

Panel: Religion, Madness, and Mimetic Theory

Chair: Joachim Duyndam
Papers: Michael Elias
Berry Vorstenbosch

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

I warmly welcome you all to this panel on the theme Religion, Madness, and Mimetic Theory. What we'll perform for you today is a reprise of the same panel at the annual conference of the Colloquium on Violence & Religion, last June at the *Institut Catholique de Paris*, in Paris, France. Unfortunately, the panel in Paris wasn't video-recorded. Because of the impact of the theme, however, the president of COV&R (as the Colloquium is usually called), prof. Martha Reineke and the editor Maura Junius have asked us to resume the panel, and yet make a video-recording at a suitable place in the Netherlands. We say many thanks to De Balie for offering their studio's people and equipment to this purpose.

My name is Joachim Duyndam, and I will serve today as your moderator, as I did in Paris. I will first briefly explain the theme of this panel, and then introduce to you the two presenters.

Well, many sorts of connections are to be drawn between religion and madness. For quite some people religion offers protection against folly and madness, for some of them religion can even bring deliverance from madness. But the border can also be very narrow: when religion itself is seen and experienced as a form of madness.

René Girard considers religion, particularly religion as it took shape in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as a remedy to the violent aspects of society, which are, in his view, caused by mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism.

In this extraordinary panel, various relationships between religion, madness, and mimetic theory are explored, starting from the life experiences of the two main presenters Michael Elias (1948) and Berry Vorstenbosch (1959). Both are 'experience-experts' in this field, having faced psychoses themselves. For Michael mimetic theory offered an opening to religion, for Berry religion offered an opening to mimetic theory. Both were able to overcome their psychoses with the help of insights from the mimetic theory.

To introduce the presenters, Michael Elias is a linguist who taught at the Free University of Amsterdam and directed for thirty years Lexis language agency. His books bear upon the urban dialect of The Hague, language change, taboos in contemporary speech, riddle stories and mimetic theory. He learned Hebrew, served on the board of a dialogue village in Israel and published on the conflict between Jews and Palestinians. For 18 years he was the convenor and president of the Dutch Girard Society. After his retirement, in 2020, he debuted as a novelist with *Alectorius* (in Dutch: *Hanesteen*), based on his experiences in a psychiatric institution.

Two years ago, Berry Vorstenbosch published *De overtocht*, which in English would be translated as *The Crossing*. The subtitle of the book is *Philosophical View on a Psychosis*. In this book, Berry tries to understand what had happened to him in his adolescence, employing the help of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and above all René Girard. The first hallucinatory period resulted in hospitalization. A second period, five years later, finally resulted into a conversion to Christianity. For explaining some of the workings of what is called “psychosis” by psychiatrists, or “madness” in more popular terms, Berry will in his talk focus on two Girardian concepts: “metaphysical desire” and the “crisis of difference”.

The two lectures will be presented intertwined. We’ll start with the first part of Michael’s paper, followed by the first part of Berry’s. Next, Michael will take his second part, and then Berry will do the same with his. The panel will be concluded by myself, providing a narrative-philosophical view on the topic, and so, trying to shed a light from a general human point of view.