An Introduction to the Work of René Girard

By Peter Stork

Over the years, several authors have written comprehensive summaries of Girard's *oevre* as well as book-length introductions.[1] This article does not seek to repeat their work. Instead, I shall attempt to introduce Girard by selectively engaging with his work. Beginning with the trajectory of Girard's intellectual quest, I shall outline first the main features and implications of his theory, followed by an account of his recognition as well as typical criticisms. Then I shall relate Girard's anthropology to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and lastly—albeit briefly—address the question of relevance of Girard's theory for the severity of the current global crisis.

The Trajectory of Girard's Thought

The milestones of Girard's intellectual quest are reflected in his major publications: *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961), *La violence et le sacré* (1972), *Des choses cachées dépuis la fondation du monde* (1978), and *Le bouc émissaire* (1982). In *Mensonge,* Girard links mimesis with desire and discerns its triangular structure or derivative nature. This discovery enabled him to unravel the hidden plot behind the human drama. Having located the motivational centre of humanity in mimetic desire and rivalry, Girard uses this insight to re-read cultural history in its entirety. In *La violence* he proposes the theory of the sacrificial crisis and the collective killing of a victim as its resolution. He then claims that this mechanism lies at the root of all religion and culture. In his exploration of this anthropological phenomenon and its socialization, he acknowledges his indebtedness to Freud (but also criticizes him) and discusses the relation between mimesis and rivalry and how

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[1] Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroad* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); Michael Kirwan S.J., *Discovering Girard* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2004); Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Robert Hamerton-Kelly, "Religion and the Thought of René Girard", in *Curing Violence*, ed. Mark I. Wallace and Theophus H. Smith (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994), 3-24; James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995); Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 2001), 27-37; Burton L. Mack, "The Innocent Transgressor: Jesus in Early Christian Myth and History", *Semeia* 33 (1985), 135-65. Most articles in Wallace & Smith's *Curing Violence* contain brief summaries of Girard's theory. For a comprehensive exposition in German see Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetische Theorie: Im Kontext Kulturtheorethischer und Gesellschaftspolitischer Fragen*, Beiträge Zur Mimetischen Theorie, vol. 6 (Münster; Hamburg; London: LIT Verlag, 1998).

overcoming difference (which is the object of acquisitive imitation) also leads to rivalry. From this he concludes that, for the imitator, the end of mimetic desire is the appropriation of the identity of the model. Because the imitator re-presents this appropriated identity as distinct or different from the original,[2] such appropriation "eliminates" the other. According to Girard, this inevitable result of mimetic desire and its escalation becomes the defining act of humanity. Tragically, this cuts across the grain of social formation. Since conflict once unleashed will run its course until a victim is slain, sacrifice becomes the saving event in communities threatened by mimetic violence. The mechanism of mimesis assures that victims are seen as "monsters" responsible for the crisis. Their lynching thus promises a new beginning for the community after the chaos. Once slain, victims also become the saviors of the community.

In his later works, especially in *Le bouc,* Girard is no longer concerned with the *definitive act of humanity* or the "originary scene" but with testing his theory as he relentlessly probes many texts in relation to the scapegoat mechanism and the mythical concealment of violence.

In *Des choses cachées* and also in *Le bouc*, Girard turns his attention to the Judeo-Christian scriptures. In his view, the Old Testament begins a prophetic process that critiques the ancient mythological mindset of the sacrificial culture which always tells the story from the perspective of the persecutors. For Girard, this process comes to full fruition in the New Testament.

Main Features and Implications

In Girard's proposal, the "scene of [human] origin" lies in the horror of an outbreak of unstoppable violence *within* the archaic community. It is the internal crisis, the spilling over of violent reciprocity into the "interior" of their social space that fills the group with dread and now brings about the perception of an encounter with the "sacred".

This notion has important implications for Girard's interpretation of the origin of sacrifice and the nature of religion.

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[2] Burton L. Mack, "The Innocent Transgressor", 138.

First, sacrificial ritual originates with a human victim, not with animal sacrifices. For Girard, animal sacrifices belong to later substitutionary development.

Second, Girard perceives violence as a reciprocal phenomenon, which, like vengeance, lends violence its self-perpetuating and interminable character. Therefore, the function of sacrifice and victimary substitution is the transmutation of reciprocal violence into a culturally "safe" ritual by venting it on a victim from whose death no one needs to fear reprisals. As long as this act is perceived by all as "sacred violence", it breaks the destructive momentum of vengeance and transposes it into a protective one. In other words, in primitive society sacrifice holds the impulse for revenge in check in the guise of religious violence.[3]

Third, this understanding throws light on the choice of sacrificial victims. To be "sacrificiable", victims had not only to be sufficiently similar to allow substitution, but also sufficiently different and marginal to make them legitimate targets of collective violence that would draw the focus away from the community proper. This explains why slaves, prisoners of war, the deformed and children qualified. As they were not fully integrated into the community, their slaughter would not pose a reciprocal threat of revenge or blood feud.[4]

Anthropologists have often related sacrifice to the notion of guilt. Girard denies this link. For him, sacrifice is ritualized vengeance, not an act of expiation. In primitive society, the orientation is not towards a wrongdoer but towards a victim designated to absorb the communal violence. Girard argues that the question of guilt only arises in judicially structured societies with their orientation towards the concepts of transgression and a guilty party.

Girard draws attention to the similarity between the sacrificial system of earlier civilizations and the judicial system of more advanced societies. He argues that they are functionally identical in that both fulfill the same purpose: to save society from its own violence. However, both will "work" only as long as they are perceived as having exclusive access to the means of vengeance. In the case of the

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[3] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 12-14, 21.

[4] *Ibid.*, 12-15.

sacrificial system this is established by the centrality of the "sacred", and in the case of the judicial system by the "independent authority" of the law. While each system declares its own violence "holy" and legitimate over and against any other source of violence, each equally obscures the fact that human beings need protection from their own reciprocal violence. Should this veil be lifted, both systems lose their efficacy. In another way, demystification robs both systems of their power to break the cycle of reciprocal violence. The ensuing weakening of the victimage mechanism leaves society open to loss of identity and to outbreaks of undifferentiated violence or anarchy. Under such conditions, society enters what Girard calls the "sacrificial crisis". When the notion of legitimate violence is lost, society is exposed to the irrepressible powers of reciprocal violence and its contagious escalation. Then, writes Girard, "man's desires are focused on one thing only: violence". The key to an understanding of this startling conclusion lies in Girard's notion of desire and its relation to violence.[5]

To understand Girard's notion of desire, it is important to grasp that in his scheme desire is "mimetic". With this qualifier Girard means, on the one hand, that desire is distinct from appetite or biological needs such as hunger or thirst. On the other hand, it is to say that human beings imitate each other. They copy not only gestures, language and other cultural expressions but also each other's desires. Conflict results when this process leads to convergence of desires on the same object.

If desire is mimetic, the conflictual nature of human interactions may be explained. It is a well-known tendency in ethology to extrapolate animal behavior into the human sphere. The idea that human aggression and violence are "instinctive" owes its existence to this tendency. However, violence in animals rarely leads to the death of an opponent or rival. A built-in mechanism terminates the combat before it reaches the lethal stage. Such a constraint is lacking in humans. Consequently, when faced with a rival, humans are defenseless against their own impulses which they do not know how to control. However, before we can understand Girard's notion of "desire", we need to trace his thoughts about the pivotal role he ascribes to the "rival" in relation to desire and its violent manifestations.

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[5] *Ibid.,* 22-30, 145.

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In Girard's thought, desire does not arise in a subject as an autonomous and spontaneous attraction to an object, neither is a rival defined as the result of two autonomous desires spontaneously and concurrently converging upon the same object. Rather, *"the subject desires the object because the rival desires it."*[6] In other words, the desirability of an object for the subject lies not in the object itself, but in its desirability in the eyes of another. Girard explains:

> In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires.[7]

We will not understand the intensity and significance of this "imitation of desire" until we see its essential motif. Desire not only seeks to possess the object to which the model points, but also seeks to be "possessed" by it, for the acquisitiveness of desire is not primarily directed at the object itself but at what it signifies, namely the model proper. In other words, this acquisitiveness aims at the very *being* of the one who finds the object so desirable. According to Girard, it is the imitator's perceived *lack of being* or his sense of ontological emptiness that drives the intensity of acquisitiveness. An existential void which the successful acquisition promises to remedy appears at the core of human desire. This acquisitiveness is therefore, as Fleming explains, "merely a path, the perceived privileged route, to the attainment of the ontological self-sufficiency detected in the rival".[8]

This dynamic renders desire essentially conflictual, and the ensuing conflict is irreconcilable, except at the expense of the model or a substitutionary victim. What is more, the outworking of this conflict locks both model and imitator into what Girard has called the *double-bind* in which they constantly signal contradictory messages to one another – "imitate me, but don't desire my object". This phenomenon, Girard contends, forms the basis of all human relationships and is, in the final analysis, the instigator of the sacrificial crisis where desire and violence are no longer distinguished.

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[6] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 145 (original emphasis).

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Fleming, *René Girard*, 24.

At the point of a mimetic crisis, violence begets more violence as each participant resorts to more violence to overcome the violence of his opponent. Under the dynamics of the double-bind, the distinction between model and imitator vanishes so that the mimetic crisis becomes a crisis of non-differentiation that threatens the cohesion of the community (which is built on distinctiveness) unless at the height of undifferentiated violence a surrogate victim is arbitrarily slain. The unanimity of the collective murder causes the violence to subside and the vicious cycle of mimetic violence to be broken. This death and the ensuing peace (absence of violence) transmute the energies of reciprocal violence into sanctioned ritualistic forms so that their later performances occur as re-enactments of the scene of origin through which the cultural order is preserved. Religion is thus not an attempt to contact "the gods" but ritualized vengeance that prevents its uncontrollable outbreak.

The five chief elements of Girard's "mimetic anthropology" may be summarized as follows:

Mimesis

In Girard, mimesis is not the copying of actions but the imitation of desire, or the replication of another's attraction towards an object. In this definition, mimesis is acquisitive and desire is "suffered desire" that arises spontaneously when the object is valued by a mediator. Girard distinguishes between external and internal mediation. The greater the distance between the subject and the mediator, the freer is the relationship between them from the possibility of rivalry. In that case, Girard speaks of external mediation. If the distance diminishes, not only does the possibility of rivalry increase but its intensity also rises proportionately. Then Girard speaks of internal mediation, in which case the model or mediator has also become the obstacle. He or she now obstructs the desired acquisition while constantly signaling the desirability of the object. This model/obstacle dynamic shifts the value from the object itself to the obstruction which also explains why prohibition heightens the object's desirability.

Metaphysical Desire and Transcendence

When mimesis progresses towards rivalry, the object becomes less and less important as desire focuses on the mediator become obstacle. At the height of the

conflict the object is forgotten altogether. At this point, desire has become metaphysical and now seeks to possess not the object but the being of the other, in fact to become the other. The conflict is over recognition and prestige.

Since human desire is mediated desire, i.e. it does not arise from within but from an external source, Girard interprets its triangular nature to mean that human beings are structured towards transcendence. Human desire is to be mediated by a truly transcendent spiritual source. Therefore, mimetic rivalry is the pathological variant of desire awakened by a false transcendence, that is, by the proximity of the desire of another human being.

The Mimetic Crisis

A further progression of mimetic conflict leads to the formation of doubles. The subject and the mediator of desire become more and more like each other. In this instance, the rivals copy each other's desire and in the process erase their differences. Girard calls this point in the progression the "mimetic crisis". Since mimetic desire is highly infectious, it affects groups and society to the point where it can spin out of control and threaten the existence of community. However, the operation of mimesis ensures that at the extreme the total reciprocal violence is vented unanimously on a surrogate victim which is killed. The murder of the victim brings peace. But if the cause for their unanimity is misattributed to the victim rather than to the function of mimesis aroused by the victim mechanism, the peace is based on a delusion. Because the resolution of the crisis demands the blood of a victim, the mimetic crisis is also called "sacrificial crisis".

The Victim and the Sacred

According to Girard, this misattribution occurs spontaneously at the height of the crisis when the group transfers its violence to the victim. Violence is not repressed, but through the process of transference it becomes "detached". This turns the victim into a god who miraculously transforms the destructive violence of the conflict into legitimate violence for the sake of peace in the community. The result is a double delusion. The victim is seen as "supremely active and powerful",[9] while its corpse has become the transcendent signifier of the "sacred" whose violence, like a double-

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[9] Girard, *Things Hidden,* 52.

edged sword, cuts both ways: it ensures the order of society but also has the power to destroy it. Under this delusion, the "sacred" masquerades as the cause as well as the cure of mimetic violence and as such represents "the transcendental pole of primitive religion".[10]

The Scapegoat

The term relates to the unconscious transference of violence onto another along with its associated guilt. In myths, the scapegoat is represented by "texts of persecution", similarly in stories which tell the tale from the perspective of the persecutors. It is both a term in common language as well as a ritual act that communicates the dynamic and result of transference. By pointing indirectly to the need for transference, however, it partly discloses the underlying problem of the human subconscious which, since the originary scene is structured on the basis of a lynching, seeks to rid itself of violence and guilt by laying it on others.[11] In short, Girard rejects the idealistic notion that it is natural for human beings to live in peace with each other.

Acclaim and Criticism

Girard's seminal thinking has had wide-ranging impact on the debate about the origins of civilization and religious theory. Other disciplines have also found his thoughts attractive as the growing secondary literature indicates. On the other hand, his sweeping claims (all violence is rooted in mimetic desire, and human civilization is a prophylactic structure, a form of organized, albeit sophisticated, victimage that prevents mimetic violence) have understandably not met with universal acceptance. Girard's theory has caught the attention of a growing number of scholars. Not only has his work been widely read in his native France, where he was honored by being admitted in 2005 to the *Académie Française,* but also the English-speaking academy has begun to draw on his insights across a range of disciplines. International conferences have explored his ideas and the interpretive literature is growing. Girard's collaboration with French psychologists Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy

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[10] Hamerton-Kelly, "Religion and the Thought of René Girard", 13.

[11] As Hamerton-Kelly puts it, "it is half-way between the pole of concealment and the pole of complete disclosure" (Hamerton-Kelly, "Religion and the Thought of René Girard", 22).

Lefort has produced a psychology of the "interdividual" that radicalizes the social dimension of the human self. Ourghourlian even attributes phenomena like hypnosis to human mimesis. Economist Paul Dumouchel and others have applied Girardian thought to such issues as market competition and scarcity. The Journal of the Colloquium on Religion and Violence, *Contagion*, regularly publishes findings of research conducted with and on Girard's theory. Biblical scholars Hamerton-Kelly and James Williams have applied Girard's theory to the interpretation of the Bible, while Catholic systematic theologian Raymund Schwager makes wide use of the Girardian grid in his theological project. James Alison has examined the doctrine of original sin from a Girardian perspective while Gil Bailie has undertaken to bring Girard's theory to a wider readership outside the academy.

While Girard has, no doubt, presented a most intriguing and compelling hypothesis, it is also controversial. When he and his followers proffer it as the ultimate explanation for all institutions of culture and religion, questions arise about the validity of assumptions, the nature of the evidence and the scientific method by which his arguments are sustained.

One of Germany's foremost Catholic theologians and Guardini-Award winner, Eugen Biser, dismisses Girard's theory as an "absurd thesis".[12] German scholar Markwart Herzog has criticized Girard for drawing the *Totalität der Geschichte* from a single event-type. While he concedes that Girard has assembled much empirical material from mythology to support his *"Kultopfer"*-theory, Herzog remains skeptical whether the same material is capable of validating the assumption of an *"Uropfer"* the historicity of which cannot be validated.[13] He also argues that Girard's system is scientifically unsound in that is not open to critical evaluation and cannot be falsified by empirically grounded objections. This immunity comes at the price of being unscientific.

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[12] Eugen Biser, "Die Stimme der Antigone: zu Georg Baudlers Untersuchung über Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit in Religion und Christentum", *Theologische Revue* 50, no. 9 (1994), 355-64; 367-68.

[13] Markwart Herzog, "Religionstheorie und Theologie René Girards", *Kerygma und Dogma* 38, no. 2 (April/Juni 1992): 105-37. See also Leo D. Lefebure, "Victims, Violence and the Sacred: The Thought of René Girard", *The Christian Century*, 11 December 1996, 1226-28; likewise Walter Wink does not believe that all myths "are lies masking events of generative violence", but offers no evidence for his view (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 153).

In an attempt to answer these charges, James Williams and Raymund Schwager have come to Girard's defence. If Girard has called his theory "scientific", it should be understood in the sense that it is "analytic" and not positivistic. Girard himself admits that his theory is not verifiable by the criteria of Karl Popper. James Williams has been careful to avoid the term "scientific," and presents Girard's proposal as a "heuristic model", whose interpretive power should be tested rather than its factual accuracy. Similarly, the demand that it should account for every cultural detail is absurd simply because traditional variations inevitably develop over time.[14] In this light, the charge of monism does not hold. Moreover, Girard has not claimed to write as a theologian, but has attempted to present an "anthropology of the cross". Schwager has also defended Girard along anthropological lines[15] and taken Girard's model deeply into his dramatic theology.

Peter Oberhofer has taken up the question of the scientific status of Girard's hypothesis again and observed that to pose the antithesis of a "scientific" and an "hermeneutical" reading of mimetic theory must remain unsatisfactory because the "scientific" issues raised are not likely to be cancelled by treating the theory as a heuristic model. This, however, is not to say that the latter negates the scientific character of the theory. It only draws attention to the inadequacies of its "scientific" categories to deliver on its own an adequate anthropological interpretation of its findings.[16]

Bruce Chilton[17] has been much more reserved in his evaluation of Girard, especially in respect to the notion of sacrifice. He also noted that Girard is frequently charged by his critics with "an excessively genetic concern with origins". But Chilton credits Girard's genius with the brilliant insight that mimesis is a renewable resource,[18] which prompts the question whether humanity is inexorably tied to

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[14] James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence*, Pbk. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 13-14.

[15] Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?,* 25-27.

[16] Peter Oberhofer, "Mimetische Theorie als Hermeneutik", in *COV&R Conference* "Passions in Economy, Politics and the Media", 20 June 2003, Innsbruck University.

[17] Bruce Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program within the Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

[18] *Ibid.*, 21.

violence. Girard denies it.[19] While scapegoats may be found as required, it is mimesis, not violence, that plays a primordial role.

Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, after examining Girard's proposal from a black-feminist perspective, echoes the concern that Girard's theory is reductionist and one-dimensional. Despite its claims to universality it lacks the capacity for an "adequate critique of women as protagonists and victims."[20]

Theophus Smith has observed that Girard is disinclined to enter the realm of praxis and seems to leave the emergence of non-violent cultures to chance,[21] while John Darr appreciates Girard's unique approach that has "altered the landscape of such diverse fields as sociology, psychology, philosophy, literary theory, and religious studies".[22]

These are important observations. Most scholars acknowledge the significance and provocative nature of his contributions, while rejecting the universal nature of his claims. Girard has certainly provided the discourse on violence and religion with many profound insights and with a useful vocabulary. As the emerging literature shows, he has stimulated many disciplines including Christian theology to rethink certain areas that have been left unattended or excluded from the discussion. Therefore, Girard's insights into mimetic conflict and the scapegoat mechanism must be ranked among the most penetrating intellectual discoveries. At the same time, I note that Girard's theory, while elucidating the phenomenon of collective violence and envious murder, does not account satisfactorily for the depth of human evil.

Girard and the Judeo-Christian Tradition

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[19] Hamerton-Kelly (ed.), "Discussion", in *Violent Origins*, 123.

[20] Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Gender, Violence, and Transformation in *The Color Purple*", in *Curing Violence*, ed. Mark Wallace and Theophus H. Smith (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994), 266-86.

[21] Theophus H. Smith, "King and the Black Religious Quest to Cure Racism", in *Curing Violence*, ed. Mark I. Wallace and Theophus H. Smith (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994), 244.

[22] John A. Darr, "Mimetic Desire, the Gospels, and Early Christianity: A Response to René Girard", *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 3 (1993), 357-67.

In approaching the thought-world of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Girard has rigorously maintained his anthropological focus. This section traces his thoughts about religious relativism and the truth claims of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Already in antiquity paganism tried to relativize Christianity's claim to uniqueness by pointing to the similarity between biblical stories and mythical accounts. The Passion account of Christ, it was asserted, differed little from the myths. Members of the pagan pantheon like Dionysus, Osiris and Adonis also suffered martyrdom at the hands of a frenzied mob. This violence too occurred at the height of a social crisis, and was followed by the triumphal reappearance of the slain victim. This "resurrection" was then interpreted as a revelation of its deity.

In search of a global, unifying theory of religion, ethnologists of the 19th and early 20th century drew similar conclusions. Although such attempts never succeeded, they displayed a form of intellectual imperialism reflective of the political and colonial imperialism of their time. Girard notes, that although many of these ethnologists were anti-colonialists, they were nonetheless motivated by the double passion typical of Darwinism: a passion for science coupled with a passionate anti-religious bias. Both motivated their search for the essence of "religion" in order to discredit Christianity's claim to uniqueness, to un-repeatability and particularity. The contemporary relativist claim that insists on the similarity of all religions has identical roots. From Girard's view point, even when differences between religions are discussed, they tend to miss the point because they omit the one difference that really counts, so that the conversation always ends with the similarity between myths and Christianity. Since these are too numerous and too obvious, the possibility that Christianity is unique is rejected.

What is then the essential difference between Christianity and myths? In the Christian presentation the victim is innocent and collective violence is self-evidently guilty, while in mythology the crowd is always innocent (even when the victims – as is sometimes the case – are also portrayed as innocent). Oedipus is really guilty and the crowd of Thebes has good reason for expelling him. But the Servant of God (Isaiah 53) and Jesus are indeed innocent. Their death is portrayed as an injustice.

According to Girard, Nietzsche has overlooked something decisive. The morality on which the Judeo-Christian defence of the innocent victim is based is not "slave morality", that is, the malicious lust for vengeance of the weak against the strong. It is instead a morality which correlates to the truth that the victims are indeed innocent. This congruence of truth and morality escaped Nietzsche and those who follow him in his anti-Christian bias. What these critics of Christianity overlooked is the unanimity that the scapegoat engenders and its moral implications.

In other words, mimetic theory lays bare what goes on behind the superficial similarity of myths and the Judeo-Christian tradition. The chaos that precedes collective violence is the disintegration of human society which is the fruit of mimetic rivalry. To this all people are prone and, because it is contagious, rivalry and thus violence escalates. But mimesis also unites society against the "scapegoats", who are thought to be responsible for the disorder. This apparent lucidity as to who is responsible is in fact the result of a delusion derived from mimetic contagion.

The myth then is a phenomenon of the crowd. This delusionary construal is incapable of unveiling even the most improbable accusations which always centre on "oedipal" crimes, patricide, incest and plague-transmission. These crimes are projected on victims in an attempt to cover the crowd's persecutor mentality. Myths deceive in that they reverse the real and inescapable relation between isolated, powerless victims and society which persecutes them. The Judeo-Christian texts, however, unveil the truth of that relation which the myths seek to conceal. These texts re-establish the right relationship. Thus the Judeo-Christian tradition shakes the mythical system in its entirety.

But this lie so exposed plays an important role in culture. Anthropologically, both the myths and the Christian story have their home in the same type of crisis. It is the same mechanism that produces the victims. What distinguishes the Christian tradition is its reaction to the crisis. In the myths, the mechanism (Girard calls it "the machine") works so efficiently that the unanimity it generates is total. No one is exempt from the violent contagion of the mob so that every opposition is excluded. The results are portrayed by the myths as "pure truth". But under the impact of Judeo-Christian revelation, the "machine" no longer works efficiently. Indeed, in the

Gospels it works so badly that the whole truth of the scapegoat mechanism is exposed.

Girard argues that the extraordinary nature of the revelation is not undermined by the fact that in a global sense neither Jewish nor Christian communities have been more efficient than mythical communities in their resistance against violent contagion. That small minorities were, however, able to achieve it, testifies to the effectiveness of the revelation in a twofold way: it lends uniqueness to the tradition itself and then comes to life at its very centre when minorities resist contagion with mimetic violence. While they were too small to carry the victory in history, they were nevertheless powerful enough to influence the redaction of the Christian texts decisively. Compared with mythical presentations, which always seek to preserve the unifying and purifying effect of violence, the Judeo-Christian narrative reveals that collective acts of violence lead to a "division" even in the gospel text itself. For instance, the synoptics let Jesus say that he brings war not peace, while the fourth Gospel depicts Jesus as bringing division wherever he presents his message. In other words, the revelation deconstructs a social harmony that is based on the lie of violent unanimity. In respect of the crisis, the myths only represent the passive reflex, while the Judeo-Christian tradition actively reveals the collective scapegoat-producing machine behind it.

This truth is inaccessible to myth. At the same time, Girard notes that the Judeo-Christian tradition is fully conscious of it. That tradition is, he writes,

> neither an ethnocentric stupidity nor rivalry with other religions from which it monopolizes and cashes in this truth claim. Nietzsche was correct on this point: No other religion defends victims in the same manner as the Judeo-Christian tradition. But if Nietzsche saw in it the mark of inferiority, we see in it an expression of superiority. Religious relativism is thus defeated on its own turf – anthropology.[23]

However, from the perspective of incarnational religion, this anthropological emphasis cannot be thought of as independent of the theological dimension. As far as desacralization is concerned, Christianity is itself somewhat problematic. Is not the Passion story a throwback on archaic patterns whereby the saving activity of Jesus is mediated through a rehabilitated scapegoat, and is not Jesus himself a

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[23] René Girard „Mimetische Theorie und Theologie" in *Vom Fluch und Segen der Sündenböcke,* eds. Jospeh Niewiadomski und Wolfgang Palaver (Thaur: Kultur Verlag, 1995), 21 (my translation).

sacralized scapegoat?[24] If this were the case, argues Girard, the deity of Christ would have its roots in violent sacralization, the witnesses to his resurrection would have been the crowd that demanded his death rather than a small group of individual followers who protested his innocence, and the peace of Christ would be the same peace the world gives, namely the surrogate peace that follows the slaying of an innocent victim. The contrary is true. The Gospels proclaim an undermining of that false peace and the fragmentation of a sociality built on violent unanimity. In other words, the NT completes the process of desacralization by revealing the mimetic genesis of scapegoats and their founding and structuring function in human culture.[25]

Mimetic Theory and Historical Christianity

As we have seen, Girard's theory understands the effect of the Judeo-Christian tradition on history as one of a progressive desacralization of culture. This process is gradual and comprises several components. Myths are no longer being generated and give way to texts of persecution, sacrificial practices disappear, and surrogate victimage fails to bring social order even when the violence committed by persecutors is regarded as divinely ordained.

But it would be a serious mistake to understand Girard's argument as an apologetic for historical Christianity. For that, argues Fleming, Christianity had too readily absorbed into its own practices the sacrificial structures unveiled by the Gospels so much so that historical Christianity became "*one of the principal mechanisms for hiding its own revelation*".[26] That the non-violent praxis of the early Church fell victim to the interests of the Empire under the fourth-century Constantinian alignment of state and church, is historically documented. In the context of examining the violence committed in the name of Christianity, this phenomenon has recently received renewed critical attention, stimulated largely by Girard's anthropology.[27] Fleming's comment that "Christianity absorbed Christ's

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[24] *Ibid.*, 22.

[25] *Ibid.,* 23.

[26] Fleming, *René Girard*, 144 (original emphasis).

[27] Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 2001) who exposes the warrior ethos that had entered the church, pp. 96-139. Also Charles Bellinger, *The Genealogy of Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 98-

teaching in perhaps the only manner that it could: through the doctrine of the sacrificial atonement" may serve as an apt summary of these findings.[28] This discovery does not excuse or minimize the atrocities of Christendom. The fact, however, that in the course of history Christians should have badly mistaken the message of Jesus does not subvert the message but rather corroborates it. :

Yet the fact that the Gospel desacralizes the culture does not mean that scapegoating has come to an end. What it means is that the power of the scapegoat mechanism to unify the community and to hide its true origin has been permanently subverted manifesting as an inability to resacralize violence. This powerlessness Girard attributes to the constraining influence of the Judeo-Christian scriptures.[29] However, this influence will not lead to a reduction in violence or of its intensity in the foreseeable future. To the contrary, the ongoing failure of victimage will engender more violence as the "mechanism of the scapegoat" needs to function at higher levels of intensity as the social cohesion of collective violence loses efficacy. Because desacralization engenders a social environment where vengeance is more readily possible, humanity will experience heightened polarization and fragmentation.

At this point in the discussion questions may be raised that highlight the severity of the current global crisis. If the generative mechanism of victimage has been unveiled, what is there to restrain the full revelation of violence? If rules of law are what holds modern society together, will they avert the crisis which the revelation of the victimage mechanism has let loose? Will such social constructs such as international human rights law prevent society from falling into apocalyptic violence and anarchy?

Today, humanity has at its disposal technological weapons capable of planetary destruction. For the first time in human history, the possibility of "limitless violence" exists. Girard calls it "absolute vengeance, formerly the prerogative of the

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112, and Denny Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 82-86. Both authors link Christian violence to post-Constantinian atonement theology.

[28] Fleming, *René Girard*, 144.

[29] Girard, *Things Hidden,* 138, 161.

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gods". According to strategists, this "pending" violence will – under the auspices of the United Nations and various non-proliferation instruments predicated on the values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – keep global violence in check. Yet in the light of the foregoing, this looks like a fallacious conclusion. Modern victimage no longer unifies society. Such "unsuccessful victimage" leads instead to increasing tribalization. This demythifying result of Christian revelation generates concomitant pressure to use more violence. However, growing concern for victims – especially in the age of annihilation – also leads to political pressure to renounce violence altogether. It is from this perspective that we must understand Girard's argument that humanity faces the fundamental choice between total destruction and the total renunciation of violence.