded and cast out, or at least isolated. Thus, the leper of the thirteenth century is a scandalous figure and those who cross the social boundaries which isolate the leper are themselves the cause of scandal.\(^\text{15}\)

In exploring St. Francis of Assisi’s relationship to the leper Chinnici returns to the Testament of St. Francis\(^\text{16}\) and specifically to St. Francis’s use of the words ‘bitterness’ and ‘sweetness’, in respect of his changed attitude towards the leper. What had been bitter in St. Francis’ relations with lepers had been transformed into sweetness. Here, Chinnici observes is the language of Exodus. In the Exodus account, the waters of Marah are bitter, indicating the bitterness of the journey of liberation out of Egypt. The bitterness of the water is changed only by Moses striking the waters with a piece of wood. Chinnici reads the conversion of St. Francis in terms of a similar journey or Exodus. At first St. Francis considers the leper a source of bitterness, but later discovers in the leper, Christ, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (53: 4), disfigured and quasi leprosus, almost a leper. The transformation in the case of St. Francis is achieved by the wood of the cross which makes what was bitter into sweetness. The disfigured body is a scandal to many but what makes a disfigured body beautiful is the presence of love, as Chinnici asserts, ‘the Lord’s loving choice to be faithfully present and to offer forgiveness in the situation of human frailty and sin.’\(^\text{17}\) The Early Franciscan Movement is fundamentally structured on this conversion experience which transforms what is scandalous into an occasion of mercy. As Chinnici observes the Early Franciscan Community is characterised by experiences of public shame and ecclesial rejection. The Community itself was aware of the possibility of causing scandal but the ‘outward limits’ of belonging to the Fraternity were tempered by a recognition that all members of the fraternity were penitents and were following a path of continuous conversion and reform.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^\text{14}\) Ibid, p. 119.

\(^\text{15}\) According to André Vauchez, in the medieval mind lepers ‘incarnated not only a horrible malady but also the suspicion of a hereditary defect or some abnormal sexual behavior which would have caused it...’ Their exclusion was justified both by a fear of contagion and the suspicion of a serious transgression against an important social taboo. Cf. André Vauchez, Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint. Trans. Michael F. Cusato (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012) p. 23.


\(^\text{17}\) Chinnici, p. 173.

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid, p. 175.
The origins of the Franciscan Movement are marked by a determination to pursue a specific way of life which potentially provokes scandal and misunderstanding. The crisis which called St. Francis home from his meeting with the Sultan in 1219 was, in part, provoked by the imposition of new laws limiting the eating of meat within Franciscan communities. These new laws would have brought the friars into line with monastic and even pious lay habits of fasting. St. Francis, however, revoked the laws on his return to Assisi. The core of their Gospel life would not be subject to extraneous conventions and comparisons, even when it provoked scandal or as Augustine Thompson puts it, the ‘humiliation of pious misunderstandings’. Rather than concede to the ‘pious misunderstandings’ and sense of scandal of their day, St. Francis and the Early Franciscans committed to forming fraternities in which a shared ethical space limited the excluding and scapegoating capacities of being scandalised.

**Skandalon**

According to Robert Hamerton-Kelly, the analysis of the meaning of “scandal” in the Gospels belongs among René Girard’s most brilliant achievements. As I have mentioned, Girard associated the word *Skandalon* with the early stages of mimetic rivalry. Because our desires are suggested by a model, the model is someone I desire to emulate and to surpass. If I surpass the model, he/she ceases to be a model for my desires. Therefore, the desire depends precisely on this tension of its being offered and withheld, and so the model is both loved and hated. Desired and despised. The model is the *Skandalon* or stumbling block of my desire. According to Hamerton-Kelly, ‘We attack and cherish, hate and love, diminish and exalt him. This is scandal, and it is the essence of anxiety (and addiction) because it is the love of what one hates and the hatred of what one loves.’ This understanding of scandal incorporates the traditional definition of *admiratio*, i.e., wonderment and fascination. According to Girard desire cannot remain in a state of scandal indefinitely. If desire cannot escape the fascinating stumbling block which both attracts and defeats us, it loses its equilibrium and descends into envy and finally hatred.

**Conclusion**

In both the Early Franciscan and the Girardian schools, ‘scandal’ is understood primarily in the passive or subjective form. Thus, the scandal, can be a stumbling block, a misreading of desire which leads me into rivalrous conflict. The initial stages of desire, the scandal, if not creatively managed, leads to conflict and usually involves the sacrificial scapegoating of the innocent surrogate victim, if social order is to be restored.

If Jesus is, as Girard insists our only proper model, He remains, for some, a source of scandal. If Jesus is a cause of scandal, James Alison has argued, the scandal is not related to the so-

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21 Ibid, p. 95.
called ‘hard sayings’ which occur in the Gospels. Scandal emerges rather when the presence of God in a particular human group is experienced not as ‘laborious or burdensome, but contrariwise, God is experienced as being loosed from the moorings to the sacred. The heavy demands of the Gospel turn out to be the existential risks of exclusion, persecution and death at the hands of “people of unbound conscience and bold speech”’.  

23 Thus the Gospel typically scandalises those who have invested much in whatever justifies them as ‘good’ in their society and ‘it is noticeably less scandalous to those who have found themselves living in the shadow side of that goodness’, such as prostitutes and tax-collectors.  

24 Jesus tells His disciples that ‘scandals are bound to come’ (Matthew 18: 7). Early Franciscan and Girardian readings of scandal direct us towards the role of desire in provoking and deepening scandal, to the dangers of scapegoating once scandal has been provoked and to healing possibilities of discovering Christ in the one who has scandalised me. Girard described the dynamics of scandal in terms of conflict based on mimetic desire. The contours of the Early Franciscan movement indicate an attempt to live outside the unstable identifies of the scandalised and the formation of communities of non-rivalrous desire.

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24 Ibid.