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CHRISTIANITY WILL BE VICTORIOUS, BUT ONLY IN DEFEAT

AN INTERVIEW WITH RENÉ GIRARD

by
Cynthia L. Haven

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*Editor's Note: In the August/September 2009 issue of FIRST THINGS, currently on news stands, is a major new essay by René Girard drawn from his recent book, *Achever Clausewitz*, forthcoming as Battling to the End: Politics, War, and Apocalypse from Michigan State University Press. Here, as a FIRST THINGS web exclusive, literary journalist Cynthia Haven interviews Girard about his book.*

Cynthia Haven: Just when people think they know what Girard is about, you surprise us. Your work has expanded into new and revelatory directions at several junctures in your long career. Now it appears to have changed again with your latest book on Carl von Clausewitz.

René Girard: *Achever Clausewitz* is a book about modern war, really. Clausewitz is a writer who wrote only about war; he was in love with war. He hated Napoleon, the enemy of his country, Prussia, but he also loved him because the emperor had restored war to its glorious nature after the eighteenth century, which weakened war by having conflicts that made maneuvers and negotiations more important than actual fighting. That is why Clausewitz's hatred for Napoleon was curiously united to a passionate admiration for the man who had restored war to its former glory.

CH: The love-hate nature of “mimetic rivalry” is apparent here, but is there anything else that attracted you to this offbeat topic?

RG: I found another interesting correspondence with my own work. Because Clausewitz talks only about war, he describes human relations in a way that interests me profoundly. When we describe human relations, we usually make them better than they are: gentle, peaceful, and so forth, whereas in reality they are often competitive. War is the most extreme form of competition. That is why Clausewitz says that business—commercial business—and war are very close to each other.

CH: You’ve pointed out that our whole contemporary society is reaching a point of “mimetic crisis.” What, exactly, causes a mimetic crisis?

RG: A mimetic crisis is when people become undifferentiated. There are no more social classes, there are no more social differences, and so forth. What I call a mimetic crisis is a situation of conflict so intense that on both sides people act the same way and talk the same way even though, or because, they are more and more hostile to each other. I believe that in intense conflict, far from becoming sharper, differences melt away.

When differences are suppressed, conflicts become rationally insoluble. If and when they are solved, they are solved by something that has nothing to do with rational argument: by a process that the people concerned do not understand and even do not perceive. They are solved by what we call a *scapegoat process*.

CH: You say that the history of scapegoating is suppressed by those who do the scapegoating.

RG: Scapegoating *itself* is the suppressing. If you scapegoat someone, only a third party can become aware of it. It won’t be you, because you will believe you are doing the right thing. You will believe that you are either punishing someone who is truly guilty, or fighting someone who is trying to kill you. We never see ourselves as responsible for scapegoating.

If you look at archaic religions, it becomes clear that religion is a way to master, or at least control, violence. I

think that archaic religions are based on a collective murder, on a lynch-mob murder, which unites the people and saves the community. This process is the beginning of a religion: salvation as a result of scapegoating. That is why the people turn their scapegoat into a god.

CH: You've said elsewhere: "I think ultimately the Christian view of violence will overcome everything, but we might consider this a great test." Do you really have that kind of confidence?

RG: Christianity will be victorious, but only in defeat. Christianity is the same scheme as archaic religions; it is an instance of scapegoating, but—and this difference is enormous—instead of blaming the victim, and joining the scapegoaters, it realizes that the victim is innocent and we all try to interpret this type of situation in the light of the innocent victim, that is, Christ himself. In a world that is no longer organized along the rigid lines of scapegoating and the sacrifices that reenact it in the penal systems, we have more and more disorder. More and more freedom, but more and more disorder.

CH: So tell us a little about this "great test"?

RG: History, you might say, is this test. But we know very well that mankind is failing that test. In some ways, the gospels, the Scriptures, are predicting that failure, since they end with eschatological themes, which predict the end of the world.

CH: You've said that, for modern societies, "the confidence is in violence. We put our faith in that violence, that violence will keep the peace." How can nations be strong without violence?

RG: Truth begins with the acknowledgement of our violence that Christianity requires of us. Well, the alternative is the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God is, by definition, nonviolent. It never comes true, because people are not Christian enough and this is the same as what I said before: We must acknowledge our own scapegoating and we cannot do it.

CH: It's hard to imagine going to the negotiating table in the Middle East, without having the prospect of

war as a last resort.

RG: I agree completely. But this is the same as our eternal deadlock. We must see history as a long process of education. God is trying to teach man to renounce violence. The kingdom of God would be no violence at all, and we do not seem capable of it. That's why you have the apocalyptic texts at the end of the gospels.

Right now, the world is moving more and more towards various types of catastrophes. It knows this very well; it talks about little else. Today we are in such a situation that we cannot distinguish the instruments of war and the instruments of peace.

When you look at the apocalyptic texts, they seem absurd and childish because they often mix up culture and nature. This sounded absurd until recently, but now it really happens. When there is hurricane in New Orleans, we wonder if it is not man rather than nature that is responsible. Unbelievers think that the apocalyptic texts of Christianity are antiscientific because they mix up nature and culture. But in our world it cannot be denied that man can interfere with the functioning of nature. The world has never known such a possibility before, but it does now and I think this situation is specifically Christian. So, far from seeing a Christianity that is outmoded and ridiculous, I see a Christianity that makes a great deal of sense. This sense is just too amazing to be understood by people who stick to conventional thinking.

CH: You've said: "More and more people in the West are becoming aware of the weaknesses of our humanism; we are not going to become Christian again, but there will be more attention to the fact that the fight is really between Christianity and Islam, more than between Islam and humanism."

RG: Yes. I believe it, you see, because Christianity destroyed sacrificial cults. Christianity reveals that our world is founded on violence. The main resource of government and civilization, in the archaic world, is the scapegoat phenomenon. The great paradox is that the scapegoat phenomenon operates only as long as it remains unperceived by the people it unites. The gospels make it visible that Jesus is a scapegoat. When people say there is no difference between a myth and Christianity, it is almost true. In both instances, the

story culminates in a big drama: A victim is collectively killed and is divinized. But, in these two instances, the victim is not divinized for the same reason. Jesus is divinized because he suffers the Passion, in spite of his innocence, and he reveals their own violence to his murderers. In archaic religions, the guilt of the murderers remains invisible, unperceived. It's the reconciliation effect of scapegoating which is emphasized as the positive significance of the process. In Christianity, the criminal violence of the murderers is revealed as well as the innocence of the victim.

An archaic religion is nothing but a scapegoat phenomenon that succeeds, so to speak, as it is naively interpreted by the scapegoaters themselves. In the gospels, this scapegoat phenomenon fails and its meaning is revealed to the scapegoaters themselves, that is, mankind as a whole. Christianity destroys archaic religions because it reveals to us their reliance on scapegoat violence.

The self-denigration of the modern world, as well as its intellectual superiority, is rooted in this awareness of scapegoating. Unfortunately, we are not aware that the entire process is rooted in Christianity, which many people reject together with the false scapegoat religions.

In a way, the Western world has been sitting on its privileges, and paid not the slightest attention to Islam. It has been absolutely sure that "in all its ways, even the least Christian" it was superior, which in a certain sense is true, but it's due to something that Christianity has not earned.

CH: In what way superior?

RG: All the spiritual advantages it has because it knows the truth. It knows the sinfulness of man, the fact that man is a killer, a killer of God. In the East, their contempt for Christianity is due to the fact that they feel absolutely scandalized by the Crucifixion. What kind of God is it that will allow himself to be persecuted and killed by men? In a way, it's good to see because of the shock, you know. In a way I think what God is saying is that "I allowed these scapegoats. But you, I teach you the truth. So you should be up to that truth, and become perfect, and that is the kingdom of God." You are the chosen ones, in the Jewish

sense.

CH: And you said Christianity had these advantages but had not earned them?

RG: It has not earned them, and it has not behaved as it should have. Christians are unfaithful to Christianity.

CH: You have said that this apocalypse is not necessarily a bang, or even a whimper, but rather a long stasis.

RG: In the Gospel of Matthew, it says: “Except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved”—because it’s an infinitely long stretch.

CH: So this is the period we’re in?

RG: I think it may well be. We are proud of the achievements we call modern and there are scriptural indications that they coincide with the dangerous times we live in.

Some of the fundamentalist Christians think the eschatological themes show that God is angry with man and is going to put an end to the world. But the eschatological texts are more meaningful if you understand the situation as I just defined it. If man doesn’t become more modest, his violence will increase in an unlimited way. This violence doesn’t increase through physical fighting and wars only, but through the increase and multiplication of weapons, which now threaten the very survival of the world. Our violence is not created by God but by man; in a world that is practically more and more oblivious God, if you look at the way nations behave with each other, at the way individuals behave with each other.

Before the invention of apocalyptic weapons, we couldn’t see how realistic apocalyptic texts have become. Today we can see that, and we should be extremely impressed by this realism. Now only one thing is left to man if he wants to survive: universal reconciliation.

CH: Who is the antichrist in your interpretation?

RG: Well, we don't know, but there are many plausible candidates. Obviously there is something very insidious about the antichrist, who is a seducer. So it must not be someone like Stalin or Hitler since they failed miserably. And the antichrist doesn't seem to work by force. But I think you could see that it's a certain modern spirit—the spirit of power, the idea that man has become totally master of himself, and that he doesn't have to bow in front of powers greater than himself, and he's going to triumph in the end.

CH: So this crisis you see us constantly going through, how does it end?

RG: We're going through a slow increase in the symptoms of destabilization that characterizes the modern world.

CH: And then what will happen?

RG: I don't know. You have two conceptions of time to consider: the eternal return, which I think is the founding murder of a scapegoat, and therefore a new religion. The scapegoat phenomenon is so powerful, that a community can organize itself around it.

And then we have continuous time, which carries through to the destruction of the world, the Second Coming. Obviously, that withdraws the source of renewal, which is the sacrificial murder of a scapegoat. With the Bible there is no renewal, no new religion.

CH: Nietzsche noted that we've gone almost two thousand years with no new god.

RG: Nietzsche has some texts, which are very interesting, because he would like to go back to the eternal return; therefore he is not really apocalyptic, because he is not really waiting for the kingdom of God. He would like to go back, and he hopes that there will be an end of Christianity.

CH: You point out that he hated the gospels, that he didn't see them from a theoretical or historical perspective.

RG: No, he didn't. He saw them as the worst possible thing for the world, because he saw it as a cause for decadence, of people becoming incapable of energy and moving in history in such a way that civilizations would not renew themselves and die. It was pre-Nazi. He was nostalgic for archaic religion.

CH: Did he have a point? Is there a kind of decadence to where we are now?

RG: Sure, he had a point. Because that long, endless period of apocalypse is getting a little tiresome. And, then, if you really look it is probably extremely noncreative. Today do you feel the arts are as productive as they were in the past?

The kingdom of God will not arrive on this earth, but there is an inspiration of the kingdom of God in our world, which is partial and limited. And there is a nonchristian, antichristian decadence in all its ways. We still have the prophesied "abomination of the desolation" to get through, undoubtedly.

CH: Given this long apocalypse we're going through, what do we do?

RG: Nothing spectacular.

CH: We just sit it out?

RG: We just sit it out. But we must try not to surrender to the spiritual decadence of our time and rise above the world around us.

CH: What about this quotation: "Except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened"?

RG: It means that the end times will be very long and monotonous—so mediocre and uneventful from a religious and spiritual standpoint that the danger of dying spirituality, even for the best of us, will be very great. This is a harsh lesson but one ultimately of hope rather than despair.

Cynthia L. Haven writes regularly for the Times Literary Supplement, the Los Angeles Times Book Review, the Washington Post, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Kenyon Review, the Georgia Review, and others. Her An Invisible Rope: Portraits of Czeslaw Milosz will be published next year by Ohio University Press/Swallow Press.

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FIRST THINGS

HOW TO READ GIRARD

by
Joe Carter
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FIRST THINGS is delighted to be able to share with our readers an original essay and an [exclusive interview](#) with René Girard, one the most intriguing and influential thinkers of modern times. Unfortunately, too many of our readers may not initially grasp the appeal of his work. As our editor Joseph Bottum noted earlier this week, “The article is a dense and difficult piece by a member of the *Académie française*, and different readers will have differing interpretations.”

Comprehending Girard’s work is certainly no easy task. But the specialized terminology that has accreted over decades to explain his concepts can make his writing appear even more daunting. Unlike many other French theorists, Girard isn’t deliberately obscure. Familiarity with a few key concepts can aid in gaining a toehold into his refreshingly original thought.

The following is rudimentary glossary, with quotations from online sources (including a surprisingly well-written Wikipedia entry). I’ve put the concepts in an order in which, I believe, they build on each on another and help us with Girard’s theory.

Mimesis/Mimetic desire —”The preeminent characteristic of human beings is that we imitate each other (thus the term “Mimetic Theory”). This mimesis is not mere mimicry, but an instinctive and preconscious

impulse. Even our desires—especially our desires—come from the imitation of others. Because we want the same things that others want, we come into conflict over who will possess the desired object. This rivalry is in turn imitated so that it escalates into violence. The rivalry does not remain limited to the first individuals involved, but others imitate it until it spreads to the entire community, generating a mimetic crisis. Violence threatens to destroy everyone involved, unless a solution is found.” ([Britton Johnson, “How Girard’s Mimetic Theory Can Help Us Understand the Relationship Between Science and Religion”](#))

Mimetic violence —”If two individuals desire the same thing, there will soon be a third, then a fourth. This process quickly snowballs. Since from the beginning the desire is aroused by the other (and not by the object) the object is soon forgotten and the mimetic conflict transforms into a general antagonism. At this stage of the crisis the antagonists will no longer imitate each other’s desires for an object, but each other’s antagonism. They wanted to share the same object, but now they want to destroy the same enemy. So, a paroxysm of violence would tend to focus on an arbitrary victim and a unanimous antipathy would, mimetically, grow against him. The brutal elimination of the victim would reduce the appetite for violence that possessed everyone a moment before, and leaves the group suddenly appeased and calm.” ([Wikipedia](#))

Mimetic crisis —”A mimetic crisis is when people become undifferentiated. There are no more social classes, there are no more social differences, and so forth. What I call a mimetic crisis is a situation of conflict so intense that on both sides people act the same way and talk the same way even though, or because, they are more and more hostile to each other. I believe that in intense conflict, far from becoming sharper, differences melt away.

When differences are suppressed, conflicts become rationally insoluble. If and when they are solved, they are solved by something that has nothing to do with rational argument: by a process that the people concerned do not understand and even do not perceive. They are solved by what we call a *scapegoat process*.” ([FIRST THINGS ONLINE, “An Interview with René Girard”](#))

The Scapegoat Process —”One individual is singled out by the community as the scapegoat whose death

absorbs the violence in the community, delivering the community from this threat. The community mistakenly believes that the scapegoat was at once the cause as well as the all-powerful cure for the chaos of the mimetic crisis. The pagan concept of the gods emerges from this misrecognition. The deliverance brought about by sacrificial violence is the basis for the primitive sacred. It is also the basis of archaic religion and the foundation of human culture.” ([Ibid](#))

Violence and the Sacred —”The brutal elimination of the victim [the scapegoat] would reduce the appetite for violence that possessed everyone a moment before, and leaves the group suddenly appeased and calm. The victim lies before the group, appearing simultaneously as the origin of the crisis and as the one responsible for this miracle of renewed peace. He becomes sacred, that is to say the bearer of the prodigious power of defusing the crisis and bringing peace back. René Girard believes this to be the genesis of archaic religion, of ritual sacrifice as the repetition of the original event, of myth as an account of this event, of the taboos that forbid access to all the objects at the origin of the rivalries that degenerated into this absolutely traumatizing crisis. This religious elaboration takes place gradually over the course of the repetition of the mimetic crises whose resolution brings only a temporary peace. The elaboration of the rites and of the taboos constitutes a kind of empirical knowledge about violence.” ([Wikipedia](#))

Christianity as Destroyer of Sacred Myths —”[T]he election of a scapegoat may in fact have worked to found culture in the days before biblical revelation, but the Gospels reveal how it works, and an understanding of how it works destroys the possibility of it working. If we know the victim to be innocent, we can still pronounce him guilty, but we will not succeed in being drawn together—we will not succeed in founding a culture—with the pronouncement.” ([Joseph Bottum, “Girard Among the Girardians”](#))

“The Gospels ostensibly present themselves as a typical mythical account, with a victim-god lynched by a unanimous crowd, an event that is then commemorated by Christians through ritual sacrifice — a bodily representation in this case— in the Eucharist. The parallel is perfect except for one detail: the truth of the innocence of the victim is proclaimed by the text and the writer. The mythical account is usually built on the lie of the guilt of the victim inasmuch as it is an account of the event seen from the viewpoint of the

anonymous lynchers. This ignorance is indispensable to the efficacy of the sacrificial violence.

The evangelical “good news” clearly affirms the innocence of the victim, thus becoming, by attacking ignorance, the germ of the destruction of the sacrificial order on which rests the equilibrium of societies. Already the Old Testament shows this turning inside-out of the mythic accounts with regard to the innocence of the victims (Abel, Joseph, Job, . . .), and the Hebrews were conscious of the uniqueness of their religious tradition. With the Gospels, it is with full clarity that are unveiled these “things hidden since the foundation of the world” (Matthew 13:35), the foundation of social order on murder, described in all its repulsive ugliness in the account of the Passion. ” ([Wikipedia](#))

Apocalypse —”The apocalypse is not God’s final act of vengeance against a sinful humanity but the historical circumstances under which the failure of Christian revelation finally becomes clear. Apocalyptic violence seeks an end in sacrifice but never finds it; it is war with neither cathartic virtue nor foundational potential. The death of Christ on the cross exposed the lie of the scapegoat mechanism from within and offered humanity the chance to establish a new and more mature relationship to the divine. Instead of seizing this opportunity, however, humanity ultimately turned away from what the Passion—the word made flesh—had to say about violence. This was the beginning of the first stirrings of modern history, of that “strange war” waged by violence against truth. Each refusal to accept the truth about violence only put off what Girard calls our inevitable “rendezvous with the real.” Today, the rise of the suicide bomber and the blurring of distinctions between the natural and anthropological realms suggest that we are entering a critical period. The more we do away with traditional institutions, with borders and barriers of all kinds, the more de-institutionalized violence comes back to haunt us, suggesting that politics and technology are now powerless to save us from ourselves.” ([Trevor Merrill, “On War: Apocalypse and Conversion Review Article on René Girard’s *Achever Clausewitz*.”](#))

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH - COMMANDMENTS NINE AND TEN

ARTICLE 9

THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.²⁹⁹

Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.³⁰⁰

2514 St. John distinguishes three kinds of covetousness or concupiscence: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life.³⁰¹ In the Catholic catechetical tradition, the ninth commandment forbids carnal concupiscence; the tenth forbids coveting another's goods. (377, 400)

2515 Etymologically, "concupiscence" can refer to any intense form of human desire. Christian theology has given it a particular meaning: the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of the human reason. The apostle St. Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the "flesh" against the "spirit."³⁰² Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man's moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sins.³⁰³ (405)

2516 Because man is a *composite being, spirit and body*, there already exists a certain tension in him; a certain struggle of tendencies between "spirit" and "flesh" develops. But in fact this

²⁹⁹ *Ex* 20:17.

³⁰⁰ *Mt* 5:28.

³⁰¹ Cf. *1 Jn* 2:16.

³⁰² Cf. *Gal* 5:16, 17, 24; *Eph* 2:3.

³⁰³ Cf. *Gen* 3:11; Council of Trent: DS 1515.

struggle belongs to the heritage of sin. It is a consequence of sin and at the same time a confirmation of it. It is part of the daily experience of the spiritual battle: (362; 407)

For the Apostle it is not a matter of despising and condemning the body which with the spiritual soul constitutes man's nature and personal subjectivity. Rather, he is concerned with the morally *good* or *bad* works, or better, the permanent dispositions—virtues and vices—which are the fruit of *submission* (in the first case) or of *resistance* (in the second case) to *the saving action of the Holy Spirit*. For this reason the Apostle writes: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”³⁰⁴

I. PURIFICATION OF THE HEART

2517 The heart is the seat of moral personality: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication....”³⁰⁵ The struggle against carnal covetousness entails purifying the heart and practicing temperance: (368; 1809)

Remain simple and innocent, and you will be like little children who do not know the evil that destroys man's life.³⁰⁶

2518 The sixth beatitude proclaims, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”³⁰⁷ “Pure in heart” refers to those who have attuned their intellects and wills to the demands of God's holiness, chiefly in three areas: charity;³⁰⁸ chastity or sexual rectitude;³⁰⁹ love of truth and orthodoxy of faith.³¹⁰ There is a connection between purity of heart, of body, and of faith: (94; 158)¹

³⁰⁴ John Paul II, *DeV* 55; cf. *Gal* 5:25.

³⁰⁵ *Mt* 15:19.

³⁰⁶ *Pastor Hermae*, Mandate 2, 1: PG 2, 916.

³⁰⁷ *Mt* 5:8.

³⁰⁸ Cf. *1 Tim* 4:3–9; *2 Tim* 2:22.

³⁰⁹ Cf. *1 Thess* 4:7; *Col* 3:5; *Eph* 4:19.

³¹⁰ Cf. *Titus* 1:15; *1 Tim* 1:3–4; *2 Tim* 2:23–26.

¹ Catholic Church, [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 601–603.

The faithful must believe the articles of the Creed “so that by believing they may obey God, by obeying may live well, by living well may purify their hearts, and with pure hearts may understand what they believe.”³¹¹

2519 The “pure in heart” are promised that they will see God face to face and be like him.³¹² Purity of heart is the precondition of the vision of God. Even now it enables us to see *according to* God, to accept others as “neighbors”; it lets us perceive the human body—ours and our neighbor’s—as a temple of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of divine beauty. (2548; 2819; 2501)

II. THE BATTLE FOR PURITY

2520 Baptism confers on its recipient the grace of purification from all sins. But the baptized must continue to struggle against concupiscence of the flesh and disordered desires. With God’s grace he will prevail (1264)

— by the *virtue* and *gift of chastity*, for chastity lets us love with upright and undivided heart; (2337)

— by *purity of intention* which consists in seeking the true end of man: with simplicity of vision, the baptized person seeks to find and to fulfill God’s will in everything;³¹³ (1752)

— by *purity of vision*, external and internal; by discipline of feelings and imagination; by refusing all complicity in impure thoughts that incline us to turn aside from the path of God’s commandments: “Appearance arouses yearning in fools”;³¹⁴ (1762)

— by *prayer*: (2846)

I thought that continence arose from one’s own powers, which I did not recognize in myself. I was foolish enough not to know ... that no one can be continent unless you grant it. For you would surely have granted it if my inner groaning had reached your ears and I with firm faith had cast my cares on you.³¹⁵

2521 Purity requires *modesty*, an integral part of temperance. Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden. It is ordered to

³¹¹ St. Augustine, *De fide et symbolo* 10, 25: PL 40, 196.

³¹² Cf. *1 Cor* 13:12; *1 Jn* 3:2.

³¹³ Cf. *Rom* 12:2; *Col* 1:10.

³¹⁴ *Wis* 15:5.

³¹⁵ St. Augustine, *Conf.* 6, 11, 20: PL 32, 729–730.

chastity to whose sensitivity it bears witness. It guides how one looks at others and behaves toward them in conformity with the dignity of persons and their solidarity.

2522 Modesty protects the mystery of persons and their love. It encourages patience and moderation in loving relationships; it requires that the conditions for the definitive giving and commitment of man and woman to one another be fulfilled. Modesty is decency. It inspires one's choice of clothing. It keeps silence or reserve where there is evident risk of unhealthy curiosity. It is discreet. (2492)

2523 There is a modesty of the feelings as well as of the body. It protests, for example, against the voyeuristic explorations of the human body in certain advertisements, or against the solicitations of certain media that go too far in the exhibition of intimate things. Modesty inspires a way of life which makes it possible to resist the allurements of fashion and the pressures of prevailing ideologies. (2354)

2524 The forms taken by modesty vary from one culture to another. Everywhere, however, modesty exists as an intuition of the spiritual dignity proper to man. It is born with the awakening consciousness of being a subject. Teaching modesty to children and adolescents means awakening in them respect for the human person.

2525 Christian purity requires a *purification of the social climate*. It requires of the communications media that their presentations show concern for respect and restraint. Purity of heart brings freedom from widespread eroticism and avoids entertainment inclined to voyeurism and illusion. (2344)

2526 So-called *moral permissiveness* rests on an erroneous conception of human freedom; the necessary precondition for the development of true freedom is to let oneself be educated in the moral law. Those in charge of education can reasonably be expected to give young people instruction respectful of the truth, the qualities of the heart, and the moral and spiritual dignity of man. (1740)

2527 "The Good News of Christ continually renews the life and culture of fallen man; it combats and removes the error and evil which flow from the ever-present attraction of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. It takes the spiritual qualities and endowments of every age and nation, and with supernatural riches it causes them to blossom, as it were, from within; it fortifies, completes, and restores them in Christ."³¹⁶ (1204)²

³¹⁶ GS 58 § 4.

² Catholic Church, [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 605.

ARTICLE 10

THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not covet ... anything that is your neighbor's.... You shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.³¹⁷

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.³¹⁸

2534 The tenth commandment unfolds and completes the ninth, which is concerned with concupiscence of the flesh. It forbids coveting the goods of another, as the root of theft, robbery, and fraud, which the seventh commandment forbids. “Lust of the eyes” leads to the violence and injustice forbidden by the fifth commandment.³¹⁹ Avarice, like fornication, originates in the idolatry prohibited by the first three prescriptions of the Law.³²⁰ The tenth commandment concerns the intentions of the heart; with the ninth, it summarizes all the precepts of the Law. (2112; 2069)³

I. THE DISORDER OF COVETOUS DESIRES

2535 The sensitive appetite leads us to desire pleasant things we do not have, e.g., the desire to eat when we are hungry or to warm ourselves when we are cold. These desires are good in themselves; but often they exceed the limits of reason and drive us to covet unjustly what is not ours and belongs to another or is owed to him. (1767)

2536 The tenth commandment forbids *greed* and the desire to amass earthly goods without limit. It forbids *avarice* arising from a passion for riches and their attendant power. It also forbids the desire to commit injustice by harming our neighbor in his temporal goods: (2445)

³¹⁷ *Ex* 20:17; *Deut* 5:21.

³¹⁸ *Mt* 6:21.

³¹⁹ Cf. *1 Jn* 2:16; *Mic* 2:2.

³²⁰ Cf. *Wis* 14:12.

³ Catholic Church, [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 606.

When the Law says, “You shall not covet,” these words mean that we should banish our desires for whatever does not belong to us. Our thirst for another’s goods is immense, infinite, never quenched. Thus it is written: “He who loves money never has money enough.”³²¹

2537 It is not a violation of this commandment to desire to obtain things that belong to one’s neighbor, provided this is done by just means. Traditional catechesis realistically mentions “those who have a harder struggle against their criminal desires” and so who “must be urged the more to keep this commandment”:

... merchants who desire scarcity and rising prices, who cannot bear not to be the only ones buying and selling so that they themselves can sell more dearly and buy more cheaply; those who hope that their peers will be impoverished, in order to realize a profit either by selling to them or buying from them ... physicians who wish disease to spread; lawyers who are eager for many important cases and trials.³²²

2538 The tenth commandment requires that *envy* be banished from the human heart. When the prophet Nathan wanted to spur King David to repentance, he told him the story about the poor man who had only one ewe lamb that he treated like his own daughter and the rich man who, despite the great number of his flocks, envied the poor man and ended by stealing his lamb.³²³ Envy can lead to the worst crimes.³²⁴ “Through the devil’s envy death entered the world”:³²⁵ (2317; 391)

We fight one another, and envy arms us against one another.... If everyone strives to unsettle the Body of Christ, where shall we end up? We are engaged in making Christ’s Body a corpse.... We declare ourselves members of one and the same organism, yet we devour one another like beasts.³²⁶

2539 Envy is a capital sin. It refers to the sadness at the sight of another’s goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly. When it wishes grave harm to a neighbor it is a mortal sin: (1866)

³²¹ *Roman Catechism*, III, 37; cf. *Sir* 5:8.

³²² *Roman Catechism*, III, 37.

³²³ Cf. *2 Sam* 12:1–4.

³²⁴ Cf. *Gen* 4:3–7; *1 Kings* 21:1–29.

³²⁵ *Wis* 2:24.

³²⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *Hom. in 2 Cor.* 27, 3–4: PG 61, 588.

St. Augustine saw envy as “*the diabolical sin.*”³²⁷ “From envy are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbor, and displeasure caused by his prosperity.”³²⁸

2540 Envy represents a form of sadness and therefore a refusal of charity; the baptized person should struggle against it by exercising good will. Envy often comes from pride; the baptized person should train himself to live in humility: (1829)

Would you like to see God glorified by you? Then rejoice in your brother’s progress and you will immediately give glory to God. Because his servant could conquer envy by rejoicing in the merits of others, God will be praised.³²⁹

II. THE DESIRES OF THE SPIRIT

2541 The economy of law and grace turns men’s hearts away from avarice and envy. It initiates them into desire for the Sovereign Good; it instructs them in the desires of the Holy Spirit who satisfies man’s heart. (1718; 2764; 397)

The God of the promises always warned man against seduction by what from the beginning has seemed “good for food ... a delight to the eyes ... to be desired to make one wise.”³³⁰

2542 The Law entrusted to Israel never sufficed to justify those subject to it; it even became the instrument of “lust.”³³¹ The gap between wanting and doing points to the conflict between God’s Law which is the “law of my mind,” and another law “making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.”³³² (1963)

2543 “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”³³³ Henceforth, Christ’s faithful “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”; they are led by the Spirit and follow the desires of the Spirit.³³⁴ (1992)

³²⁷ Cf. St. Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus* 4, 8: PL 40, 315–316.

³²⁸ St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* 31, 45: PL 76, 621.

³²⁹ St. John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Rom.* 7, 5: PG 60, 448.

³³⁰ *Gen* 3:6.

³³¹ Cf. *Rom* 7:7.

³³² *Rom* 7:23; cf. 7:10.

³³³ *Rom* 3:21–22.

³³⁴ *Gal* 5:24; cf. *Rom* 8:14, 27.

III. POVERTY OF HEART (2443–2449)

2544 Jesus enjoins his disciples to prefer him to everything and everyone, and bids them “renounce all that [they have]” for his sake and that of the Gospel.³³⁵ Shortly before his passion he gave them the example of the poor widow of Jerusalem who, out of her poverty, gave all that she had to live on.³³⁶ The precept of detachment from riches is obligatory for entrance into the Kingdom of heaven. (544)

2545 All Christ’s faithful are to “direct their affections rightly, lest they be hindered in their pursuit of perfect charity by the use of worldly things and by an adherence to riches which is contrary to the spirit of evangelical poverty.”³³⁷ (2013)

2546 “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”³³⁸ The Beatitudes reveal an order of happiness and grace, of beauty and peace. Jesus celebrates the joy of the poor, to whom the Kingdom already belongs:³³⁹ (1716)

The Word speaks of voluntary humility as “poverty in spirit”; the Apostle gives an example of God’s poverty when he says: “For your sakes he became poor.”³⁴⁰

2547 The Lord grieves over the rich, because they find their consolation in the abundance of goods.³⁴¹ “Let the proud seek and love earthly kingdoms, but blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”³⁴² Abandonment to the providence of the Father in heaven frees us from anxiety about tomorrow.³⁴³ Trust in God is a preparation for the blessedness of the poor. They shall see God. (305)

IV. “I WANT TO SEE GOD”

2548 Desire for true happiness frees man from his immoderate attachment to the goods of this world so that he can find his fulfillment in the vision and beatitude of God. “The promise [of

³³⁵ *Lk* 14:33; cf. *Mk* 8:35.

³³⁶ Cf. *Lk* 21:4.

³³⁷ *LG* 42 § 3.

³³⁸ *Mt* 5:3.

³³⁹ Cf. *Lk* 6:20.

³⁴⁰ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus* 1: PG 44, 1200D; cf. *2 Cor* 8:9.

³⁴¹ *Lk* 6:24.

³⁴² St. Augustine, *De serm. Dom. in monte* 1, 1, 3: PL 34, 1232.

³⁴³ Cf. *Mt* 6:25–34.

seeing God] surpasses all beatitude.... In Scripture, to see is to possess.... Whoever sees God has obtained all the goods of which he can conceive.”³⁴⁴ (2519)

2549 It remains for the holy people to struggle, with grace from on high, to obtain the good things God promises. In order to possess and contemplate God, Christ’s faithful mortify their cravings and, with the grace of God, prevail over the seductions of pleasure and power. (2015)

2550 On this way of perfection, the Spirit and the Bride call whoever hears them³⁴⁵ to perfect communion with God: (314)

There will true glory be, where no one will be praised by mistake or flattery; true honor will not be refused to the worthy, nor granted to the unworthy; likewise, no one unworthy will pretend to be worthy, where only those who are worthy will be admitted. There true peace will reign, where no one will experience opposition either from self or others. God himself will be virtue’s reward; he gives virtue and has promised to give himself as the best and greatest reward that could exist.... “I shall be their God and they will be my people....” This is also the meaning of the Apostle’s words: “So that God may be all in all.” God himself will be the goal of our desires; we shall contemplate him without end, love him without surfeit, praise him without weariness. This gift, this state, this act, like eternal life itself, will assuredly be common to all.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus* 6: PG 44, 1265A.

³⁴⁵ Cf. *Rev* 22:17.

³⁴⁶ St. Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, 22, 30: PL 41, 801–802; cf. *Lev* 26:12; cf. *1 Cor* 15:28.

⁴ Catholic Church, [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 609–610.

René Girard

René Noël Théophile Girard (/ʒɪəˈrɑːrd/^[2] French: [ʁiʁaʁ]; 25 December 1923 – 4 November 2015) was a French historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science whose work belongs to the tradition of anthropological philosophy. Girard was the author of nearly thirty books, with his writings spanning many academic domains. Although the reception of his work is different in each of these areas, there is a growing body of secondary literature on his work and his influence on disciplines such as literary criticism, critical theory, anthropology, theology, psychology, mythology, sociology, economics, cultural studies, and philosophy.

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René Girard



Girard in 2007

Born	René Noël Théophile Girard <div>25 December 1923</div> Avignon, France
Died	4 November 2015 (aged 91) <div>Stanford, California, U.S.</div>
Education	École Nationale des Chartes (MA) <div>Indiana University (PhD)</div>
Known for	Fundamental anthropology <div>Mimetic desire</div> Mimetic double bind <div>Scapegoat mechanism as the origin of sacrifice and foundation of human culture</div> Girard's theory of group conflict
Spouse(s)	Martha Girard ^[1]

External links

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Early life and career

Girard was born in Avignon on 25 December 1923.^[a] He studied [medieval history](#) at the [École des Chartes](#), Paris, where the subject of his thesis was "Private life in Avignon in the second half of the fifteenth century" ("*La vie privée à Avignon dans la seconde moitié du XVe siècle*").^[3]

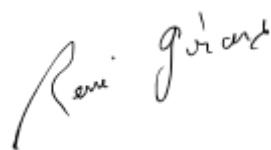
In 1947, Girard went to [Indiana University](#) on a one-year fellowship. He was to spend most of his career in the United States. He received his [PhD](#) in 1950 and stayed at Indiana University until 1953. The subject of his PhD at Indiana University was "American Opinion of France, 1940–1943".^[3] Although his research was in history, he was also assigned to teach [French literature](#), the field in which he would first make his reputation as a literary critic by publishing influential essays on such authors as [Albert Camus](#) and [Marcel Proust](#).

Girard occupied positions at [Duke University](#) and [Bryn Mawr College](#) from 1953 to 1957, after which he moved to [Johns Hopkins University](#), Baltimore, where he became a full professor in 1961. In that year, he also published his first book: *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 1966). For several years, he moved back and forth between the [State University of New York at Buffalo](#) and [Johns Hopkins University](#). Books he published in this period include *La Violence et le sacré* (1972; *Violence and the Sacred*, 1977) and *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (1978; *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 1987).

In 1981, Girard became Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language, Literature, and Civilization at [Stanford University](#), where he stayed until his retirement in 1995. During this period, he published *Le Bouc émissaire* (1982), *La route antique des hommes pervers* (1985), *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (1991) and *Quand ces choses commenceront ...* (1994).

In 1985, he received his first honorary degree from the [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#) in the Netherlands; several others followed.

In 1990, a group of scholars founded the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R) with a goal to "explore, criticize, and develop the [mimetic model](#) of the relationship between violence and religion in the genesis and maintenance of culture."^{[4][5]} This organization organizes a yearly conference devoted to topics related to mimetic theory, [scapegoating](#), violence, and religion. Girard was Honorary Chair of COV&R. Co-founder and first president of the COV&R was the Roman Catholic theologian [Raymund Schwager](#).

Children	3
Awards	Académie française (Seat 37) Knight of the Légion d'honneur Commandeur of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres
Scientific career	
Institutions	Duke University , Bryn Mawr College , Johns Hopkins University , State University of New York at Buffalo , Stanford University
Doctoral students	Sandor Goodhart
Other notable students	Andrew Feenberg
Influences	Claude Lévi-Strauss
Influenced	Raymund Schwager , James Alison , Robert Barron , Peter Thiel
Signature	
	

René Girard's work has inspired interdisciplinary research projects and experimental research such as the Mimetic Theory project sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation.^[6]

On 17 March 2005, Girard was elected to the Académie française.

On 4 November 2015, he died at his residence in Stanford, California, following a long illness.^[1]

Girard's thought

Mimetic desire

After almost a decade of teaching French literature in the United States, Girard began to develop a new way of speaking about literary texts. Beyond the "uniqueness" of individual works, he looked for their common structural properties, having observed that characters in great fiction evolved in a system of relationships otherwise common to the wider generality of novels. But there was a distinction to be made:

Only the great writers succeed in painting these mechanisms faithfully, without falsifying them: we have here a system of relationships that paradoxically, or rather not paradoxically at all, has less variability the greater a writer is.^[7]

So there did indeed exist "psychological laws" as Proust calls them.^[8] These laws and this system are the consequences of a fundamental reality grasped by the novelists, which Girard called **mimetic desire**, "the mimetic character of desire." This is the content of his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961). We borrow our desires from others. Far from being autonomous, our desire for a certain object is always provoked by the desire of another person—the model—for this same object. This means that the relationship between the subject and the object is not direct: there is always a triangular relationship of subject, model, and object. Through the object, one is drawn to the model, whom Girard calls the mediator: it is in fact the model who is sought. Girard calls desire "metaphysical" in the measure that, as soon as a desire is something more than a simple need or appetite, "all desire is a desire to be",^[7] it is an aspiration, the dream of a fullness attributed to the mediator.

Mediation is external when the mediator of the desire is socially beyond the reach of the subject or, for example, a fictional character, as in the case of Amadis de Gaula and Don Quixote. The hero lives a kind of folly that nonetheless remains optimistic. Mediation is internal when the mediator is at the same level as the subject. The mediator then transforms into a rival and an obstacle to the acquisition of the object, whose value increases as the rivalry grows. This is the universe of the novels of Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust and Dostoevsky, which are particularly studied in this book.

Through their characters, our own behaviour is displayed. Everyone holds firmly to the illusion of the authenticity of one's own desires; the novelists implacably expose all the diversity of lies, dissimulations, maneuvers, and the snobbery of the Proustian heroes; these are all but "tricks of desire", which prevent one from facing the truth: envy and jealousy. These characters, desiring the being of the mediator, project upon him superhuman virtues while at the same time depreciating themselves, making him a god while making themselves slaves, in the measure that the mediator is an obstacle to them. Some, pursuing this logic, come to seek the failures that are the signs of the proximity of the ideal to which they aspire. This can manifest as a heightened experience of the universal pseudo-masochism inherent in seeking the unattainable, which can, of course, turn into sadism should the actor play this part in reverse.

This fundamental focus on mimetic desire would be pursued by Girard throughout the rest of his career. The stress on imitation in humans was not a popular subject when Girard developed his theories, but today there is independent support for his claims coming from empirical research in psychology and neuroscience (see below). Farneti (2013) also discusses the role of mimetic desire in intractable conflicts, using the case study of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and referencing Girard's theory. He posits that intensified conflict is a product of the imitative behaviors of Israelis and Palestinians, entitling them "Siamese twins".^[9]

The idea that desire to possess endless material wealth was harmful to society was not new. From the New Testament verses about the love of money being the root of all evil, to Hegelian and Marxist critique that saw material wealth and capital as the mechanism of alienation of the human being both from their own humanity and their community, to Bertrand Russell's famous speech on accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950, desire has been understood as a destructive force in all of literature - with the theft of Helen by Paris a frequent topic of discussion by Girard. What Girard contributed to this concept is the idea that what is desired fundamentally is not the object itself, but the ontological state of the subject which possesses it, where *mimicry* is the aim of the competition. What Paris wanted, then, was not Helen, but to be a great king like Agamemnon. A person who desires seeks to be like the subject he imitates, through the medium of object that is possessed by the person he imitates. Girard writes:

"It is not difference that dominates the world, but the obliteration of difference by mimetic reciprocity, which itself, being truly universal, shows the relativism of perpetual difference to be an illusion."^[10]

This was, and remains, a pessimistic view of human life, as it posits a paradox in the very act of seeking to unify and have peace, since the erasure of differences between people through mimicry is what creates conflict, not the differentiation itself.

Fundamental anthropology

Since the mimetic rivalry that develops from the struggle for the possession of the objects is contagious, it leads to the threat of violence. Girard himself says, "If there is a normal order in societies, it must be the fruit of an anterior crisis."^[11] Turning his interest towards the anthropological domain, Girard began to study anthropological literature and proposed his second great hypothesis: the scapegoat mechanism, which is at the origin of archaic religion and which he sets forth in his second book *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), a work on **fundamental anthropology**.^[12]

If two individuals desire the same thing, there will soon be a third, then a fourth. This process quickly snowballs. Since from the beginning desire is aroused by the other (and not by the object) the object is soon forgotten and the mimetic conflict transforms into a general antagonism. At this stage of the crisis the antagonists will no longer imitate each other's desires for an object, but each other's antagonism. They wanted to share the same object, but now they want to destroy the same enemy. So, a paroxysm of violence would tend to focus on an arbitrary victim and a unanimous antipathy would, mimetically, grow against him. The brutal elimination of the victim would reduce the appetite for violence that possessed everyone a moment before, and leaves the group suddenly appeased and calm. The victim lies before the group, appearing simultaneously as the origin of the crisis and as the one responsible for this miracle of renewed peace. He becomes sacred, that is to say the bearer of the prodigious power of defusing the crisis and bringing peace back. Girard believes this to be the genesis of archaic religion, of ritual sacrifice as the repetition of the original event, of myth as an account of this event, of the taboos that forbid access to all the objects at the origin of the rivalries that degenerated into this absolutely traumatizing crisis. This religious elaboration takes place gradually over the course of the repetition of the mimetic crises whose resolution brings only a temporary peace. The elaboration of the rites and of the taboos constitutes a kind of empirical knowledge about violence.

Although explorers and anthropologists have not been able to witness events similar to these, which go back to the earliest times, indirect evidence for them abounds, such as the universality of ritual sacrifice and the innumerable myths that have been collected from the most varied peoples. If Girard's theory is true, then we will find in myths the culpability of the victim-god, depictions of the selection of the victim, and his power to beget the order that governs the group. Girard found these elements in numerous myths, beginning with that of Oedipus which he analyzed in this and later books. On this question he opposes Claude Lévi-Strauss.

The phrase "scapegoat mechanism" was not coined by Girard himself; it had been used earlier by Kenneth Burke in *Permanence and Change* (1935) and *A Grammar of Motives* (1940). However, Girard took this concept from Burke and developed it much more extensively as an interpretation of human culture.

In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978), Girard develops the implications of this discovery. The victimary process is the missing link between the animal world and the human world, the principle that explains the humanization of primates. It allows us to understand the need for sacrificial victims, which in turn explains the hunt which is primitively ritual, and the domestication of animals as a fortuitous result of the acclimatization of a reserve of victims, or agriculture. It shows that at the beginning of all culture is archaic religion, which Durkheim had sensed.^[13] The elaboration of the rites and taboos by proto-human or human groups would take infinitely varied forms while obeying a rigorous practical sense that we can detect: the prevention of the return of the mimetic crisis. So we can find in archaic religion the origin of all political or cultural institutions. The social position of king, for instance, begins as the victim of the scapegoat mechanism, though his sacrifice is deferred and he becomes responsible for the wellbeing of the whole society.

According to Girard, just as the theory of natural selection of species is the rational principle that explains the immense diversity of forms of life, the victimization process is the rational principle that explains the origin of the infinite diversity of cultural forms. The analogy with Charles Darwin also extends to the scientific status of the theory, as each of these presents itself as a hypothesis that is not capable of being proven experimentally, given the extreme amounts of time necessary for the production of the phenomena in question, but which imposes itself by its great explanatory power.

Origin of language

According to Girard, the origin of language is also related to scapegoating. After the first victim, after the murder of the first scapegoat, there were the first prohibitions and rituals, but these came into being before representation and language, hence before culture. And that means that "people" (perhaps not human beings) "will not start fighting again."^[14] Girard says:

If mimetic disruption comes back, our instinct will tell us to do again what the sacred has done to save us, which is to kill the scapegoat. Therefore it would be the force of substitution of immolating another victim instead of the first. But the relationship of this process with representation is not one that can be defined in a clear-cut way. This process would be one that moves towards representation of the sacred, towards definition of the ritual as ritual and prohibition as prohibition. But this process would already begin prior the representation, you see, because it is directly produced by the experience of the misunderstood scapegoat.^[14]

According to Girard, the substitution of an immolated victim for the first, is "the very first symbolic sign created by the hominids."^[15] Girard also says this is the first time that one thing represents another thing, standing in the place of this (absent) one. This substitution is the beginning of representation and language, but also the beginning of sacrifice and ritual. The genesis of language and ritual is very slow and we must imagine that there are also kinds of rituals among the animals: "It is the originary scapegoating which prolongs itself in

a process which can be infinitely long in moving from, how should I say, from instinctive ritualization, instinctive prohibition, instinctive separation of the antagonists, which you already find to a certain extent in animals, towards representation."^[14]

Unlike Eric Gans, Girard does not think that there is an original scene during which there is "a sudden shift from non-representation to representation,"^[14] or a sudden shift from animality to humanity. According to the French sociologist Camille Tarot, it is hard to understand how the process of representation (symbolicity, language...) actually occurs and he has called this a *black box* in Girard's theory.^[16]

Girard also says:

One great characteristic of man is what they [the authors of the modern theory of evolution] call neoteny, the fact that the human infant is born premature, with an open skull, no hair and a total inability to fend for himself. To keep it alive, therefore, there must be some form of cultural protection, because in the world of mammals, such infants would not survive, they would be destroyed. Therefore there is a reason to believe that in the later stages of human evolution, culture and nature are in constant interaction. The first stages of this interaction must occur prior to language, but they must include forms of sacrifice and prohibition that create a space of non-violence around the mother and the children which make it possible to reach still higher stages of human development. You can postulate as many such stages as are needed. Thus, you can have a transition between ethology and anthropology which removes, I think, all philosophical postulates. The discontinuities would never be of such a nature as to demand some kind of sudden intellectual illumination.^[14]

Judeo-Christian scriptures

Biblical text as a science of man

In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard discusses for the first time Christianity and the Bible. The Gospels ostensibly present themselves as a typical mythical account, with a victim-God lynched by a unanimous crowd, an event that is then commemorated by Christians through ritual sacrifice — a material representation in this case — in the Eucharist. The parallel is perfect except for one detail: the truth of the innocence of the Victim is proclaimed by the text and the writer. The mythical account is usually built on the lie of the guilt of the victim in as much as it is an account of the event seen from the viewpoint of the anonymous lynchers. This ignorance is indispensable to the efficacy of the sacrificial violence.^[17]

The evangelical "good news" clearly affirms the innocence of the Victim, thus becoming, by attacking ignorance, the germ of the destruction of the sacrificial order on which rests the equilibrium of societies. Already the Old Testament shows this turning inside-out of the mythic accounts with regard to the innocence of the victims (Abel, Joseph, Job...), and the Hebrews were conscious of the uniqueness of their religious tradition. Girard draws special attention to passages in the book of Isaiah, which describe the suffering of the Servant of Yahweh at the hands of the entire community, and which emphasize his innocence (Isaiah 53, 2-9).^[18]

By oppression and judgement he was taken away;

And as for his generation, who considered

That he was cut off from out of the land of the living,

Stricken for the transgression of my people?

And they made his grave with the wicked

And with a rich man in his death,

Although he had done no violence,

And there was no deceit in his mouth. (Isaiah 53, 8-9)

With the Gospels, it is with full clarity that are unveiled these "things hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matthew 13:35), the foundation of social order on murder, described in all its repulsive ugliness in the account of the Passion.

This revelation is even clearer because the text is a work on desire and violence, from the serpent setting alight the desire of Eve in paradise to the prodigious strength of the mimetism that brings about the denial of Peter during the Passion (Mark 14: 66–72; Luke 22:54–62). Girard reinterprets certain biblical expressions in light of his theories; for instance, he sees "scandal" (*skandalon*, literally, a "snare", or an "impediment placed in the way and causing one to stumble or fall"^[19]) as signifying mimetic rivalry, as in Peter's denial of Jesus.^[20] No one escapes responsibility, neither the envious nor the envied: "Woe to the man through whom scandal comes" (Matthew 18:7).

Christian society

The evangelical revelation contains the truth on the violence, available for two thousand years, Girard tells us. Has it put an end to the sacrificial order based on violence in the society that has claimed the gospel text as its own religious text? No, he replies, since in order for a truth to have an impact it must find a receptive listener, and people do not change that quickly. The gospel text has instead acted as a ferment that brings about the decomposition of the sacrificial order. While medieval Europe showed the face of a sacrificial society that still knew very well how to despise and ignore its victims, nonetheless the efficacy of sacrificial violence has never stopped decreasing, in the measure that ignorance receded. Here Girard sees the principle of the uniqueness and of the transformations of the Western society whose destiny today is one with that of human society as a whole.

Does the retreat of the sacrificial order mean less violence? Not at all; rather, it deprives modern societies of most of the capacity of sacrificial violence to establish temporary order. The "innocence" of the time of the ignorance is no more. On the other hand, Christianity, following the example of Judaism, has desacralized the world, making possible a utilitarian relationship with nature. Increasingly threatened by the resurgence of mimetic crises on a grand scale, the contemporary world is on one hand more quickly caught up by its guilt, and on the other hand has developed such a great technical power of destruction that it is condemned to both more and more responsibility and less and less innocence.^[21] So, for example, while empathy for victims manifests progress in the moral conscience of society, it nonetheless also takes the form of a competition among victims that threatens an escalation of violence. Girard is critical of the optimism of humanist observers, who believe in the natural goodness of man and the progressive improvement of his historical conditions (views themselves based in a misunderstanding of the Christian revelation). Rather, the current nuclear stalemate between the great powers reveals that man's capacity for violence is greater than ever before, and peace is only a product of this possibility to unleash apocalyptic destruction.^[22]

Influence

Psychology and neuroscience

Jean-Michel Oughourlian in his book *A mime named desire* (*Un mime nommé désir* - Grasset 1982) has used Girard's theories in psychopathology. Hysteria and obsession are explained through mimetic rivalry and the priority of desire.

Girard's work is also attracting increasing interest from empirical researchers investigating human imitation (among them Andrew Meltzoff and Vittorio Gallese). Recently, empirical studies into the mechanism of desire have suggested some intriguing correlations with Girard's theory on the subject. For instance, clinical psychologist Scott R. Garrels wrote:

What makes Girard's insights so remarkable is that he not only discovered and developed the primordial role of psychological mimesis (...) during a time when imitation was quite out of fashion, but he did so through investigation in literature, cultural anthropology, history, and ultimately returning to religious texts for further evidence of mimetic phenomena. The parallels between Girard's insights and the only recent conclusions made by empirical researchers concerning imitation (in both development and the evolution of species) are extraordinary (...).^[23]

Economics and globalization

The mimetic theory has also been applied in the study of economics, most notably in *La violence de la monnaie* (1982) by Michel Aglietta and André Orléan. Orléan was also a contributor to the volume *René Girard in Les cahiers de l'Herne* ("*Pour une approche girardienne de l'homo oeconomicus*").^[24] According to the philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg:

In *La violence de la monnaie*, Aglietta and Orléan follow Girard in suggesting that the basic relation of exchange can be interpreted as a conflict of 'doubles', each mediating the desire of the Other. Like Lucien Goldmann, they see a connection between Girard's theory of mimetic desire and the Marxian theory of commodity fetishism. In their theory, the market takes the place of the sacred in modern life as the chief institutional mechanism stabilizing the otherwise explosive conflicts of desiring subjects.^[25]

In an interview with the *Unesco Courier*, anthropologist and social theorist Mark Anspach (editor of the *René Girard* issue of *Les Cahiers de l'Herne*) explains that Aglietta and Orléan (who were very critical of economic rationality) see the classical theory of economics as a myth. According to Anspach, the vicious circle of violence and vengeance generated by mimetic rivalry gives rise to the gift economy, as a means to overcome it and achieve a peaceful reciprocity: "Instead of waiting for your neighbour to come steal your yams, you offer them to him today, and it is up to him to do the same for you tomorrow. Once you have made a gift, he is obliged to make a return gift. Now you have set in motion a positive circularity."^[26] Since the gift may be so large as to be humiliating, a second stage of development—"economic rationality"—is required: this liberates the seller and the buyer of any other obligations than to give money. Thus reciprocal violence is eliminated by the sacrifice, obligations of vengeance by the gift, and finally the possibly dangerous gift by "economic rationality." This rationality, however, creates new victims, as globalization is increasingly revealing.

Literature

Girard's influence extends beyond philosophy and social science, and includes the literary realm. A prominent example of a fiction writer influenced by Girard is J. M. Coetzee, winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. Critics have noted that mimetic desire and scapegoating are recurring themes in Coetzee's novels *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace*. In the latter work, the book's protagonist also gives a speech about the history of scapegoating with noticeable similarities to Girard's view of the same subject. Coetzee has also frequently cited Girard in his non-fiction essays, on subjects ranging from advertising to the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.^[27]

Theology

Theologians who describe themselves as indebted to Girard include James Alison (who focuses on mimetic desire's implications for the doctrine of original sin), Raymund Schwager (who builds a dramatic narrative around both the scapegoat mechanism and the theo-drama of fellow Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar), and Bishop Robert Barron (who has remarked that Girard will be appreciated as a 21st-Century Church Father in the future.^[28])

Criticism

Originality

Some critics have pointed out that while Girard may be the first to have suggested that *all* desire is mimetic, he is by no means the first to have noticed that *some* desire is mimetic – Gabriel Tarde's book *Les lois de l'imitation* (*The Laws of Imitation*) appeared in 1890. Building on Tarde, crowd psychology, Nietzsche, and more generally on a modernist tradition of the "mimetic unconscious" that had hypnosis as its *via regia*, Nidesh Lawtoo argued that for the modernists not only desire but all affects turn out to be contagious and mimetic.^[29] René Pommier^[30] mentions La Rochefoucauld, a seventeenth-century thinker who already wrote that "Nothing is so infectious as example" and that "There are some who never would have loved if they never had heard it spoken of."^[31]

Stéphane Vinolo sees Baruch Spinoza and Thomas Hobbes as important precursors. Hobbes: "if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies."^[32] Spinoza: "By the very fact that we conceive a thing, which is like ourselves, and which we have not regarded with any emotion, to be affected with any emotion, we are ourselves affected with a like emotion."^[33] Proof... If we conceive anyone similar to ourselves as affected by any emotion, this conception will express a modification of our body similar to that emotion."^[34]

Wolfgang Palaver (de) adds Alexis de Tocqueville to the list. "Two hundred years after Hobbes, the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville mentioned the dangers coming along with equality, too. Like Hobbes, he refers to the increase of mimetic desire coming along with equality."^[35] Palaver has in mind passages like this one, from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*: "They have swept away the privileges of some of their fellow creatures which stood in their way, but they have opened the door to universal competition; the barrier has changed its shape rather than its position."^[36]

Maurizio Meloni highlights the similarities between Girard, Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud.^[37] Meloni claims that these similarities arise because the projects undertaken by the three men—namely, to understand the role of mythology in structuring the human psyche and culture—were very similar. What is more, both Girard and Lacan read these myths through the lens of structural anthropology so it is not surprising that their intellectual systems came to resemble one another so strongly. Meloni writes that Girard and Lacan were "moved by similar preoccupations and are fascinated by and attracted to the same kind of issues: the

constituent character of the other in the structure of desire, the role of jealousy and rivalry in the construction of the social bond, the proliferation of triangles within apparently dual relations, doubles and mirrors, imitation and the Imaginary, and the crisis of modern society within which the 'rite of Oedipus' is situated."

At times, Girard acknowledges his indebtedness to such precursors, including Tocqueville.^[38] At other times, however, Girard makes stronger claims to originality, as when he says that mimetic rivalry "is responsible for the frequency and intensity of human conflicts, but strangely, no one ever speaks of it."^[39]

Use of evidence

Girard has presented his view as being scientifically grounded: "Our theory should be approached, then, as one approaches any scientific hypothesis."^[40] René Pommier has written a book about Girard with the ironic title *Girard Ablaze Rather Than Enlightened* in which he asserts that Girard's readings of myths and Bible stories—the basis of some of his most important claims—are often tendentious. Girard notes, for example, that the disciples actively turn against Jesus.^[41] Since Peter warms himself by a fire, and fires always create community, and communities breed mimetic desire, this means that Peter becomes actively hostile to Jesus, seeking his death.^[42] According to Pommier, Girard claims that the Gospels present the Crucifixion as a purely human affair, with no indication of Christ dying for the sins of mankind, a claim contradicted by Mark 10:45, Matthew 20:28.^[43]

The same goes for readings of literary texts, says Pommier. For example, Molière's Don Juan only pursues *one* love object for mediated reasons,^[44] not *all* of them, as Girard claims.^[45] Or again, Sancho Panza wants an island not because he is catching the bug of romanticism from Don Quixote, but because he has been promised one.^[46] And Pavel Pavlovitch, in Dostoevsky's Eternal Husband, has been married for ten years before Veltchaninov becomes his rival, so Veltchaninov is not in fact essential to Pavel's desire.^[47]

Accordingly, a number of scholars have suggested that Girard's writings are metaphysics rather than science. Theorist of history Hayden White did so in an article titled "Ethnological 'Lie' and Mystical 'Truth';"^[48] Belgian anthropologist Luc de Heusch made a similar claim in his piece "*L'Evangile selon Saint-Girard*" ("The Gospel according to Saint Girard");^[49] and Jean Greisch sees Girard's thought as more or less a kind of Gnosis.^[50]

Non-mimetic desires

René Pommier has pointed out a number of problems with the Girardian claim that all desire is mimetic. First, it is very hard to explain the existence of taboo desires, such as homosexuality in repressive societies, on that basis.^[51] In Girard's defence on the other hand, Jean-Michel Oughourlian exemplifies the situation by noting that "one homosexual admitted to me that he just wanted to be somebody else."

Second, every situation presents large numbers of potential mediators, which means that the individual has to make a choice among them; either authentic choice is possible, then, or else the theory leads to a regress.^[52] Third, Girard leaves no room for innovation: Surely somebody has to be the first to desire a new object, even if everyone else follows that trend-setter.^[53]

One might also argue that the last objection ignores the influence of an original sin from which all others follow, which Girard clearly affirms. However, original sin, according to Girard's interpretation, explains only our propensity to imitate, not the specific content of our imitated desires.^[54] Thus, the doctrine of original sin does not solve the problem of how the original model first acquires the desire that is subsequently imitated by others.

Beneficial imitation

In the early part of Girard's career, there seemed no place for beneficial imitation. Jean-Michel Oughourlian objected that "imitation can be totally peaceful and beneficial; I don't believe that I am the other, I don't want to take his place. ... This imitation can lead me to become sensitive to social and political problems."^[55] Rebecca Adams argued that because Girard's theories fixated on violence, he was creating a "scapegoat" himself with his own theory: the scapegoat of positive mimesis. Adams proposed a reassessment of Girard's theory that includes an account of loving mimesis or, as she preferred to call it, creative mimesis.^[56]

More recently, Girard has made room for positive imitation.^[57] But as Adams implies, it is not clear how the revised theory accords with earlier claims about the origin of culture. If beneficial imitation is possible, then it is no longer necessary for cultures to be born by means of scapegoating; they could just as well be born through healthy emulation. Nidesh Lawtoo further develops the healthy side of mimetic contagion by drawing on a Nietzschean philosophical tradition that privileges "laughter" and other gay forms of "sovereign communication" in the formation of "community."^[58]

Anthropology

Various anthropologists have contested Girard's claims. Elizabeth Traube, for example, reminds us that there are other ways of making sense of the data that Girard borrows from Evans-Pritchard and company—ways that are more consistent with the practices of the given culture. By applying a one-size-fits-all approach, Girard "loses ... the ability to tell us anything about cultural products themselves, for the simple reason that he has annihilated the cultures which produced them."^[59]

Religion

One of the main sources of criticism of Girard's work comes from intellectuals who claim that his comparison of Judeo-Christian texts vis-à-vis other religions leaves something to be desired.^[60] There are also those who find the interpretation of the Christ event—as a purely human event, having nothing to do with redemption from sin—an unconvincing one, given what the Gospels themselves say.^[43] Yet, Roger Scruton notes, Girard's account has a divine Jesus: "that Jesus was the first scapegoat to understand the need for his death and to forgive those who inflicted it ... Girard argues, Jesus gave the best evidence ... of his divine nature."^[61]

Honours and awards

- Honorary degrees at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (the Netherlands, 1985), UFSIA in Antwerp (Belgium, 1995), the Università degli Studi di Padova (Italy, 2001, honorary degree in "Arts"),^[62] the faculty of theology at the University of Innsbruck (Austria), the Université de Montréal (Canada, 2004),^[63] and the University of St Andrews (UK, 2008)^[64]
- The Prix Médicis essai for *Shakespeare, les feux de l'envie* (*A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare*, 1991)
- The prix Aujourd'hui for *Les origines de la culture* (2004)
- Guggenheim Fellow (1959 and 1966)^[65]
- Election to the Académie française (2005)
- Awarded the Dr. Leopold Lucas Prize by the University of Tübingen (2006)^[66]
- Awarded the Order of Isabella the Catholic, Commander by Number, by the Spanish head of state, H.M. King Juan Carlos

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This section only lists book-length publications that René Girard wrote or edited. For articles and interviews by René Girard, the reader can refer to the database maintained at the University of Innsbruck. Some of the books below reprint articles (*To Double Business Bound*, 1978; *Oedipus Unbound*, 2004; *Mimesis and Theory*, 2008) or are based on articles (*A Theatre of Envy*, 1991).

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- 1985. *La Route antique des hommes pervers*. Paris: Grasset. ISBN 2-246-35111-1. (English translation: *Job, the Victim of His People*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987)
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See also

- James George Frazer
- Mimetics
- Simulacrum

Notes

a. Noël, his second name, is also French for "Christmas", the day on which he was born.

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