

# Mimesis and Violence - An Introduction to the Thought of René Girard

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*This essay provides an overview of the thought of the French literary and cultural theorist René Girard and attempts to contextualise his work in relation to other cultural thinkers such as Emile Durkheim and Friedrich Nietzsche. The essay begins with his theorisation of 'mimetic desire,' the explanatory schema Girard utilises to theorise interpersonal relations, which involves a construal of desire as preeminently imitative; this model suggests that human beings learn what to desire from observing and copying others. From there, the essay moves on to discuss the 'scapegoat' or 'victimage' mechanism, Girard's hypothesis for how cultural and religious formation takes place through the banishment or lynching of an emissary victim in order to initiate and sustain cultural stability. Finally, the essay examines the relationship between the Judeo-Christian scriptures and the scapegoat mechanism, looking at Girard's depiction of the Bible as representing a trenchant critique of violence, especially those forms of violence unconsciously used in the service of social unification.*

It seems to us that the research of Girard provides an 'Archimedean point', outside the terrain of classical thought, from which we might profitably de-construct this thought, not in the service of a nihilism which is only the negative image of its failure, but through a *positive* reflection which is capable both of integrating the assets of traditional philosophy and of providing a true anthropological foundation to the 'social sciences'(Eric Gans, 1973:581).<sup>1</sup>

Gans may have underestimated the case (Sandor Goodhart, 1996:99).

For a social and literary theorist whose work has impacted so heavily on such a wide range of disciplines, the work of René Girard—who is currently Emeritus Professor of French Language, Literature and Civilisation at Stanford University—is relatively unknown to Australian scholars. This seems particularly regrettable in the case of theorists of religion, as much of Girard's work has been explicitly preoccupied with questions of the sacred and the Judeo-Christian scriptures. This essay attempts a partial remedying of this situation by introducing Girard to those unfamiliar with

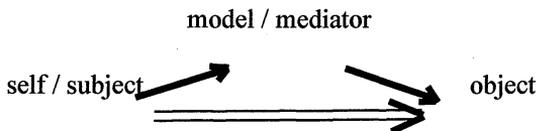
his work and providing an overview of the main currents of his thought.

## I. Mimesis: A New Theory of Desire

Beginning with the books *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961) and *Dostoïevski: du double à l'unité* (1963), Girard developed a new theorisation of desire based around the idea of imitation or 'mimesis'.<sup>2</sup> As Aristotle noted in *Poetics* (1448b 4-10), imitation is perhaps the single defining characteristic of humanity, which distinguishes itself from the rest of the animal kingdom through its increased aptitude and propensity for imitation. From the acquisition of language and the development of regional accents, to the practices of religious discipleship and formal education, it is predominantly through the imitation of others that we are able to learn and come to 'inhabit' a culture. Girard suggests: "If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish" (Girard, 1987a:7).<sup>3</sup>

To this, Girard adds that **desire** is as dependent on imitation as anything else that we learn; in other words, we learn to desire what others desire. Girard's theory rests, in part, on a distinction between 'appetites and needs' on the one hand, and 'desire' on the other. Where the former are constituted by the biological basis of life, and include such things as the basic appetite for food and water (rather than any particular *kind* of food or water), desire is a properly human characteristic, one that is more amorphous in its directions than appetites and far less easy to satisfy:<sup>4</sup> "Once his basic needs are satisfied...man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to suggest" (1977:146).

Thus, Girard argues that what we desire is always 'mediated' or 'modeled' to us by other people, who in turn have their desires mediated or modeled to them. Desire, in this sense, is contagious—it is capable of being 'caught.' However this may conform to our own experience, it certainly jars with many popular and Romantic ideas about individual human autonomy, which tend to suggest that desires are invariably the product of 'inner,' subjective (rather than inter-subjective) preferences. By claiming that desire is 'mimetic,' Girard's view of desire appears structurally—if not substantively—similar to Freud's: it is most easily schematised by the triangle. Desire is not a single line of force, which runs between the subject and the desired object, but is more properly figured as a triangle in which the real energy of desire is provided by the mediator, who renders an object desirable:



This understanding of desire construes it as preeminently **relational**; that is, desire (like the Newtonian notion of 'gravity') doesn't reside in any one object or person by itself but rather in the **relationships** between people. In this respect at least, Girard's thought remains firmly within the tradition of French psychoanalysis

of the late twentieth century, which emphasised the radically **social** character of human psychology over the monadic, or individual, self (Butler, 1999). As Jacques Lacan (1966:73) states in *Écrits*: “It is in the specific reality of **inter-human relations** that psychology can locate its proper object and its method of investigation.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*—a collection of studies of the novels of Cervantes, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, and Proust—Girard moved to suggest that mimetic desire, despite his systematisation, was not quite his **invention**; the highly suggestive problematic of imitative desire was an incipient logic of certain novels with which Girard chose to engage theoretically. In these novels, he detected a comprehension of the mimetic or imitative nature of desire that he argued was on par with, and often outflanked, the most perceptive of standard behaviourist or psychoanalytic approaches to human behaviour.

In Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, the hero announces his desire to be a perfect imitation of the legendary knight Amadis de Gaul:

I want you to know, Sancho, that the famous Amadis of Gaul was one of the most perfect knight errants.... Amadis was the pole, the star for brave and amorous knights, and we others who fight under the banner of love and chivalry should imitate him. Thus, my friend Sancho, I reckon that whoever imitates him best comes closest to perfect chivalry. (qtd in Girard, 1966:1)

The imitation of Amadis, so enthusiastically taken up by the hero, exerts heavy influences on Don Quixote’s judgement, his actions, and his emotions; it determines his romantic attachments, religious observances, and even his vision. Quixote hallucinates and transforms a very ordinary Spanish countryside into a place of damsels in distress, lurking evil, and heroic knights. In turn, Quixote’s imitation of Amadis itself proves to be contagious: Sancho Panza, the simple farmer who is the hero’s companion and who imitates his master’s desires, suddenly wants to become Governor of his own island and wants his daughter to become a duchess.

The kind of mimetic desire at work in *Don Quixote* is what Girard describes as ‘externally mediated,’ where the model or mediator of desire is removed from the desiring individual (historically, ontologically, spiritually) so that there is no realistic possibility for rivalry between the subject and the mediator concerning an object of desire. Don Quixote is as unlikely to become a rival of Amadis of Gaul, as a Christian is to become a rival of Christ. But Girard also provides a description of a type of mimetic desire structured by ‘internal mediation,’ a situation in which the subject’s and the model’s objects of desire overlap and become a matter of potential, and perhaps actual, conflict.

In Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, the character Monsieur de Rênal decides to hire the tutor Julien Sorel on the basis that his rival Monsieur Valenod was thought to be planning to do the same. As it turns out, Valenod wasn’t planning this, but now that Sorel has been employed by Monsieur de Rênal, Valenod attempts to hire him—although both men are indifferent to the educational possibilities of tutoring and seem

to care little for the tutor himself. That this constitutes ‘internal mediation’ is evidenced by the explicit rivalry between model and mediator, possible because both Valenod and Rênal occupy a similar social status and live in the same town during the same period in history. Unlike Quixote’s admiration for Amadis, the antagonists of *The Red and the Black* serve to be both models for each other’s desire, but also, most importantly, as **obstacles to its consummation**.

Drawing on that aspect of his work that detailed the propensity for mimesis to increasingly generate internal mediation, and hence conflict, Girard expanded his interests to cultural and social anthropology. By the time of the appearance of his third book in 1972, *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard had incorporated his notion of mimetic desire into a more general theory of cultural formation. From the idea that mimetic desire culminates in a conflictual scenario, Girard then moved to think about the sources of this potential conflict and its implications.

## II. Violence and the Sacred: The Phenomenon of Scapegoating

One of the central insights of Girard’s early work was the notion that conflictual (internally mediated) mimesis moves in the direction of the effacement of differences between people; as rivalry intensifies, characteristics that previously distinguished individuals begin to erode and antagonists effectively become ‘doubles’ of each other. The intensification of the mutual imitation of rival desires and actions produces a situation where the protagonists become progressively more obsessed with **each other** than the putative object of their desire. They mirror each other in an attempt to differentiate themselves (to be the one to obtain the object of desire over the other), but such an intensification does nothing but **eliminate** differences. It is thus an ironic effect of rivalrous—internally mediated—desire that increasingly desperate attempts for differentiation work towards the effacement of all significant differences; the more Rênal and Valenod attempt to **outdo** each other (in their quest for Julien), the more both come to **resemble** each other.

This escalation of conflict and rivalry, operating through the effacement of differences is what Girard calls a ‘sacrificial crisis,’ an intensification of violent activity which works—starting at a local level—to progressively undermine cultural order. For Girard, cultural order is simply a “regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their ‘identity’ and their mutual relationships” (1977:49). Logically then, the sacrificial crisis, being essentially a “crisis of distinctions” (1977:49) gradually undermines the identities of subjects and the social hierarchies that underwrite these: “Culture is somehow eclipsed as it becomes less differentiated” (1986:14).

But there is a problem with this scenario left simply as it is: If mimetic desire often moves in the direction of internal mediation, and if the pervasiveness of internally mediated desire invariably produces conflict and rivalry—the effacement of differences and the production of conflictual ‘doubling’—then humanity seems

destined to seemingly endless cycles of violence and the erosion of social and cultural structures. Given that this is the case (according to Girard), how then can one account for the development and maintenance of culture, and the continued operation of highly complex social institutions? *Violence and the Sacred* represents Girard's first attempt to pose and pursue this question in detail; it suggests that violence **itself** is invariably culture's 'answer' to disintegration and disorder. In other words, at the most intense moment of conflict, a violent resolution to the crisis will tend to emerge.

Girard argues that ultimately we deal with conflict generated by mimetic contagion and progressive undifferentiation by means of fixing our attention on some marginalised figure or group and, attributing to them the cause of the tensions, move to expel them. The communal response to the debilitating threat of social collapse tends towards the attribution of cause, and the resultant imputation of blame, to an unprotected, marginal 'other': the scapegoat. In a situation of heightened sensitivity to mimetic suggestion and burgeoning conflict, an accusatory gesture is all that is required to unite or reconcile warring parties around a common enemy. Thus, what Girard calls the 'scapegoat' or 'victimage' mechanism, describes the seemingly perennial means of siphoning off the internal conflict generated by conflictual desire by means of the elimination or banishment of a surrogate victim. This victim, by absorbing the projection of hostilities, is turned into the 'outsider' and carries the blame for the tensions; it is the victim whose expulsion or immolation temporarily restores harmony and peace to a community.<sup>6</sup>

However, the 'scapegoat mechanism' itself ensures that finding the emissary victim in order to restore peace is not done consciously (here perhaps, one should speak of the victim as 'appearing' rather than being 'found'); the mechanism can only operate effectively if people believe that the expulsion is strictly necessary and the victim deserving of their fate. The result of this is that the only real scapegoats that we see tend to be **other people's** scapegoats:

In order to be genuine, in order to exist as a social reality, as a stabilized viewpoint on some act of collective violence, scapegoating must remain nonconscious. The persecutors do not realize that they chose their victim for inadequate reasons, or perhaps for no reason at all, more or less at random. (Girard, 1987b:78)

But, despite this arbitrariness, Girard argues that the expulsion of this scapegoat **actually does** have the effect of restoring the community to order and peace; and by endowing physical violence with metaphysical significance, the violence is rendered legitimate or 'sacred.'

Girard's theory is ultimately about the function of violence in archaic religions, and how these religions manifest themselves in human cultures, even nominally 'secular' ones. The violent movements of world history and politics furnish countless examples of the way in which scapegoating produces or attempts to secure social unanimity. Take for instance Idi Amin's expulsion of an 'unclean' Asian populace from Uganda, or the far more exhaustively documented attempts by the Third Reich

to unite an economically and socially fractured Germany around the creation of a common enemy: the 'Jew.'<sup>7</sup> In these cases, the scapegoat served to consolidate latent national identity; the ostracized group functioned like the proverbial black sheep that kept the (national) family together, however briefly. (Perhaps a cynical encapsulation of this scenario might be that there seems to be nothing that promises to regenerate a torn social fabric more swiftly than an intermittent, communal bloodletting.)

The act of scapegoating allows for a restoration of harmony and peace to a group, at least for a certain length of time; it is the concerted use of violence to keep violence (temporarily) at bay. Girard discusses how, in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus—the 'innocent' or unknowing transgressor—is driven out and in so doing saves Thebes from the plague that had been threatening its survival; although Oedipus is not a victim of an actual lynching, he is a victim of a legal violence grounded in the same collective delusion, whose banishment effectively cures a community of a disorder that was threatening its foundations.<sup>8</sup>

The scapegoat mechanism is central to Girard's theory of religion which, he maintains, legitimizes or sacralises a certain social or cultural configuration. In order that peace can be restored, victimisation and ostracism are (unwittingly) utilised to this end. For Girard, the special function of particular kinds of religious ritual is to maintain the peace occurring as a result of the sacrifice by institutionalising a repetition of the sacrifice at the same time that this repetition works to cover up its historical reality. For Girard, the textual form of this 'covering up' is what he characterises as 'myth.'<sup>9</sup>

Girard points out that the lynching of a victim is very often a constitutive factor in the constitution of polities. For instance, in the legend of the foundation of Rome, the twin brothers Romulus and Remus become engaged in a squabble: during the ensuing action Romulus kills Remus and in so doing establishes Rome and becomes its first king. The theme of 'warring brothers' is a very common one in world myth; for Girard, this theme is a mythical representation of the mimetic doubling and undifferentiation brought about by the intensification of rivalrous mimesis (Girard 2001:22).<sup>10</sup> The ancient historian Livy's recounting of this event is what Girard would classify as 'myth'; for Girard, myth is neither simply a 'falsehood,' nor the expression of some ineffable 'truth.' Myth, in his sense, represents the trace of a real event, although the representation of the event itself has been disfigured in its' recounting. Myths "are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them" (1977:64).

But although myths often attempt to 'keep secret' the violence that lies at their origin, they invariably leave sufficient clues for detection for those who are sufficiently textually inquisitive. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard examines Guillaume de Machaut's fourteenth century poem, *Judgement of the King of Navarre* (Girard 1986:1-14). Guillaume's text undoubtedly contains highly improbable, mythical elements: people are felled by rains of stones; there are heavenly signs in the sky; whole cities are demolished by lightning. Guillaume also claims that Christians died as a result of

Jews poisoning the water; the evildoers were duly revealed by ‘heavenly signs’ and then massacred. Girard asks what aspects of Guillaume’s account might be considered legitimate or believable.<sup>11</sup>

Girard suggests that, at first, most of Guillaume de Machaut’s text would seem highly suspect as a strictly factual, historical document; and yet, even a contemporary reader—accustomed to regarding all referential elements of texts with suspicion—might suspect that actual events stand behind or beside the mythical elements. The ‘signs’ in the sky, the hailing of stones, the destruction of cities by lightning, or the manifest guilt of the Jews and their accomplices do not strike the reader as reflecting a credible reporting of actual events. And yet, not all seemingly ‘incredulous’ events are of the same kind, or can be treated in exactly the same way. Behind these elements of the text lies an historical reality that, once discerned, the mythical elements do not conceal, but actually work to reveal. Girard goes so far as to assert:

Guillaume did not invent a single thing. He is credulous, admittedly, and he reflects the hysteria of public opinion. The innumerable deaths he tallies are nonetheless real, caused presumably by the famous Black Death, which ravaged the north of France between 1349 and 1350. Similarly, the massacre of the Jews was real. In the eyes of the massacrers the deed was justified by the rumors of poisoning in circulation everywhere. (1986:2)

Girard argues that there is scant reason to disbelieve Guillaume’s reporting of a number of deaths, despite **rejecting the meaning he attributes to them**; Guillaume furnishes us with some details of an historical event despite not perceiving the event adequately himself; he attributes the plague to the Jews, but we realise their innocence.

For Girard, it is not simply historical work on anti-Semitic persecution in the Middle Ages that has been done that allows us to discern the credulous from the less credulous aspects of *Judgement of the King of Navarre*. We accept that the poisonings could not have taken place, in part, because we know of no poison of that era capable of inflicting the degree of carnage reported; but we also suspect Guillaume’s account on the basis of his obvious hatred of the accused.

And yet, as Girard states, “these two types of characteristics cannot be recognized without at least implicitly acknowledging that they interact with each other” (1986:6). That is, if there really was an epidemic, then it might have worked to stir up latent persecutory tendencies; by the same token, such a persecution might be comprehensible if the accusations against the Jews were proven to be correct. The correlation of these two factors prompts Girard to discard the generally endorsed rule that a text be considered reliable only to the level of its most dubious element:

If the text describes circumstances favorable to persecution, if it presents us with victims of the type that persecutors usually choose, and if, in addition, it represents these victims as guilty of the type of crimes which persecutors normally attribute to their victims, then it is very likely that the persecution is real. (1986:6-

7)

In the case of a text like Guillaume's, if one attends to and works to understand the perspective of the persecutors, the obvious unreliability of their accusations against the scapegoats works to validate rather than undermine the informational value of the account, if only in terms of the violence that it depicts: "If Guillaume had added stories of ritual infanticide to the episodes of poisoning, his account would be even more improbable without, however, in the least diminishing the accuracy of the massacres it reports" (1986:7). The more spurious the accusations against the scapegoat, the more probable the mob violence reported; it is not simply the text's inaccuracies that prompt Girard's conclusion, but the very nature of those inaccuracies.

This reading of social history would also apply to something like the witch-hunts of the sixteenth century, the accounts of which have an interaction of probable and improbable elements that are highly suggestive of actual persecutions. In other words, it would be unwise to disbelieve the reality of the persecutions on the basis of the unreliability of the accusations directed against those so accused; although everything in the accounts is rendered as fact, we believe only select elements and our willingness to disregard those elements we consider spurious has little or no effect on those we think reliable. Again, it is even the case that certain kinds of distortion in the retelling of events make the reality of the persecution more certain: "the mind of a persecutor creates a certain type of illusion and the traces of his illusion confirm rather than invalidate the existence of a certain kind of event, the persecution itself in which the witch is put to death" (Girard, 1986:11).

These accounts—the *Judgement of the King of Navarre* and the accounts of witch hunts—are what Girard terms 'texts of persecution': accounts of actual violence, characteristically, even predictably, distorted by virtue of being recounted from the perspective of the persecutors. Girard has also been interested in the way in which these texts share certain key structural features with a variety of mythological and dramatic texts; in these texts, Girard finds the same features ('stereotypes') that characterise texts of persecution, and thus he posits that these apparent homologies show evidence of the actual lynching of a scapegoat.

In important respects, Girard's work builds on that of Durkheim (1968), and shares many of its concerns. In the first instance, Girard, like Durkheim, rejects the liberal-individualist conception of society, the notion that the individual's self-interest constitutes the most primitive unit of society, and that community and the body politic are simply epiphenomena of individual decisions. For both Girard and Durkheim, society is prior to the individual, not something which is reducible to the psychology of individual agents. Religion, in this purview, is not primarily supernatural—involving divine irruptions into the normal workings of nature—or mystical—involving divine irruptions in the soul of an individual—but pertaining to the workings of the social group, and containing symbolic representations of social laws and bonds.

Girard has made vigorous criticisms of Durkheim's work, but still sees him as the first significant theorist to take issue with Voltaire and the Enlightenment's dismissal of religion: Voltaire was *le premier a reagir vraiment contre cet escamotage*

*sceptique du religieux*. For Girard, the “Voltairean interpretation, which is still dominant, makes religion the widespread conspiracy of priests to take advantage of natural institutions” (1987a:63). Eschewing this option—that religion is essentially some kind of ‘trick’ executed by a powerful minority—Girard along with Durkheim, argue that religion is foundational and coeval with society, not something that happens ‘once it gets going,’ something superimposed upon realities that are more fundamental. Girard supports Durkheim’s intuition of the “identity of the social and religious domains, which means, ultimately, the chronological precedence of religious expression over any sociological conception” (Girard, 1987a:82).

For Girard, like Durkheim, religion always exists, however disguised and transformed, at the foundations of every society; there is no culture without religion and no religion without sacrifice. But where Durkheim emphasised the socially unifying function of religion, Girard emphasises its violence. Or rather, Girard emphasises the means by which violence functions to produce socially unifying effects, which he has pursued through his notion of the victimage mechanism. For Girard, religion has its origins in internecine and fratricidal conflict, generated by the conflictual ramifications of mimetic desire, and brought to momentary closure only through recourse to scapegoating. As already touched upon, it is a process that works best, strictly only ever works, when the beneficiaries of its effects are ignorant of its true workings.

But, one might well ask: Is this all religion is? Girard’s emphasis on the social and violent nature of the ‘sacred’ has led some to believe that his views of religion are entirely negative. This is not the case, however—far from it. Girard’s work, beginning with the publication of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, has increasingly engaged with properly theological questions concerning the Judeo-Christian scriptures and their impact on archaic religion and secular forms of violence.

### III: Violence Unveiled: The Judeo-Christian Scriptures

Certainly the most controversial of Girard’s theses concerns the role of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in the destabilisation and de-constitution of communities and cultures founded on sacrificial violence. If Girard’s theory is to be believed, then there is little point in arguing over the validity of whether religious beliefs *per se* are reasonable, as all social structures—even admittedly ‘secular’ ones—are shot-through with rituals of purification, sacrifice, and exclusion (ostensibly, quintessentially ‘religious’ features).

For Girard, what is distinctive about the Judeo-Christian scriptures, culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus, is that the mechanism of scapegoating is itself progressively unveiled; the collective act of violence whose function it is to secure temporary peace from the conflict infecting it, and through which participants are ‘saved,’ is finally revealed and repudiated, showing its arbitrariness and its horror. For Girard, the Bible is a textual mechanism that enacts a startling exposé of the victimage mechanism and

whose mission it is to alert us to this seemingly perennial cycle of the restoration of order through violence: it is a 'revelation' which seeks our 'redemption' from the violent structures of humanity: "We can see that the significance of the Kingdom of God is completely clear. It is always a matter of bringing together the warring brothers, or putting an end to the mimetic crisis by a universal renunciation of violence" (Girard, 1987a:197).

Girard believes that the Judeo-Christian scriptures represent an unequalled unveiling and trenchant critique of the victimage mechanism, substituting the promotion of an ethic of love and forgiveness that allows humanity to loosen its hold of the seemingly ineluctable necessity of scapegoating.<sup>12</sup> Largely at odds with the intellectual climate from which his work initially developed, Girard argues that the Bible is unique in its disclosure of the victimage mechanism through the narrative identification of God with the victim.

Girard's argument is not upheld in order to minimise the less than universally edifying history of Christian 'mission,' of the horrors of blood shed in the name of Christian 'defenses of the faith' (or perhaps even the more aggressive aspects of Zionism). Historically, the Bible and more specifically, the Gospel message, has too easily been recuperated by the sacrificial structures that it had unveiled. Girard aims not to mitigate these atrocities of Christian history, but to provide a critique of such practices **from within**. And to grant Girard's claim of the radicalness of the unveiling of violence in the Judeo-Christian scriptures also draws attention to the real possibility that sacrificial culture's fiercest critics could very easily become its most faithful perpetrators.

Although mythology's structuring of events is transfigured by the scapegoat mechanism, which forces a misrecognition of the events of a particular narrative by recounting the story from the beneficiaries of the new social order, Girard argues the Biblical perspective takes the point of view of the outsider and the victim. The Psalms contain the first sustained outcries in world literature of the lone victim, a theme which crystallises in Job, whose exhortations to God reveal his persecution at the hands of his neighbours. The same theme is again taken up in the prophetic story of the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 52:13-53:12), who is scapegoated by his own people and does not resist; he is the "lamb led to the slaughter." The general tenor of Girard's arguments have precedent and have been corroborated by Jewish religious and cultural scholars; Abraham Heschel (1962) and Sandor Goodhart (1996) have strongly emphasised the message of the Hebrew prophets as centering on a progressive denunciation of mob violence.<sup>13</sup>

Girard suggests that by taking the prophets' denunciation of bloodshed and sacrifice and carrying it to its conclusion, Jesus institutes a social space in which all violence is abandoned:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue

thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have *thy* cloke also (Matthew 5:38-40).

However, it is not simply the pronouncements, but the drama of Christ's life and death that has such destabilising effects on the violent structures of culture. During the meeting of council of high priests, Caiaphas says to the Pharisees and the other chief priests: "it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and the whole nation perish not" (John, 11:50). By incorporating statements specifically addressed to the function of sacrifice for generating social cohesion, the Bible works as a textual force to reveal this mechanism, 'hidden since the foundation of the world' (Luke, 11:50), so that this knowledge (*aletheia*) might set us free.

Girard acknowledges that he was by no means the first to sense the full historical significance of the empathy for victims that the gospel invokes. Nietzsche also recognised this and wrote extensively—perhaps obsessively—about it. The 'Christocentrism' of Nietzsche's philosophy has been under-emphasised by contemporary European philosophers, perhaps now embarrassed by this preoccupation. But his denunciation of Christianity as a 'slave morality,' a religion which concerns itself with the weak, is utterly central to appreciating his *oeuvre*. In the essay "Why I Am a Destiny," Nietzsche asks:

Have I been understood? What defines me, what sets me apart from the whole rest of humanity is that I *uncovered* Christian morality .... The uncovering of Christian morality is an event without parallel, a real catastrophe. He that is enlightened by that, is a *force majeure*, a destiny—he breaks the history of mankind in two. One lives before him, or one lives after him (1967b:332/§7).

Nietzsche even goes so far as to explicitly frame his later works in terms of a self-confessed 'fundamental antithesis' of his thought: "Dionysus the crucified." This antithesis is, again, predicated on a construal of Christianity as a religion that fosters an 'active sympathy' or pity for the victim. In book four of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche specifies the "two types: Dionysus and the Crucified."

Dionysus versus the crucified: there you have the antithesis. It is *not* a difference in regard to their martyrdom. It is a difference in the meaning of it. Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilate. In the other case, suffering—the "Crucified as the innocent one"—counts as an objection to this life, as a formula for its condemnation .... The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life; Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and reborn and return again from destruction (1967a:542-543/§1052).<sup>14</sup>

In relation to Girard's work, the significance of Nietzsche's 'antithesis' is difficult to over-emphasise. Dionysus is the wandering god, associated with wine, madness, and most importantly, the bringing and destruction of culture, often through military power. As a performative genre, Dionysian ritual is associated with the dismemberment

of a sacrificial victim to appease the deity, a ritual repetition of what was believed to have happened to the god himself.

Like Nietzsche, Max Weber, in *Ancient Judaism*, emphasises repeatedly that the authors of the bible take the side of the victim (1952:19-22, 86; 475-476; 492-495). And Eric Gans, professor of French at UCLA, states, “Christianity’s impact on the West is a tribute to the power of its basic conception, which is the absolute centrality of the position of the victim” (1982:4). In light of this, Girard believes that the effect of Jesus’s crucifixion was effectively an unveiling of the illegitimacy of violence, unconsciously used in the service of social tranquility.

Undoubtedly, Girard’s work continues (by other means) Simone Weil’s intuition that before offering a theory of God, a **theology**, the Biblical tradition offers a theory of humanity, an **anthropology**. As such, Girard’s work sheds surprising light on those elements of Biblical texts most often considered ‘mythical,’ or ‘fantastic’ by the contemporary mind. For instance, in suggesting, as the Gospels do, that those involved in Jesus’ crucifixion were on the side of ‘Satan’ is simply to render tangible, through personification, the power of rivalrous desire which engenders violence and accusation; consistent with this reading, the New Testament is continually at pains to indicate that evil has power only insofar as it is **embodied** in a particular person or group. Satan has no real being, existing only as a parasite on humans, as the Bible tells us he does on God. Thus, the personification of Satan as rivalrous mimesis—as that which engenders accusation and violence—is necessitated by the way in which this power attaches itself to the victim at the epicenter of the scapegoat mechanism: they are viewed as a demon or devil.

Further, Satan is a Hebrew word which means ‘the accuser’; the Christian revelation also speaks continually of Satan as ‘the father of lies’ and the ‘murderer from the beginning’ (John 8:44). That lie, suggests Dominique Barbé—with an insight that parallels Girard’s—consists precisely in covering over the violence that lies at the base of all societies (1989:54). This construal makes sense of the Biblical claim that Satan is both the *archon*, the ruler or prince of this world, and the *arche*, the ‘beginning,’ the spirit of murder that founds the earthly *polis*.

To understand this evangelical anthropology, we must complete with it the Gospel statements concerning Satan. Far from being absurd or fantastic, they use another language to reformulate a theory of scandals and the working of a mimetic violence that initially decomposes communities and subsequently recomposes them, thanks to the unanimous scapegoating triggered by the decomposition. (Girard 2001:182).

Girard argues that this revelation attempts to disclose not simply the innocence of one victim, Christ, but **all victims**. Needless to say, the fruitfulness of Girard’s thinking on religion continues to prompt considerable amounts of ongoing theological reflection.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

The validity and usefulness of Girard's ideas are, at this point, somewhat difficult to gauge. It is a body of work—both in its conclusions and in its methods—that is largely out of step with current theoretical trends in the humanities and social sciences; and yet in itself, it is hard to see this as necessarily a disrecommendation. Perhaps Girard's greatest potential as a theorist of culture is the extent to which his work sheds welcome light on the vexing question of how and why violence seems central to many religious practices and expressions.<sup>16</sup> As I have argued, Girard's somewhat paradoxical formulation suggests that religion provides a mechanism for defusing and controlling violence through violence; it 'contains' violence in both senses of the word: it deploys so-called 'good,' sanctioned violence against 'bad.' With his insistence on the links between violence and cultural formation, Girard's work seems both profoundly contemporary and yet suggestive of the continued presence the 'archaic'—the 'primitive,' the violent, the 'tribal'—in the so-called 'civilised' present.

As might be expected, responses to Girard's work have been very mixed; where some critics see tendencies toward 'reductionism,' advocates are prone to see theoretical elegance and explanatory fruitfulness. Indeed, his work has prompted fierce criticism, but has also inspired the establishing of an academic journal (*Contagion: The Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture*), numerous conferences and symposia, and a considerable amount of interdisciplinary engagement from areas as diverse as economics, philosophy, psychology, and musicology. Perhaps, ultimately, the most pertinent question is not whether all of Girard's ideas are perfectly 'true,' or have absolute referents in the world, but whether his thinking presents powerful hermeneutic or heuristic means through which culture may be profitably approached. Girard is, at the very least, a provocateur, someone whose theories hold out considerable generative scope, and commensurately, also much need for further scrutiny and analysis.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Il nous semble que les recherches de Girard fournissent un << point archimédien >> en dehors du terrain de la pensée classique d'où nous pouvons dé-construire celle-ci au profit, non d'un nihilisme qui n'est que l'image négative de son échec, mais d'une réflexion positive capable à la fois d'intégrer l'acquis de la philosophie traditionnelle et de donner un véritable fondement anthropologique aux << sciences humaines >>."

<sup>2</sup> 'Mimesis' is a Greek word, meaning 'imitation.' There are two primary reasons that Girard chooses to use the word 'mimesis' rather than simply 'imitation' in his discussion of desire: firstly, the latter term tends to imply that the desire is invariably conscious, rather than something that very often occurs below the level of awareness, and secondly, the word mimesis has conflictual valences that the word 'imitation' does not bear out, and which are central to Girard's theorisations (discussed in the second part of this essay).

<sup>3</sup> Although Girard's statement concerning the overarching importance of imitation in human development may seem hyperbolic (and perhaps at odds with empirical science), it has received strong, albeit indirect, corroboration from studies in cognitive and developmental psychology

(Meltzoff 1977, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c) and cognitive science (Gallese and Goldman 1998; Rizzolatti and Arbib 1998; Ramachandran 2001). Additionally, the role of imitation in the behaviour of non-human animals has also been a repeatedly studied feature of contemporary ethology (DeWaal, 1996: 19-20, 71-73). And finally, although such an investigation is beyond the scope of the current paper, there are interesting resonances between Girard's notion of 'mimesis' and what psychoanalysts term 'identification,' Judith Butler's (1990) notion of the 'performative citation,' and Louis Althusser's (1971) notion of 'interpellation,' all of which (broadly) figure corporeal or symbolic imitation as a key element of subject formation.

<sup>4</sup> There are parallels here between Girard's schema and Hegel's distinction in *The Phenomenology of Mind* between 'the sentiment of self' (which is common to non-human animals) and 'self-consciousness' (which is particular to humans) (Hegel 1967).

<sup>5</sup> The permeation of the social field into the 'self' has placed French social psychology largely at odds with American ego psychology, with the latter's emphasis on the 'strengthening' of the ego.

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that in the French and German languages, the main words for 'victim' (French: *victime*, German: *Opfer*) also mean 'sacrifice.'

<sup>7</sup> Of course, this simplifies a very complex state of affairs; the scapegoating of Jews has a very long history in western culture. For a Girardian reading of the Holocaust from a Jewish perspective, see Goodhart (1996): 215-288.

<sup>8</sup> Girard's choice of the myth of Oedipus for an analysis of scapegoating is strategic; he is here contesting the Freudian engagement with the same text (cf. Freud, 1955: 65-143; 1961: 1-66). For Girard's engagement with Sophocles and Freud, see Girard (1977: 169-222); (1987a: 352-392).

<sup>9</sup> The root of the Greek word for myth, *muthos*, is *mu*, which means 'to keep secret' or 'to close.' In Girard's conceptual scheme, 'myth' refers to a cultural memory that operates selectively or discretely.

<sup>10</sup> For Girard's discussion of Romulus and Remus, see Girard (1986: 88-94). The French philosopher Michel Serres (1991) has written a book about the foundation of Rome and the saga of Romulus and Remus from a distinctly Girardian perspective.

<sup>11</sup> Note the structural similarity between "the Jews" in de Machaut's poem and Oedipus; a 'plague' is eventually halted by the lynching or banishment of a scapegoat, although neither text quite 'owns up' to the mythological concealment of victimisation.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida has recently written that 'forgiveness,' which finds its ultimate grounding in the notion of the sacredness of the human, is a culturally specific notion, derived from the "Abrahamic memory of the religions of the Book, and in a Jewish but above all Christian interpretation of the 'neighbour' or the 'fellow man'" (2001:30).

<sup>13</sup> Even the (often criticised) Judaic principle of retributive equivalence (an 'eye for an eye') works to curtail escalating violence through setting strict temporal and qualitative limits to punitive justice; in doing so, it represents tangible progress in the judicial application of moral judgement, as it works to halt the tendency for violence to enter what communications theorists call 'positive feedback loops,' spiralling upward in ever-increasing amounts.

<sup>14</sup> These are by no means the only references Nietzsche makes regarding Christianity and its "active sympathy for the weak" (cf. Nietzsche, 1990: 127-131/§2-§7).

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance Alison (1996) & (1998); Bailie (1995); Goodhart (1996); Hamerton-Kelly (1992) & (1994); Williams (1991); and Schwager (1991) & (1994).

<sup>16</sup> An edition of the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* was dedicated to Girard's work. See Juergensmeyer (1991).