

## VIOLENCE AND THE SACRED: INTERPRETATIONS OF RENÉ GIRARD IN CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY AND PEACE STUDIES

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**Abstract.** *René Girard's theory about the structure of civilization as a whole is at the same time a theory trying to explain religion, sacred and violence. Today, one can see a constantly increasing interest from Christian philosophers towards Girard's theory, his work being invigorating in the struggle to think and live in light of society's violence. This article investigates briefly the relation between the work of Girard and the Bible as well as his influence on contemporary Christian philosophy.*

**Keywords:** violence, sacred, René Girard, Christian thought, peace studies

René Girard presents a theory about the structure of civilization as a whole. The claim is audacious at best and sweepingly general at worst. Girard claims to have discovered that the structure of civilization has primal violence as its foundation.

That Girard is speaking about civilization itself and examining civilization as a whole reminded me of a quotation attributed to Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi was asked what he thought about western civilization. Gandhi is said to have replied, "I think it would be a good idea". We will see that René Girard would not agree with Gandhi.

Calling the structure of civilization into question is like the old classroom exercise where you assign persons to go outside and count automobiles. One group is to count blue automobiles and one group is to count red ones. You tell them you will have two questions when they return in ten minutes. When they return, your two questions are 1) "Didn't you wonder if it was pointless when I asked you to do it;" and for those who say "well yes, we wondered a little;" your second question is "why didn't you question me about it before you went out and did it". Thinking about the structure, and calling it into question, is what René Girard intends.

Here is an imaginary scene described by Gil Bailie in his book *Violence Unveiled*<sup>1</sup>, which is a book designed to introduce René Girard's thought. Bailie's book *Violence Unveiled*, as a secondary source, is the best general introduction to Girard's thought.

Bailie calls the story "The Nursery." It takes place ... in a children's nursery. One small child is sitting alone in a nursery with a couple of dozen toys scattered about. The child is not particularly focused on anything—with perhaps only a casual interest in the toy that just

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<sup>1</sup>Bailie, Gil. *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995

happens to be nearby. Another child enters the room and sees the first child and the great number of toys. In a moment, the second child will choose a toy. Any parent knows that it likely will be the toy that the first child seems most interested in, even if the first child is only mildly interested.

We smile. We smile at the children. We smile even a little condescendingly. However, substitute the children with adults and substitute the toys with lovers, wealth, power, spouses, career opportunities, or social prestige and the relevance of the story becomes clearer. It is peculiarly human that desire is always a desire for something else, a desire for something else that someone else desires.

Bailie and Girard suggest that it is possible, by focusing on this distinctively human characteristic, to locate the origins of human civilization. The claim is a cultural and anthropological claim (as well as philosophical). Civilization has its origins in what Girard calls the processes of "mimetic desire" or "mimesis" and of "scapegoating" or the "surrogate victim".

With these concepts of "mimetic desire" and "scapegoating" in mind we can examine how Girard's theory becomes also a proposed explanation of "religion," "sacrifice" and the "sacred," and we must turn to the Bible itself (as Girard does) for clues.

### **Biography**

Some biographical background on René Girard is important first however. Girard's résumé has a very specific biblical turn. Girard's entire career has been as a literary critic and anthropologist although he also has chaired the Department of Romance Languages at Johns Hopkins University.

Girard was born in 1923 and in the late 1950's, at Johns Hopkins, Girard was at work on his book on literary theory whose English title became *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. While he was working on this book, he underwent two conversions. The first was intellectual. In working with Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoyevsky; Girard developed the theory of mimesis. He discovered that these writers all present the idea that the model or mediator we might imitate can become our rival if we desire what we imagine the model has. The second conversion was due especially to Dostoyevsky. Girard was especially interested in Dostoyevsky's character Stephan Verkhovensky and the Christian elements surrounding that character. As Girard puts it, "So I began to read the Gospels and the rest of the Bible. And I turned into a Christian".<sup>2</sup>

Girard describes his early career as "very much in the spirit of the atheistic intellectuals of the time". He describes himself as having been engaged in "cynical", "destructive", "pure demystification mode."<sup>3</sup> This is the place he left when he seems to have heard the "take up and read" in the voice of Dostoyevsky. What had been an intellectual-literary conversion for Girard now became a Christian one. That was the impact that reading the Bible had on him.

I have said that Girard's theory becomes also a proposed explanation of "religion", "sacrifice" and the "sacred" and we can turn to the Bible itself for our clues. The time has come.

### **Girard and The Bible**

Not literally, but literarily, culturally, and anthropologically, Girard points to Cain as the founder of civilization through his killing of Abel in Genesis 4:1-16. This murder is the beginning of the process.

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, James G (ed.).*The Girard Reader*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996, p. 285.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 283.

Allow me to describe Girard's view of violence and the sacred by paraphrasing from Leo Lefebure who teaches theology at the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois.<sup>4</sup> Lefebure gives a very clear general description of Girard's thought in the December 11, 1996 edition of the journal *Christian Century*.

Girard says religion was born when a group, for the first time, discovered that in a social situation of internal tension, anxiety and random violence, that killing one or more members of the group would bring a mysterious calm and discharge of tension, discharge of anxiety and discharge of violence--for a time. This is the mechanism of the scapegoat or surrogate victim. In fear that the social anxiety, tension, and violence would return, early humans sought ritual ways to re-enact and resolve the sacrificial crisis in order to channel and contain the violence. Every culture arose, achieved a degree of stability, and incessantly repeats the pattern of targeting certain individuals, or groups, as scapegoats so that violence poured out onto them would keep violence from overflowing its banks and threatening the group in a random way.

This scapegoating violence, and the mysterious calm it produces, has the qualities of fascination and terror –the essential features of primordial religious experience which Rudolf Otto described in his 1917 book *The Idea of the Holy* when he speaks of the "mysterium tremendum et fascinans".<sup>5</sup>

Girard suggests that Otto was closer to the truth than he knew when Otto speaks of the holy as fascinating and terrifying and as "not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances [you]; and beside that in it which bewilders and confounds, [you] feel a something that captivates and transports [you] with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzying intoxication." Then Otto overtly refers to a foundational story of violence and the sacred by referring to the story of Dionysius. Otto says this is the Dionysiac-element in the numen.

Girard argues that culture and literature, with only a single exception, cover and hide their violent origin. One can see it in modern novels; one can see it in classical mythology such as the Dionysius myth. First comes mimetic desire, then comes scapegoating violence, then comes repeated sacrificial ritual.

Above all, one can see this in the Bible. Notice again the story of Cain and Abel. The issues there are not covered over or hidden. They are not justified or explained. The story ends with no great institution comparable to Rome being founded (as in the story of murder with Romulus and Remus).

In the Bible, the tragedy is plain to see. In the Bible it is painfully obvious. With Cain and Abel, the story turns on God's report of the voice of the victim. God says to Cain, "Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" (Genesis 4:10).

The Bible, Girard says, forces one to hear the victim's voice; it forces one to see the tragedy. Throughout its pages the Bible uncovers the struggle, displays the tension, raises the anxiety, and states the violence directly. At most, other literature and society show that the victimization is unjust and arbitrary (and the Bible too is sometimes a mixed message). Overall however, the Bible shows victimization as a fraud. God sides with the victims.<sup>6</sup>

### **Girard's influence**

As evidence of the rising excitement about Girard's themes I would point to the over 200 members of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. It was founded, without the

<sup>4</sup> Lefebure, Leo D. "Victims, Violence and the Sacred: The thought of René Girard" in *Christian Century*, December 11, 1996, pp. 1226-1229.

<sup>5</sup> Bailie, p. 104.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, p. 17.

initiative of Girard himself, "to explore, criticize, and develop the mimetic model of the relationship between violence and religion in the genesis and maintenance of culture."<sup>7</sup> The Colloquium publishes a bulletin as well as the journal *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture*. "Documentation of Literature and the Mimetic Theory" has become a searchable database at the University of Innsbruck. The journal *The Christian Century* in 2006 devoted its 5 September issue to the topic of Girard's thought as it also had its 5 December 1996 issue. A great breadth and variety of documents on Girard's thought are now available and they span several decades.

Despite the excitement, or perhaps because of it, it is important to ask about challenges to Girard's theory. Leo Lefebure, George Hunsinger, and others point out that a core problem in confirming or disconfirming Girard's theory is that it seems to dismiss rather than address opposing evidence. That is, Girard's view can claim that when literary or cultural features seem to contradict the theory, this just shows how religion and culture often effectively cover their origin and their tracks. Lefebure and Hunsinger certainly are right that we should be suspicious of any theory that has a built-in prejudicial means of accounting for evidence against it. One cannot see how Girard's claim even could be refuted.

Secondly, as Lefebure says, Girard's theory risks being a "tour de force which explains too much by explaining everything"<sup>8</sup>. Girard's generalizations do sweep the thinker along. The careful student of literature, scripture, history, or anthropology will find herself questioning whether Girard's claims do account for the entire range of social, religious, philosophical, and psychological phenomena which he says they do. That these matters are important themes or threads in civilization is not as large a claim as that these matters are the origin of all civilizations, for all humankind, throughout all time.

Finally, and theologically rather than philosophically, Hans Urs von Balthasar (as early as 1980) and George Hunsinger suggest that Girard's views are inadequate christologically. They suggest that Girard's views focus on the social context to the exclusion of the Trinitarian context. Girard speaks of Christ as revealing the corrupt mechanism of violence and the victim. Girard fails to speak adequately of Christ as revealing God as the Father and God as the Son and God the Holy Spirit in an act of atonement for the sin world. For von Balthasar and Hunsinger this is much more than a social mechanism, it is God's initiative in atonement. Furthermore, as Hunsinger points out using Karl Barth, the Christian does not merely see a social insight in the life and death of Christ. The Christian sees atonement and the atonement is even of the unaware, even of those without insight, and even of the enemy.

Hunsinger says that Barth writes that "in the cross of Christ, God makes himself vulnerable to [God's] enemies. In the giving of his only Son, God gives nothing more or less than [God's] self ... In giving him-and giving himself-he exposes him-and himself-to the greatest danger. He sets at stake his own existence as God."<sup>9</sup>

Hunsinger points out that "in the cross God does not meet his enemies with malice, retaliation or crushing force. He meets them with the mystery of suffering love. He not only treats them with restraint, but also offers himself up for them all. He presents himself as a living sacrifice, saving them from their self-inflicted destruction by suffering the condemnation they deserve. He does not repay evil for evil, but overcomes evil with good,

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Lefebure, p. 1228.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, Part 1, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956, pp. 71-72 quoted in Hunsinger, George "The Politics of the Nonviolent God" *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 1998, p. 78.

even to the point of setting at stake his own existence. The politics of God thus reveals itself as the politics of nonviolent love."<sup>10</sup>

This initiative by God, and the Christian requirement not merely to avoid making victims but to love one's enemies, to pray for the persecutor, and repay evil with good, includes (but goes beyond) what Girard observes. Yet, Hunsinger concludes with von Balthasar "the central insights of René Girard might be retrieved within the context of a Christian theology more traditional than he supports."<sup>11</sup> Leo Lefebure also notes that "even if it turns out that the universalizing claims of Girard's theory are not sustainable, his work nonetheless calls attention to widespread dynamics of cultural and religious life that too often have been neglected by [philosophers and] theologians. For this we owe him a debt of gratitude."<sup>12</sup>

I conclude that as with much that is theologically and philosophically suspect, Girard's work should be invigorating for the struggle to think and to live in light of society's violence and in light of what Christian philosopher's see as God's ideal of peace.

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<sup>10</sup> Hunsinger, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Lefebure, p. 1229.

Violence and the Sacred (French: *La violence et le sacré*) is a 1972 book about the sacred by the French critic René Girard, in which the author explores the ritual role of sacrifice. The book received both positive reviews, which praised Girard's theory of the sacred, and more mixed assessments. Some commentators have seen the book as a work that expresses or points toward a Christian religious perspective. However, the book has also been seen as "atheistic" or hostile to religion.

Violence and the Sacred

10 Beyond the Novel Girard studies texts of persecution Exploration of religious myths A look at the Oedipus myth. 11 4 Stereotypes in Myths Loss of difference (plague) Crimes that eliminate difference (parricide, incest) Mark of the victim (physical/social defect [limp, foreigner, different class]) Violence (destroy or banish the victim). 12 In a sentence...

22 A Personal Note Girard's Approach to Substitution and the Medieval (Anselmic) Approach The use of scientific method to approach texts and to relate texts to one another The implications of mimetic theory for interpersonal relations

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This article investigates briefly the relation between the work of Girard and the Bible as well as his influence on contemporary Christian philosophy. Keywords. No keywords specified (fix it). René Girard (December 25, 1923 - November 4, 2015) was a world-renowned French historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science. His work belongs to the tradition of anthropological philosophy. Much of his writing is devoted to developing the idea that human culture is based on a sacrifice as the way out of mimetic, or imitative, violence between rivals. His writing covers anthropology, theology, psychology, mythology, sociology, cultural studies, critical theory, and literary criticism

Violence and the Sacred is René Girard's landmark study of human evil. Here Girard explores violence as it is represented and occurs throughout history, literature and myth. Girard's forceful and thought-provoking analyses of Biblical narrative, Greek tragedy and the lynchings and pogroms propagated by contemporary states illustrate his central argument that violence begets violence.

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