

Sacrifice and Violence: new perspectives in the theory of religion from René Girard

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We live in a time in which the boundary fences between the various disciplines are being dismantled—at least as far as the social sciences and humanities are concerned. Take, for example, the work of Michel Foucault. Is it philosophy, history, sociology or political science? Again, where would one place the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida? Under the guise of literary theory it has profoundly changed the enterprise of literary criticism, and some think it is finally bringing to an end the hegemony of historical criticism in the theory and practice of biblical interpretation. With a nod towards Thomas Kuhn we could say that across the social sciences and humanities there is a search for new paradigms.

Students of that questionable discipline, called variously science of religion, history of religions, religiology, religious studies, comparative religion, or simply religion, are well used to a cloud of uncertainty obscuring the legitimacy, function and defining method of their academic project. About the only point of agreement is that the science of religion is not theology—and even that distinction is understood in different ways. Other questions abound. Is there a single science of religion, with a defining method, distinguishing it from such related sciences as anthropology and sociology? Or, is it a collective name for a group of sciences and disciplines with no single methodology? Is there a strictly empirical science of religion or is the study of religion essentially a hermeneutic discipline, demanding a methodology appropriate to one of the *Geisteswissenschaften*? One could continue along these lines, multiplying questions. Enough has been said to indicate what all its practitioners know, the uncertain status of the academic study of religion. By the ‘academic study’ of religion I mean that study when disengaged from the controlling authority and presuppositions of any particular religious tradition or organization.

The study of religion is therefore a doubly sensitive area, both because of the general search for new paradigms in the social sciences and humanities and because of the questionable status of the science of religion in particular. Into this sensitive area René Girard, by profession a literary critic, has charged with unbelievable self-confidence, but

demanding attention by the originality of his thought and the initial plausibility of his theoretical results.¹

A theory based on faith or on analysis?

Girard claims to be engaged in the scientific study of religion. His theory of religion, he insists, is a truly scientific hypothesis, abundantly verified. Perhaps because he knows that his kind of comprehensive theorizing about the origin of religion is generally nowadays dismissed as unscientific, he shows scant respect for what has been achieved so far in the science of religion. He refers contemptuously to 'our pseudo-science of religion' (*RA*, 233). He declares that all the social sciences are impotent because trapped in a phenomenological or empirical impasse. He aims at making the study of religion scientific by grounding it upon an analysis of mimetic desire.² In doing so, he hopes to do for religion what Darwin did for biology in *The Origin of Species*.³ Indeed, his ambition is even greater. His theory, if accepted, would not only account for the origin of religion, but also explain the origin of society with all its institutions and culture; more than that, the theory even embraces the process of hominization (*DCC*, 132—4), and would thus explain the very origin of the human species.

The failure up till now of all such comprehensive, genetic accounts of religion or society does not deter Girard. 'It is foolhardy,' he contends, 'to condemn the search for a real origin simply because the search has not been successful so far' (*VS*, 91). The social sciences are in any case in a state of crisis, and the cause of the confusion they are experiencing lies in their reluctance to scrutinize religion (*VS*, 92). It is in religion, or more precisely in sacrifice, that the key to social formation is to be found. Girard is convinced that he has at last uncovered the secret of religion, and that his hypothesis, truly scientific, can be endlessly verified in all the constants and variables in religious beliefs and practices throughout the world (*DBB*, xiii).

Yet it is the very claim to be scientific that creates a curious incoherence in Girard's thought. Religion, as we shall see, is for him a deceit, a delusion, the concealment of the scapegoat mechanism by which it is constituted. At the centre of religion is a misapprehension of the sacrificial act. The arbitrariness of the choice of the victim upon whom violence is wreaked is concealed. Girard dismisses the theological interpretation of sacrifice as simply fostering the basic misunderstanding by its supposition that God wants sacrifice and demands the victim. He opposes another kind of discourse to theology. This alternative discourse would be an analysis of the social function of sacrifice (*VS*, 7—8).

But is a scientific analysis of the social function of sacrifice capable of revealing the hidden truth of sacrifice, which is the secret of religion and the secret of all human society and culture? That secret is 'what has been hidden since the foundation of the world'—to quote Matthew 13:35, which Girard used as a title for his major work. The question of

the sufficiency of social analysis is pertinent, because Girard maintains that the Christian Gospel alone has broken through the deceit and uncovered the violence that lies at the foundation of religion and society. He even uses that alleged achievement of the Christian Gospel to argue that the Gospel texts have a divine origin. His argument runs in this way: Since human intelligence, human language, everything human, rests upon that foundational violence, the Gospel texts that shatter the delusion cannot have a worldly origin, but must be transcendent.⁴ Is not this a clear appeal to divine revelation? Is it not also a reiteration of the unique status of the Christian faith? Girard refuses to put Buddhism on the same level as Christianity, despite the similarity of the Buddhist analysis of desire and his own theory of the destructiveness of mimetic desire. Christianity, he argues, unlike Buddhism, bases the transcendence it acknowledges upon a total elimination of the false transcendence of idolatry.⁵ According to Girard, even the Old Testament did not succeed in fully uncovering the primordial violence and the primordial deceit underlying the sacrificial form of religion, though it did begin the process of deconstruction.

Are we not here dealing, not with a scientific study of religion, but with a religious thought, based upon faith? The question is complicated by the fact that Girard does not think Christians remained true to the founding insight of Jesus, but fell back into a sacrificial form of religion, which compromised with violence. Hence in relation to Christianity itself Girard joins the company of those who practice a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'—to use Ricoeur's famous phrase. The question will arise whether in refusing to take religious texts at their face-value, Girard has not too easily exempted the Gospel texts from suspicion.

But to return to the question whether Girard is deploying a faith rather than engaged in social analysis. When asked what was the part of faith in his research, Girard answered by distinguishing various points. He claimed to have successfully demonstrated the reduction of the entire corpus of myths and rites to a victimary or scapegoat mechanism. Again, that the principle of this reduction was given by the Gospels was also for him something demonstrated. Further, a non-sacrificial interpretation of the Gospels would seem to impose itself. The elimination of sacrifice strengthens their evangelical authenticity and allows a more coherent and intelligible interpretation than any other exegesis or theology.

Thus, so Girard claims, he has been carried along by the intrinsic force of the perspective he has adopted. Is this a matter of faith or of human intelligence? In reply, Girard rejects the idea that faith and intelligence are opposed. We are passing from a time when faith seems always opposed to intelligence to a time when faith, no longer so opposed, is going to become once again easy. The opposite of faith is not intelligence, but the absence of faith. Research when faith is present is research orientated by faith and for faith; research when faith is absent is research oriented against faith and by its absence. Who is to say *a priori*

which orientation is the truer and most fruitful? In our culture the loss of faith has been considered as the necessary condition for the light of reason to shine. There was some justification for that, inasmuch as the faith thus rejected was tied to the sacrificial form of Christianity. Now that the sacrificial religious system has been radically overcome, faith and reason mutually enlighten each other and tend to become merged.⁶

According, therefore, to Girard's own account, we have in his writings a research orientated by and for faith. Not, however, by and for any kind of faith. Not, however, by and for any kind of faith, but by and for an authentic faith that, enlightened by the Christian Gospels, has seen through the delusion of religion and uncovered its concealed violence. In pursuing his own faith-oriented account of religion, Girard looks at theology, philosophy and the social sciences and finds them all wanting. Theology has compounded the deceit and violence of religion with its concept of God as wanting sacrifice (*VS*, 7) and its interpretation of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice. Philosophy since Plato has recognized the importance of mimesis, but not of the mimesis of appropriation, which we shall see is the fundamental concept in Girard's analysis (*DBB*, vii). Heidegger has deconstructed the Western philosophical tradition and returned to the Pre-Socratics, but it is necessary to go behind the Pre-Socratics to the religious (*DCC*, 377–84). Philosophy has proved unable to understand religion, so we have to reverse our method and understand philosophy through religion. As for the social sciences, they are impotent at present and facing the threat of cognitive nihilism. They are locked into established methodologies, which are dogmatic and based upon the false ideal of direct mastery and immediate evidence (*DBB*, xi).

In place of those dogmatic methodologies, Girard proposes what he calls 'hypothetical knowledge', which does not stem directly from empirical observation or phenomenological intuition (*DBB*, 213). His own theory or hypothesis exemplifies such knowledge. It is a theory or hypothesis based upon facts of which the empirical characteristics are not directly accessible. The texts from which the facts are drawn invariably offer only distorted, fragmentary or indirect testimony.

What Girard is getting at is perhaps clarified by the comparison he draws between his theory and the theory of evolution. This is how he understands the way in which the theory of evolution is grounded:

The theory of evolution depends on the comparison and linkage of evidence—the fossil remains of living creatures—corresponding, in the case of my hypothesis, to religious and cultural texts. No single anatomical fact studied in isolation can lead to the concept of evolution. No direct observation is possible, no form of empirical verification even conceivable, because evolution occurred over a span of time entirely out of scale with the span of human existence (*VS*, 309).

So, in the same way no single text will show forth the full functioning of

the sacrificial system and its founding of human society.

But there is a further reason why the social sciences are not at present truly scientific. 'The scientific spirit cannot come first' (*BE*, 284).

It is not because men invented science that they ceased to hunt witches, it is because they ceased to hunt witches that they invented science. The scientific spirit, like the spirit of free enterprise in economy, is a by-product of the actions in depth exercised by the evangelical text. Modern Western culture forgets the revelation in order to interest itself only in the by-products. It has made arms of it, instruments of power, and behold today the process is turning around against it. The West believed itself a liberator and it discovers itself a persecutor (*BE*, 285).⁷

In other words, science is a by-product of Christian faith. It has reached an impasse at present both because it has denied its origin and because it has failed to renounce violence, being misled by the sacrificial misinterpretation of Christian faith on the part of institutional Christianity. In contrast, Girard sees his own hypothesis as standing apart as truly scientific. It accepts the truth of the Gospel's revelation of the violence at the origin of human society and culture. Its explanatory power enables it to account for all the data. It is scientific, 'because it allows for a rigorous definition of such key terms as *divinity, ritual, rite, and religion*' (*VS*, 315).

But does the hypothesis or theory have the explanatory power Girard attributes to it? Let us examine now the theory more in detail, so as to assess its demonstrative force.

The universality of mimetic desire

Girard's theory of religion rests upon the notion of mimetic desire. The human being is a passionate being, subject to intense desires. Once basic needs for food, sleep, sex, and so on, have been satisfied, and sometimes even before, the human being is carried forward by the power of desire, but by a desire that has of itself no determinate object. Human desire has no fixed object, because what is desired is *being*, something that the subject feels is lacking but which someone else has. Human desire essentially looks to a model for the determination of its object. In other words, it is mimetic or imitative. We desire what we see other people have. We learn what to desire by following a model. Human desire is not binary, with a subject desiring an object, but triangular. It is directed towards an object desired by a model. The object is mediated by the model.

Girard, as I have already noted, came to the study of religion from literary criticism. His first book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*), was a study of mimetic desire in the novels of Cervantes, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Flaubert and Proust. The Romantic lie is that desire is spontaneous, arising within a

self-determining subject. The truth as found in those great novels is that the object of desire is given by mimesis. Thus, to extract two examples: Don Quixote did not spontaneously pursue chivalrous adventures, but was imitating the medieval romances of Amadis de Gaule; Rasholnikov, the murderer of the old pawn broker in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, was not motivated by personal gain but was modelling himself upon Napoleon; and so on. There is in general, according to Girard, an enormous emphasis upon mimesis in Western literature (*DBB*, ix). To overcome their present impotence and regain their vitality, the social sciences need the insights into the dialectic of mimetic desire as found in the great literary masterpieces (*DBB*, xi).

But to return to an analysis of the theory: its basic thesis is that mimetic desire leads inevitably to rivalry and violence. Because our desire as mimetic imitates the desire of the other as model, the other becomes a rival for the same object. When mimesis is mimesis of appropriation, namely an imitation of the model's desire for an object, it is with structural necessity that it gives rise to conflict. The conflict is not just a fortuitous convergence of two desires upon a single object; the mimetic structure of human desire means that the subject desires the object *because* the model or rival desires it.

For that reason, people are everywhere confronted with a double bind. 'Imitate me', the universal human injunction that goes out to all of us from those around us, is immediately followed by 'Don't imitate me' or, in other words, 'Do not appropriate my object'. We are not, however, fully aware of the conflict. We do not understand what is happening. The models, that is everyone in the function of models, though they have encouraged imitation, are still surprised and upset to find themselves in competition with their disciples and feel betrayed by their imitators become rivals. The disciples, in other words everyone in the function of imitators, rebuffed by those they have exalted as models, feel rejected and humiliated by their models become rivals. Each side hurls itself against the other in a blind conflict. Because desire is mimetic, the closer it comes to fulfilment, the greater will be the resistance of the rival and the more violent the resulting conflict.

In this conflict the particular object under contention ceases to matter, compared with overcoming the rival and appropriating the rival's being. Violence itself becomes the very signifier of ultimate desire. The violence is both loved and detested. If the rival collapses under the conflict and ceases to be an obstacle, the prestige of the rival as model has been lost. The disciple must turn elsewhere to a greater violence and thus find an obstacle that promises to be insurmountable and serve as a signifier of ultimacy (*VS*, 148). In short, because human desire is structurally mimetic, human beings are inevitably caught in a universal, reciprocal violence of all against all, which blocks every process of social formation.

Let us pause at this point to ask whether Girard's analysis of desire,

with the Hobbesian view of original human nature it implies, deserves our assent.

Granted a place for mimetic desire, a place greater than has previously been acknowledged, it would seem to me that human desire is not of itself indeterminate or objectless. What makes it seem objectless is that it is unrestricted. As unrestricted, it is, according to a Christian analysis, a natural desire for God. The human being is *capax Dei*, a capacity for God; that is why no finite object can fully satisfy the passionate nature of human beings.

The movement of ultimate desire deploys itself through limited desires. Must it do that through the mediation of mimesis or imitation? The universality of mimesis is unproven. Is there not in fact a contradiction in making mimesis primordial? Mimesis or imitation is of its nature derivative.

A further point: For Girard, as we shall see, religion is a lie and delusion. We have to wait for the Christian Gospels for the truth to be revealed. The consequence of that Christian exclusivity is that human beings in their original or non-Christian state are without any natural idea of God. Torn by a reciprocal violence the cause of which they do not fully understand and without any true knowledge of God or concept of justice, they escape from their plight by the delusionary power of another form of violence: the violence of the sacred, namely by sacrifice. Surely, what we have here is a philosophical or theological anthropology resting upon an *a priori*, not upon a scientific anthropology, drawn from texts and practices, even if only indirectly? But I have anticipated the next stage in the analysis of Girard's theory.

The role of the scapegoat

We have left human beings in a violent conflict of mimetic desire, which blocks the emergence of society and culture. How do they overcome that reciprocal violence? They do so by channelling the reciprocal violence into a unanimous violence against a victim. The victim is arbitrarily chosen and is innocent, not having committed the crimes which everyone falsely and unjustly charges the victim. Though the choice of victim is arbitrary, some distinguishing mark, say a physical disability or a difference of race, makes the future victim marginal to the collectivity and thus suitable to deflect violence away from the group on to the victim. There is operative here a scapegoat mechanism. In a spontaneous fashion, helped by the force of mimesis itself, the group is led to pour out its violence upon a surrogate victim, so that its self-destructive reciprocal violence of all against all becomes a unanimous violence of all against one, which, far from destroying the group, unifies it. At the origin of human society and culture is a collective murder or murders—the contribution of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* is acknowledged but modified—and this originating lynching is what is meant by sacrifice. Sacrifice is an act of violence inflicted upon a surrogate victim or

scapegoat.

The unitive effect of the primal sacrifice is prolonged by means of ritual sacrifice. The primal sacrifice was a unique and spontaneous act. Ritual sacrifice is the endlessly repeated imitation and re-enactment of the originating spontaneous, unanimous violence. The primal sacrifice has a surrogate victim, representing, though in an arbitrary fashion, the community. Ritual sacrifice replaces the surrogate victim with a substitute victim, such as an animal instead of a human victim.

The function of ritual sacrifice is preventive. Its purpose is peaceful. It is not a glorification of violence. Even the most violent rites are designed to abolish violence, to channel violence into spending itself upon victims whose death will not provoke reprisals, so that the cycle of violence will be halted. Nevertheless, the machinery of ritual hides the arbitrariness of the choice of the surrogate victim of the original sacrifice. What is also concealed is the nature of violence and its ability to move arbitrarily from one object to another. The innocence of the victim and the scapegoat mechanism of sacrifice are both suppressed from view. 'Sacrificial substitution implies a degree of misunderstanding. Its vitality as an institution depends on its ability to conceal the displacement upon which the rite is based' (*VS*, 5).

How, then, is human community and culture constituted? The reconciliation brought about by the channelling of reciprocal violence into a unanimous violence against a scapegoat can only be temporary. But it is secured and prolonged by prohibitions, ritual and myth. These are the three pillars of religion, and religion is the symbolic matrix out of which society with its culture is born.

Prohibitions or taboos are designed to exclude all mimetic or imitative behaviour and to forbid all the objects that may cause rivalry. All ritual, whether or not completed in a full sacrifice, is in some measure a re-enactment of the primordial violence against the scapegoat. As such, ritual is a kind of inoculation against a full repetition of that violence. 'The physician inoculates the patient with a minute amount of the disease, just as, in the course of the rites, the community is injected with a minute amount of violence, enabling it to ward off an attack of full-fledged violence.' (*VS*, 289).

The third pillar of religion, standing alongside prohibitions and ritual, is myth. Where Girard makes a dramatic break with all current interpretations of myth is in insisting that the narrative of myth recounts a real event. Myth has a real reference. It refers to the real event of the spontaneous outbreak of violence against the scapegoat victim.

To make sense of the mythological elaboration, we must not overlook one effect of the primal violence, not yet mentioned. Because the murdered victim unites the community and thus renders possible the formation of society and culture, the victim is transformed into a god or hero. From being arbitrarily designated as the guilty cause of the crisis or catastrophe facing the group, the innocent sufferer undergoes an

apotheosis and becomes the founder of society and its institutions.

So, in the manner outlined, the primal violence gives rise to religion, and through religion, namely, through taboos, ritual and myth, gives birth to the other institutions of society. Violence and the sacred, therefore, coincide. The same process is made by each. As Girard writes: 'I have used the phrase "violence *and* the sacred". I might as well have said "violence *or* the sacred". For the operations of violence and the sacred are ultimately the same process' (*VS*, 258).

Religion is an attempt to control, to hold in check, sacral violence. It aims at preventing any further outbreak of spontaneous violence. To achieve its purpose, religion has to camouflage what really happened. It would not retain its structuring power in the formation of society if it did not hide the generative violence at its origin. Religion has to deceive, and it is this that has made religion so enigmatic an object of research. 'In order to retain its structuring influence,' writes Girard, 'the generative violence must remain hidden; misapprehension is indispensable to all religious or postreligious structuring, and the hidden nature of the event corresponds to the researchers' inability to attribute a satisfactory function to religious practices' (*VS*, 310).

Supposing at this point we try a definition of religion. Here are two complementary definitions offered by Girard: 'Religion in the broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence' (*VS*, 23); and, 'Any phenomenon associated with the acts of remembering, commemorating, and perpetuating a unanimity that springs from the murder of a surrogate victim can be termed "religious"' (*VS*, 315).

More needs to be said concerning Girard's interpretation of myths. It should be clear from what has been said so far that Girard brings all myths under a single line of interpretation. All myths are camouflaged accounts of one kind of real event or events, namely of the murder of an innocent victim, designated as a scapegoat. A victim is arbitrarily chosen as the cause of the troubles of the group and thus made the representative of the crimes and guilt of the collectivity. In an act of unanimous violence, the victim is killed, and as a result the community is unified and brought to order and peace. The murdered victim is then transformed into the founding god or hero of the society with his story narrated in the myth. What, however, renders myths difficult to interpret, indeed almost indecipherable, is the necessity of concealing the primal violence and the innocence of the victim and the sheer arbitrariness of the choice of the victim upon whom to wreak violence.

Myths are composed from the point of view of the murderers. Behind the sacralization of the victim, it is easy enough to discern the accusations of which the victim is the object. The victim is made responsible for the disaster, the catastrophes, which are afflicting the community. While present and alive in the community, the victim is

considered as the cause of death; when dead as the source of life. This is the origin of religious transcendence. It is, however, a deception, a lie, because the victim is in truth innocent.

Girard has made his interpretation of myths more intelligible by relating myths to the wider category of 'persecution texts'. Both persecution texts in general and myths in particular are written from the falsifying perspective of the persecutors. The innocence of the victim and the arbitrary character of the violence wreaked upon the victim are concealed and denied. But myths go on to divinize the murdered victim; the persecution texts that are not myths do not proceed to apotheosis. The scapegoat mechanism has to this extent been exposed insofar as we can no longer adore the victims we persecute.

Le Bouc émissaire opens with an examination of a persecution text taken from the fourteenth-century French writer, Guillaume Machaut. The text blames the Jews for the series of disasters at that time afflicting the region. Various crimes, such as poisoning wells, are attributed to them. The text goes on to report the slaughter to which the Jews have been subjected, proclaiming it to have been a just retribution for what they have done. In his analysis Girard points out the particular mode of interpretation we apply to such texts. We do not take them at their face-value, so as to accept or reject their content as a whole. We look behind the text for its structuring principle, namely the scapegoat mechanism. Hence we assign a different reliability or truth-value to the different parts of the text. So, we accept as factual the onset of disaster. We also accept as factual the outcry against the Jews and the slaughter inflicted upon them. However, we dismiss the accusations made against them as false. The more the accusations are multiplied, the more implausible we regard them and the less we hold them to be true. In other words, we read the text as written from the falsifying perspective of persecutors, who are looking for a scapegoat to blame. This going behind the text to its structuring principle is carried out as a matter of mere common sense without any claim to hermeneutical sophistication.

The mode of interpretation we apply to the anti-Jewish texts, we also use in interpreting the texts concerning witches. Apply, says Girard, the same mode of interpretation to myths. They are false in so far as they conceal the scapegoat mechanism and the innocence of its victims. They are, however, acceptable evidence for the fact of primal violence. Their reference is a set of real events. In regard to them, they are narrating the truth.

Two questions for Girard

At this point let us again pause to make some assessment of Girard's theory as it has so far been unfolded. Two lines of criticism suggest themselves. The first is to ask whether Girard has a sufficient data base for the construction of a theory claiming to account for all religions, all myths, all rites and all cultural prohibitions. That, I think, remains very

doubtful, though admittedly the initial explanatory power of the theory has been considerable, which is the reason for the impact it has made.

But I am personally more interested in the second line of criticism and more competent to handle it. This is that Girard puts forward an account of human society that removes society from the sphere of human creativity. Human beings are regarded as incapable of making a society for themselves. They are locked into a mutually destructive violence, from which they cannot extricate themselves. Here are Girard's own words:

Even the crudest of religious viewpoints acknowledges a truth ignored by even the most lucid nonreligious system. The religious believer knows that the establishment of a human society is no simple matter and that the credit for its accomplishment cannot go to man (*VS*, 259).

Again:

Primitive religion is no 'cult of violence' in the contemporary sense of the phrase. Violence is venerated insofar as it offers men what little peace they can ever expect. Nonviolence appears as the gratuitous gift of violence; and there is some truth in this equation, for men are only capable of reconciling their differences at the expense of a third party. The best men can hope for in their quest for nonviolence is the unanimity-minus-one of the surrogate victim. If primitive religious thought is mistaken in deifying violence, it is correct in its refusal to attribute to mankind the principle of social unity. To date, Western society has escaped the most catastrophic form of basic violence, the violence that is capable of annihilating society. This privilege, however, has not been obtained through the kind of *dépassement* advanced by the idealist philosophers who cannot conceive either of the nature of this privilege or the reason behind it, and indeed hardly realize their good fortune (*VS*, 258—9).

We shall see shortly Girard's understanding of the privilege of Western society. Meanwhile, I must remark that what he outlines is a gnostic anthropology. Human nature is structurally evil. It is not a question of sin, but of being trapped in a structurally necessary, but destructive, mimesis. As Valadier has noticed,⁸ Girard pays more attention to Cain's murder of his brother Abel than to the sin of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden. Caught in the reciprocal violence of mimetic desire, the only way forward to a precarious peace is the lynching of an innocent victim, with the murder camouflaged as a sacrifice. The camouflage is what is meant by religion, which is the lie at the basis of every human society.

No wonder that Hans Urs von Balthasar has summed up Girard's view by saying that for Girard religion is the invention of Satan. He adds that in Girard's theory the transition from the sacred to Christ occurs without any understanding on the part of human beings, so Christ

Girard, when asked about Evil, of which he made no mention in his book, *Des Choses cachées*, gave what to me is a most unsatisfactory reply.¹⁰ He first tried to avoid the question by saying that his perspective was anthropological and the question of Evil was ethical and theological. He went on to say that nothing in the Gospel text permitted one to problematize Evil. However, Evil could neither be separated from nor assimilated to mimetism and violence—whatever that might mean! Evil, he goes on, cannot prevent God revealing himself. Unlike the sacred, God is not implicated in Evil.

It is difficult to know how to interpret all this. If the sacred, with the scapegoat mechanism and the deceitful strategy we call religion, is implicated in Evil, the Creator God who made human nature would seem to be likewise implicated. Is God for Girard limited to the New Testament and Christ?

The God who wants no sacrifice

To turn now to the next section of Girard's theory: his interpretation of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and, in particular, his reading of the Gospel texts. This part of Girard's theory was not found in his first two books, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* and *La Violence et le sacré*, but had to wait for its full expression until *Des Choses cachées*. This, as Girard tells us,¹¹ corresponds to the manner in which he came to his conviction of the uniqueness of Christ and the Christian message. He did not begin with that conviction. It was his study of myths and religion that brought him to see that Christianity was not another myth nor another example of sacrificial religion, even though official Christianity was corrupted in direction in the course of its history.

What, then, has been the impact of the Christian Gospels? To understand Girard's answer, we must recall that the scapegoat mechanism, which achieves peace and reconciliation, and thus allows the formation of society and its institutions, only works successfully through a misapprehension, a process of self-duping, which conceals the innocence of the victim of the unanimous violence. What the Judaeo-Christian tradition has done is to uncover that misapprehension, unmask the deceit and proclaim the innocence of the victim. Religions and myths present the primal violence from the standpoint of those who inflict it, namely from the standpoint of the sacrificers. The biblical tradition presents that violence from the standpoint of the victims. This is not yet done with complete consistency in the Old Testament. Thus the Servant Songs in the Book of Isaiah, which are the nearest approach in the Old Testament to the Christian tradition, still attribute some responsibility to Yahweh for the suffering and death of the Servant: '...and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.... Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief' (Is. 53:6 & 10; *DCC*, 328).

The God of the New Testament is a God who does not want

sacrifice. The Gospels never speak of sacrifices, except to reject them and to refuse them any validity. Thus: 'Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners' (Mt. 9:13). Again, the following text is both a rejection of sacrifice and a revelation of its now obsolete function: 'So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift' (Mt. 5:23—4; *DCC*, 266).

The death of Jesus was not a sacrifice. It is Girard's flat denial of the sacrificial character of Jesus' passion and death which has caused most of the ripples in the theological pond. Yet Girard insists that there is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice. The sacrificial reading of the passion of Jesus ought to be exposed and criticized, he says, as the most paradoxical and colossal misunderstanding in the whole of history and at the same time the most revealing of the radical inability of human beings to understand their own violence even when it is represented to them in a most explicit fashion (*DCC*, 267). There is no sacrificial exigency on the part of the Father of Jesus. He is not a God of vengeance or retribution. The Gospels have demystified the theme of divine punishment; it no longer exists, save in the mythological imagination. The apocalyptic theme for Christians is an affair of *human* terror, not of *divine* terror or chastisement. The God of the Christian message is not a God of violence nor of punishment nor of sacrifice.

The very meaning of the divinity of Christ is bound up with the proclamation of God as a God of nonviolence. Girard writes:

To recognize Christ as God is to recognize in him the only being capable of transcending that violence which until then had utterly transcended man. Violence is the subject of every mythical and cultural structure. Christ is the only subject that has escaped that structure in order to free us from its grasp. That hypothesis alone allows us to understand why the truth of the scapegoat victim is present in the Gospels and why that truth enables us to deconstruct all cultural texts without exception (*DCC*, 318—9 — my translation).

Girard applies the same hermeneutic principle to the doctrine of the virginal conception of Christ. What is born of this world is born of violence. In all the mythical accounts of birth from a god, the god does violence to the mother. The truth of the virginal conception is that the God of Jesus Christ is a God of nonviolence (*DCC*, 319—20).

The Gospels make some reference to the primal violence. Girard cites Mt. 23:34—5: 'Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of

innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar'. A similar text is found in John 8:44—5: 'You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin?' Thus, Christ the innocent victim declares his innocence and unmasks the murderous deceit that lies behind official religion.

Girard has written a number of detailed biblical interpretations in support of his theory, to be found in *Le Bouc émissaire. La Route antique des hommes pervers*, published in 1985, is a book-length study of Job. The key to the understanding of Job, according to Girard, is Job's insistence upon his innocence. That is what distinguishes the story of Job from myth and the figure of Job from Oedipus. With Oedipus the scapegoat mechanism is still working, and Oedipus is successfully led to admit his guilt. Job will not enter into the deceit and refuses to deny his innocence. 'The Dialogues of Job,' writes Girard, 'are an Oedipus where the victim refuses to the very end to join his voice to that of his persecutors' (*RA*, 50). Again, 'Oedipus is a successful scapegoat because never apprehended as such; Job is a scapegoat manqué' (*RA*, *ibid*). The comparison allows Girard to offer a definition of myth. 'A myth,' he declares, 'is nothing other than an absolute faith in the all-powerfulness of evil in the victim, which frees the persecutors from their reciprocal recriminations and which thus becomes an absolute faith in the all-powerfulness of salvation' (*RA*, 54). In brief, in the Bible the victims, not the persecutors, have the last word, and for that reason the scapegoat mechanism is unmasked and rendered inoperative.

That is why the death of Christ is not a sacrifice, even though as an event it would seem to have re-enacted the primal violence. The Gospel writers describe how the violence against Jesus became unanimous through mimesis. At the end, Jesus was rejected by the entire society: by the Jewish leaders, by the people, by the Romans and even by his disciples. Yet the resurrection should not be seen as a product of his death, as it would have been had his death been a sacrifice. He was innocent, and therefore all should repent his death. Jesus was not offered in sacrifice, but murdered by lawless men (Acts 2:23). He was killed as the innocent victim who renounced violence and turned the other cheek. The sacrificial re-interpretation of Jesus' death, from the Epistle to the Hebrews onwards, marks the failure of human beings to follow Jesus in embracing total nonviolence.

The Christian Gospels, then, according to Girard do two things, though only with a cultural lag and a consequent failure to understand the Gospels aright and put them into effect. First, they uncover the scapegoat mechanism that lies at the origin of religion, society and

culture, and by uncovering it they destroy its efficacy. Once understood correctly, it no longer works. Human beings are left without the only resource they had for social formation. The innocence of victims, on whose murder society was erected, can no longer be convincingly denied.

Second, the Gospels offer the only alternative policy: namely, conversion to a unilateral forgiving love of all, including your enemies. This implies that we open ourselves to everyone in gratuitous reconciliation and embrace a total renunciation of violence. In the present situation, that is indeed the only alternative to annihilation. Girard writes:

It seems increasingly clear that the pressure of violence or the insistence of truth (for whom man acts as a kind of torchbearer) has forced modern man to come face to face with this same violence or truth. For the first time he is confronted with a perfectly straightforward and even scientifically calculable choice between total destruction and the total renunciation of violence (*VS*, 240).

That would seem to be eminently plausible. But before we rush to agree, let us consider two major objections to Girard's presentation of Christian nonviolence.

Girard and the Gospels: the flaws

The first objection to Girard's presentation of Christian nonviolence points to an unanswered question. How are we going to escape mimetic desire and its destructive consequences? We have seen that mimesis is structurally necessary to human beings, because human desire has otherwise no object. But mimesis inevitably leads to conflict and to reciprocal violence. Girard says extraordinarily little that might help us answer that question. At the end of *Des Choses cachées* he writes:

The Gospels and the New Testament do not preach an ethic of spontaneity. They do not claim that man ought to renounce imitation. They recommend that he should imitate the sole model where there is no risk, if we imitate him as children imitate, of his turning into a bewitching rival (*DCC*, 591—my translation).

In other words we should imitate Jesus Christ, which means that we renounce mimetic desire and seek the glory that comes from God instead of that which comes from men. Jesus, we are told, will make us see that mimetic rivalries lead only to murders and death. He will show us the part played by the victimary mechanism in our cultural system. He will not hide the fact that we are tributaries of all the collective murders committed since the foundation of the world—the murders that founded the same world. He will ask us to acknowledge that we are children of Satan, dedicated to the same lie of our father, who was a murderer from the beginning (*RA*, 228—9). But this simply dodges the issue. We are given groundless preaching, not serious theoretical analysis. Girard, it

must be plainly said, does not show how his original anthropology can allow for the supposed transformation of human beings when they hear the Gospel message.

The second major objection to Girard's presentation of the role of the Christian Gospels is his uncritical acceptance of those texts at their face-value, and his failure to take account of recent historical criticism. This objection was set out in detail in an article of 1985 by Burton L. Mack, 'The Innocent Transgressor: Jesus in Early Christian Myth and History'¹². I will limit myself to the central point. (Some might well find Mack's thesis much too sweeping, but as an hypothesis current in biblical scholarship, it may serve here to illustrate the uncritical character of Girard's interpretation.)

The Gospels are not straight history, says Mack. They do not simply record the situation at the time of Jesus. We cannot without further ado read off from them the truth of Jesus' passion and death. They are written from the point of view of early Christianity, and belong to the time when Christians were struggling to define their social identity, and when their effort to do so was bringing them into conflict with the Jews. The Gospels were in fact written in such a way as to throw the blame for the death of Christ upon the Jews. The trial before the Sanhedrin, for instance, is a constructed replica of the earlier story of the trial before Pilate, thus illustrating the tendency to shift the blame from the Romans to the Jews.

If we use Girard's own terms, the Gospels are persecution texts. 'The gospels,' asserts Mack,¹³ 'are *not* history.... They are myths claiming to be history. They are products of the christological and sociological shifts which marked out the boundaries by which the early Christian movement defined itself as new over against its own past, and as distinct against its contemporary rivals'. They are therefore persecution texts. The persecutors writing the Gospels are Christian and the victims are the Jews. What is unique about the Gospels as persecution texts is that the victims of the persecutors are accused of being themselves persecutors of an innocent victim. They are also peculiar in that they are not written from the point of view of the dominant strata in a culture. The persecutors are a small sub-cultural group within another minority group. However, the fact still remains that the Gospels are mythical texts in Girard's sense, inasmuch as they conceal the truth of social conflict and victimize others without cause. They thus stand at the head of the long series of anti-Jewish persecution texts that punctuate Western history.

If then, we do not stop at individual texts, but consider the meaning and function of the Gospels within the social situation in which they originated, they exemplify the scapegoat mechanism which Girard denounces and claims the Gospels uncover and nullify. The conclusion I draw from this disturbing finding is that there are no privileged texts and no privileged traditions. 'Our pseudo-science of religions,' remarks

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contemptuously Girard, 'rests entirely upon the conviction that there is no essential difference between the different religions' (RA, 233). I can only retort that he himself has indulged in more generalizations about religions and myths than most religionists would consider feasible. Further, his faith in the uniqueness of the Christian Gospels is not scientifically grounded, whatever he may assert to the contrary.

The difficulty with a hermeneutic of suspicion, to use Ricoeur's phrase, or with the critique of systematically distorted communication, to adopt Habermas's analysis, or with the uncovering of a mechanism of structuration under the written text, to adopt Girard's account (RA, 50), is that there is no innocent starting-point, no absolute beginning, no unquestionable *a priori*. Suspicion, critique, uncovering: all can be turned upon oneself. This should keep us humble and prevent us putting forward grandiose systems and universal visions. As a literary critic wrote with a passing reference in the context to Girard:

The trouble with visions, reductive answers and systems is that they homogenize evidence very easily. Criticism as such is crowded out and disallowed from the start, hence impossible; and in the end one learns to manipulate bits of the system like so many parts of a machine. Far from taking in a great deal, the universal system as a universal type of explanation either screens out everything it cannot directly absorb or it repetitively churns out the same sort of thing all the time.¹⁴

There will no doubt be others like myself drawn to investigate the writings of Girard because of his interpretation of the Gospel message as a call to a total renunciation of violence. The attractiveness of the moral choice of nonviolence should not, however, be allowed to blind our critical faculty. Apart from the multiple questionableness of Girard's theory, there is this basic inconsistency: in the name of nonviolence, he is advocating the kind of exclusiveness that has been an endless source of violence in Christian history.

1 René Girard was born in France in 1923. He came to the U.S.A., where he obtained a Ph.D. at Indiana University in 1950. Since then, he has held positions at Buffalo NY State and John Hopkins, and is at present at Stanford. He has published the following books:

Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque (Paris: Grasset, 1961); translated as *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1965).

La Violence et le sacré (Paris: Grasset, 1972); translated as *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1977). The English translation is cited as *VS*.

Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde. Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourian et Guy Lefort (Paris: Grasset, 1978 = Livre de poche, 1983). The Livre de poche edition is cited as *DCC*. English translation: *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987)—not available to me at

time of writing.

'*To Double Business Bound*': *Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1978). Cited as *DBB*.

Le Bouc émissaire (Paris: Grasset, 1982). Cited as *BE*. English translation: *The Scapegoat* (John Hopkins Press, 1986)—not available to me at time of writing.

La Route antique des hommes pervers: Essais sur Job (Paris: Grasset, 1985). Cited as *RA*. English translation: *Job: The Victim of His People* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987)—not available to me at time of writing.

The publication of *VS* brought Girard some critical attention, and articles were devoted to his thought in a variety of journals. But it was with the publication of *DCC* that Girard and his thought became a media event in France, so that one spoke of *Le phénomène Girard*. Since then articles, seminars and symposia have been devoted to his theory. There is a useful bibliography, compiled by Georges Tissot, in *SR: Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 10/1 (hiver/winter 1981), 109–12. Despite the froth of publicity, Girard's writings still demand serious consideration.

- 2 'Quand ces choses commenceront...'. Entretien avec Philippe Murray, dans *Tel Quel* (1978), 37.
- 3 *Ibid*, 44.
- 4 'Seminaire de recherche sur l'oeuvre de René Girard', *SR: Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 10/1 (Hiver/winter 1981), 84. Girard himself participated in the seminar, and the reference is to his own words.
- 5 *Ibid*.
- 6 'Quand ces choses commenceront...', 38–9.
- 7 I have taken the English translation of the passage from *Le Bouc émissaire* from the Introduction by André J. McKenna to the special number of *Semeia*, devoted to Girard. *Semeia* 33 (1985), 10.
- 8 Paul Valadier, 'Bouc émissaire et Révélation chrétienne selon René Girard', *Etudes*, Août-septembre 1982 (357é2–3), 258.
- 9 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, Band 3: *Die Handlung* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1980), p. 287.
- 10 'Quand ces choses commenceront...', 36.
- 11 'Quand ces choses commenceront...', 46–8.
- 12 *Semeia* 33 (1985), 135–65.
- 13 *Op. cit.*, 155.
- 14 Edward W. Said, 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community' in Hal Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. 143.