

THE THEORY OF RENE GIRARD AND ITS THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS - PART I

INTRODUCTION

Robert J Daly, Professor of Theology at Boston College wrote¹ “The Girardian theory is one of the great intellectual achievements of the late twentieth century - a comprehensive vision of the psychological, sociological, political and religious processes of sin and redemption.” What is Girard’s theory? What are the theological implications of his work? Part I of this paper will confine itself to answering the first question and the anthropology he discovered; it will also introduce some of the theological implications. Part II of the paper will explore in more detail the theological implications of Girard’s work.

GIRARD’S ANTHROPOLOGY

Leo Lefebure’s words echo the disappointment of many regarding religion as they set the scene for Girard’s life work:

“Religious traditions promise to heal the wounds of human existence by uniting humans to ultimate reality. Yet the history of religions is steeped in blood, sacrifice and scapegoating. The brutal facts of the history of religions pose stark questions about the intertwining of religion and violence. How does violence cast its spell over religion and culture, repeatedly luring countless “decent” people - whether unlettered peasants or learned professors - into its destructive dance? Is there an underlying pattern we can discern?”²

In 1947, a French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote “violence can found culture, terror can preserve stability, and the unanimity created by sacrifice of a scapegoat can become so complete that it includes even its victim.”³ At that time his claims were considered controversial and Merleau-Ponty, uneasy about his own analysis and its ramifications, turned away from further investigation. In 1972, however, Rene Girard, a French literary critic, took up the question of the violent root of culture through literature, anthropology, psychology, and biblical criticism. In a succession of books (see the bibliography) and through numerous articles and interviews, Girard “has relentlessly pursued what he even calls his *idée fixe*: the way in which scapegoats found, preserve, and unify culture.”⁴

Mimetic Desire

Mimetic desire or mimesis is the starting point of Girard’s theory. Because he is not a philosopher but a literary critic, Girard did not pursue his project philosophically but by the interpretation of literary and anthropological texts. In his early literary criticism, Girard defined mimesis, the

¹ Review on the back cover of the book *The Girard Reader* edited by James Williams.

² Lefebure, *Victims, violence and the sacred*, p.1226.

³ Bottum, *Girard among the Girardians*, p.42.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.43.

tendency of humans to imitate (mimic) others both consciously and unconsciously.⁵ Girard's examination of literature by authors like Cervantes, Stendahl, Dostoevsky and Proust taught him "that humans learn what to desire by taking other people as models to imitate. Aware of a lack within ourselves, we look to others to teach us what to value and who to be."⁶ At first the desire to imitate is harmless when we imitate our model's thoughts but as we begin to imitate their ideas, we become a threat, a rival, and this leads to rivalry and then violence.

Bailie provides us with an excellent insight into the mechanism of mimetic desire and how it can lead to rivalry and violence:

"Imagine a scene. A small child is sitting alone in a nursery that has a couple of dozen toys scattered about it. He sits there rather dreamily expressing only a casual interest in the toy that happens to be closest to him. Another child comes into the room and surveys the room. He sees the other child and a great number of toys. There will come a moment when the second child will choose a toy. Which of the toys will he most likely find interesting? It will likely be the toy the first child seems interested in though at this time his or her interest is only casual. The second child will be more interested in the first child than in any of the toys, but this interest is translated into a concern for the toy in which the first child has shown some interest.... and the second child reaches for the toy. What happens? The first child's nonchalance vanishes in an instant. Suddenly he clings to the toy for dear life. Extremely vexed, the first child says: "I had that!". His intense reaction arouses in the second child a desire for the toy vastly more powerful than the mild desire with which he has first reached for it. The two children feed each other's desire for the toy by demonstrating to each other how desirable it is..... As long as the conflict remains unresolved, the suggestion that both children bear some responsibility for the squabble will be resolutely rejected. Each will be certain that the other is the sole cause of the conflict."⁷

The dynamics of mimetic desire that operate in the nursery scenario are just as real in "grown-up" arenas and are easily recognised in religious, ethnic and nationalistic conflicts today (eg. the recent USA/China dispute over the US spy plane). Mimesis inevitably leads to rivalry and rivalry if unchecked leads sooner or later to chaotic, self-perpetuating, reciprocating acts of violence, the violence we witness today in the Middle-East and elsewhere, what Girard calls "mimetic crises".⁸ The rivals are models/obstacles to each other in a struggle no longer for a specific object but for prestige!

This desire is not biological or instinctual and it is not simply a response to some desirable object. Mimetic desire arises through imitation (mimesis) of another's desire. This is significant in that it opposes the Platonic tradition in philosophy which is based on the separation of mimesis and desire. "Mimesis is simple imitation and desire is simple wanting. Girard's theory reconnects mimesis and desire... and this is the fundamental move (that) discloses the centrality of violence in the system of desire which is the human system as such."⁹ The desire that is subject to mimesis is "that

⁵ Girard, *Deceit, desire and the novel: self and other in literary structure*.

⁶ Lefebure, p.1227.

⁷ Bailey, *Violence unveiled: humanity at the crossroads*, p.116-7.

⁸ Girard, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*, p.78-79, 287-289.

⁹ Hammerton-Kelly, *The gospel and the sacred: poetics of violence in Mark*, p132-3.

fundamental desire that forms and defines the total behaviour of the human being” which is to be distinguished from hunger or the need for sleep.¹⁰ Everything in the theory follows from this insight.

In first recognising mimetic desire in the European novel and certain ethnological texts, Girard expanded this insight into a fundamental anthropology. The question of “human nature remains alive and is to be asked and answered in the domain ... of the origin and genesis of signifying systems, which in the life sciences is the process of hominisation.”¹¹ Hammerton-Kelly provides an important observation:

“This is a theory (Girard’s) of origins that links current human relations with traditional societies and animal behaviour. The capacity for imitation is shared by human beings with the higher apes; there is a developmental connection between animal mimicry and human initiation, and the point of hominisation might be plotted with reference to the change in this activity. Animal mimicry is also acquisitive and goes through the same process of escalating rivalry to human mimesis. However, animals have instinctual braking mechanisms that prevent the rivalry from becoming group-destroying violence. The weaker animal surrenders and patterns of dominance are established; subordinate animals now imitate dominant ones in non-competitive areas, without acquisitiveness. Animal mimesis is closely tied to the object (of desire) and does not develop the metaphysical dimension of a struggle (the object is often forgotten) that human mimesis does.”¹²

Scapegoating

Following his study of mimetic desire in the modern novel, “Girard next turned his attention to the relation of violence and the sacred in early cultures, especially in primal religions and Greek tragedy”;¹³ his findings were published in 1972 in *La Violence et le Sacre* (the English version, *Violence and the Sacred*, was published in 1977). As we see everyday, human societies are constantly threatened by violence arising out of rivalry. When “two hands reach for the same object simultaneously, conflict cannot fail to result”¹⁴. Violence leads to more violence, and the cycle of violence and retribution is only undone, Girard discovered, by the introduction of the “scapegoat”. As an answer to chaos brought about by violence, Gerard found societies resort to acts of unanimous violence to restore order. “By organising retributive violence into a united front against an enemy common to all the rivals, either an external enemy or a member of the community symbolically designated as an enemy, violence itself is transformed into a socially constructive force.”¹⁵ As Girard says, “where only shortly before a thousand individual conflicts had raged unchecked between a thousand enemy brothers, there now reappears a true community, united in its hatred for one alone of its number. All the rancors scattered at random among the divergent individuals, all the differing antagonisms, now converge on an isolated and unique figure, the

¹⁰ Schwager, *Must there be a scapegoats?* p.235.

¹¹ Girard, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*, p.6-7.

¹² Hammerton-Kelly, *The gospel and the sacred*, p136.

¹³ Lefebure, p.1227.

¹⁴ Girard, *To double business bound*, p.201.

¹⁵ Fredricks, *The cross and the begging bowl*, p.155.

surrogate victim.”¹⁶ The scapegoat can be from outside (who threatens from without) or from inside (persons or objects that because of mimetic desire are valued, such as virgin women, and animals, especially animals essential to the community’s welfare).¹⁷

As Hammerton-Kelly reflects, “Scapegoating is the psycho-social propensity to relieve frustration by lashing out at someone defenceless, or to avoid responsibility by blaming someone. ... Scapegoating arises from psycho-social propensities we recognise in ourselves and in our societies, from the family to the nation. They are so banal that we seldom reflect on their danger to social order and on the important social mechanisms that control them. In our enlightened democracies, we tend to deny their power over us while they drive our economy and dominate our entertainment industry. Great literature however makes us aware of them and Girard’s theory explains how they are controlled and directed, ... a theory that begins with these shameful and alas banal features of human life. It makes violence and resentment (where the scapegoat is the self) central to its analysis rather than irrational exceptions. For this reason alone, it is preferable to most other theories of human behaviour which are ethically naive because they do not take sufficient account of these banalities.”¹⁸ “We have arrived at the second fundamental human characteristic (mimetic desire being the first) on which all culture is based, the surrogate victim mechanism.”¹⁹ Instead of all becoming the victim of each, one becomes spontaneously the victim of all. This unanimous act plays the same role for humans as the surrender of the weaker animal plays in the establishment of dominance patterns among the higher animals.²⁰

Sacred Violence, Religion and Mythology

Through scapegoating, societies can now distinguish between profane violence which is destructive, retributive and self-sustaining and sanctioned violence which is constructive in that it brings the violence caused by mimetic desire to an end. The society values and feels good about the outcome of “sacred” violence. It seems like a miracle.²¹ Over time, significant foundational acts of sacred violence are mythologised. Girard recognised the strong links between a culture’s social structure and its sacred narratives and religious symbols. “If social structure is established by ordering profane violence into sacred violence, myth is the narrative of this establishment that masks the innocence of the scapegoat.”²² The root of the Greek word for myth, *muthos*, is *mu*, which means “to close” or “keep secret”. In an ancient Greek myth, Aeschylus tells of how Agamemnon’s daughter is sacrificed to Artemis. At the moment of her death, Iphigenia is gagged and the chorus can only say:

*The rest I did not see,
Nor do I speak of it.*

¹⁶Girard, *Violence and the sacred*, p.79.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.68-88, 250-273; *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*, p.31.

¹⁸ Hammerton-Kelly, *The gospel and the sacred*, p.131.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 137.

²⁰ Girard, *Violent origins*, p.129.

²¹Hammerton-Kelly, *The gospel and the sacred*, p.138.

²²Fredricks, p.156.

Myth then remembers discretely and selectively; the violence inflicted upon the scapegoat remains hidden.²³ The scapegoat is subsequently divinised and the establishment event marks the foundation of religion. The word “religion” comes from the Latin *religare*, meaning to bind back. “Primitive religion is the binding up of the community by binding back to the moment of its origins, the moment when it gathered together around its first victim.”²⁴

Scapegoats then found, preserve, and unify culture. Countless examples can be found in antiquity; a graphic illustration is provided by Bailie’s in his examination of the decline of the Aztec God-king Quetzacoatl, the feathered serpent whose reign ended soon after the arrival of a stranger (the god Tezcatlipoca). “Like the Greek God Dionysus, the flamboyant behaviour of this strange and fascinating man plunged the society into social chaos. Eventually he was slain by the very crowd that had found him so intriguing (*sounds familiar*), a slaying that coincided with such a restoration of religious awe and social harmony that it was obvious to everyone that the one they had slain must have been a god. A cult dedicated to him arose and on its altars regular human sacrifices were offered.”²⁵

On the surface, the mythology disguises the violence. In “mining the mythology” for signs where the narrative seems to be glossing over violence, violence is frequently unveiled. In one place the myth tells us that as the number fascinated by Tezcatlipoca grew, the fascination grew in intensity. “Like a bacchalian pied piper... Tezcatlipoca led his revellers out to the river. So great was the throng that the bridge collapsed under the weight and many people fell and were turned to stone.” As Bailie notes, people who fall from a collapsing bridge don’t turn to stone. They are drowned or crushed. “In many primitive societies, the most typical form of spontaneous violence involves the throwing of stones. Stones fly and people fall dead. When the mythological mind recollects the frenzy of a full-blown violent crisis, it *muses* (filters, enchants). Evidence of mob violence doesn’t always disappear, for if the myth is to serve as the ‘sound-track’ for future sacrificial re-enactments, these hints of violence cannot be altogether erased.”²⁶

After a number of incidents like the collapse of the bridge, the myth tells us that Tezcatlipoca spoke to the community, now little more than a frantic mob, and tells them that to avoid future disasters such as these, they should stone him to death (and they did). It was his presence he explains that caused such death and confusion. “Except in myth, people don’t ask to be stoned to death. In retrospect, the stoning of Tezcatlipoca would have been understood as having the god’s own warrant, for it is only in retrospect that the sudden peace that accompanied his murder had to be accounted for, and gods don’t die at the hands of mortals unless they want to.”²⁷ (*very prophetic*)

“The culture’s sacrificial crisis then has run its course and social harmony is restored but an important key to that harmony was the fear that it might be swept away again, that the god might again unleash violence, should his worshippers fail to take the necessary precautions. These precautions not unexpectedly took the form of ritual re-enactments of the “god’s last mesmerising and terrifying visit, including most essentially the re-enactment of his death. The violent death of

²³ Bailie, p.33.

²⁴ Ibid, p.114.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 100.

²⁶ Ibid, p.102-103.

²⁷ Ibid, p.104.

Tezcatlipoca was clearly the recipe for harmony and re-enactments of it were necessary for extending that harmony over time.”²⁸

To conclude this section, I refer to what Andrew Marr said:

“In this understanding of religion, there seems no place for God. That is precisely Girard’s understanding of the case. God would not want anything to do with religion that operates on the basis of sacred violence, and God does not”²⁹ (as we shall see).

GIRARD’S ANTHROPOLOGY OF GOD

According to Girard, every ancient culture arises from “the incessantly repeated patterns of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating. Some authors like the Greek tragedians caught a glimpse of the underlying dynamics of the cycle and the arbitrariness of the choice of victim but only the Bible, Girard contends, offers a full unveiling of this pattern of violence and a rejection of it.”³⁰

The Hebrew Bible

Having developed his theory through the analysis of other texts, Girard next turned his attention to the Bible. He quickly discovered in the Hebrew bible a radical contrast with mythology. “Far from veiling the truth, the Hebrew Bible begins to reveal the truth of sacred violence.” There are many familiar stories in the Hebrew Bible where mimetic rivalry leads to violence. The story of Adam and Eve is a story of desire. The Fall involves two things, mimetic desire for the fruit (aroused by the desire of the serpent) and mimetic rivalry and resentment towards the divine³¹. As a result of the Fall death is declared to be the punishment. It is not coincidental that the first death to occur in the aftermath is the murder of an innocent person which in turn gives rise to the first Biblical culture. What is different in the Cain and Abel story though is that as soon as Abel’s blood drops to the ground it cries out and Yahweh asks “What have you done?” The victim is heard and revealed and the perpetrator is remembered not as divine but as a murderer.

Not all Hebrew Bible texts speak for the victim however. The origin and mythologising of Israel’s cult of sacrifice were the result of a mimetic crisis and in response to mob violence. In Leviticus, “after the death of the two sons of Aaron, Yahweh spoke to Moses” (Lev. 16:1-2a) and the scapegoat ritual was initiated. “The scapegoat ritual was a liturgical innovation specifically designed to avoid the kind of sacrificial frenzy that lead to the death of the two priests”. This interpretation is confirmed by the warning given to priests about not correctly observing ritual and prohibitions “lest they bring guilt upon themselves and die” (Exodus 28:43). It’s not the wrath of God they fear though that is the recorded motivation; it’s the inability of the scapegoat ritual to divert violence away from themselves. As well, “any ritual innovation aimed at preventing a recurrence of such a crisis would have to relieve the community of its sense of impurity and the load of guilt associated with it. This is precisely what the scapegoat ritual does.”³²

²⁸ Ibid, p.106.

²⁹ Marr, Violence and the kingdom of God, p.591.

³⁰ Lefebure, Victims, violence and the sacred, p.1227.

³¹ Bailey, Violence unveiled, p.137.

³² Ibid, p.152.

The Hebrew Bible then is “one long account of how a people averse to myth and disenchanted with primitive religion strove with only intermittent success to find an amalgam of myth and religion that could sustain their cultural enterprise.”³³ The authors of the Hebrew scriptures, especially the psalmists and the prophets, recognised and constantly spoke out against scapegoat victimage. The prophets are constantly denouncing the people, often at the peril of becoming scapegoats themselves, for “offering up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter my mind that they should do this abomination, causing Judah to sin” (Jer. 32:35). The prophets spoke against all the sacrificial rites in Israel “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies” (Amos 5:21). The scenario of the “majority less one” reaches its climax in Isaiah in the Songs of the Suffering Servant. As in the Psalms, it is clearly stated that the Servant of God was persecuted without cause: “By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people... although he had done no wrong and there was no deceit in his mouth.” (Is. 53:8-9). The age-old mythological drama is presented again: a crowd surrounds an innocent victim and heaps abuse on him. The point of view however has changed; the victim is innocent and vindicated by God as is Jesus who is foretold in these verses from Isaiah.

The Gospels

In the Gospels, the victim is fully revealed. God incarnate appears in history as the innocent victim, who goes to his death as the scapegoat. Far from demanding victims, God identifies with victims and exposes the surrogate victim mechanism as a fraud and deception. As Schillebeeckx notes, “implicit in John’s (Gospel’s) whole movement is an unprecedented disavowal of the Jerusalem Temple cult and propitiatory sacrifices.”³⁴ When you begin to look at the Gospels from Girard’s point of view, their interpretation is quite different. Consider the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In the parable, the priest and the Levite are intimately connected with the temple and the sacrificial cult. In contrast, the Samaritans, who were marginalised (scapegoated) for being ritually impure and socially unacceptable, while accepting the Torah and observing the Sabbath, rejected the Jerusalem Temple and the sacrifice offered there. “By undermining cultural and religious presuppositions about purity and moral rectitude, Jesus’ parable confronts his audience (the Pharisees) with the fact that they can no longer justify themselves or the cosmology of violence by the sacrificial systems and scapegoating mechanisms that they themselves have created for precisely that purpose. By reading this parable as a moral exhortation (as it normally is), Christians have otherwise rendered it harmless.”³⁵

God responds to our (collective) violence with nonviolent love. The realisation that God is on the side of victims is, for Girard, the centre of biblical revelation.³⁶ Indeed Girard laments that throughout its history, the church has largely ignored this message. It has misinterpreted the death of Jesus as a sacrificial offering to a God who demands victims. Jesus understood himself to be a scapegoat, not a sacrifice. Jesus did not die because the Father needed a sacrifice, perfect or not. For centuries the true meaning of the gospel has been lost and Christians continued the cycle of scapegoating (eg. the Moslems during the Holy Land Crusades), especially against the Jews during

³³ Ibid, p.135.

³⁴ Schillebeeckx, Jesus: an experiment in Christology, p.134.

³⁵ Fredricks, The cross and the begging bowl, p.158.

³⁶ Lefebure, Victims, violence and the sacred, p.1228.

the Middle Ages. As a concerned American reflects on the school massacres in the US³⁷, he recognises as does Girard that the crucified and risen Christ offers the antidote to mimetic violence. Jesus refused to be drawn into our destructive cycles of violence. Even though our violence nails Jesus to the cross, he refuses to retaliate. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do". The risen Jesus offers a judgement that does not condemn but rather brings life in a new creation, a new community.

The full impact of Jesus's crucifixion for us is captured in these words of Bailie:

"The surest way to miss the link between the cure (the crucifixion and its after effects) and the disease (the structures of scapegoating violence upon which all human arrangements have depended) is to read the passion story with an eye to locating and denouncing those responsible for it. There is a deep irony in this. The fact that we automatically search the text - or the world outside the text - for culprits on whom to blame the crucifixion is proof that we are one of culprits, for the crucifixion was demanded by those determined to find a culprit to blame or punish or expel. The responsibility for the crucifixion - and the system of sacred or scapegoating violence it epitomises - is to be borne either by all of us or only by some of us. If the responsibility belongs only to some of us, those who bear responsibility deserve the contempt of those who do not, and we are back in a world of religious categories and sacred violence. The crucifixion's anthropological significance is lost if responsibility for its violence is shifted from *all* to *some*. To lay blame on the Pharisees or the Jews is to undermine the universal meaning of the crucifixion in favour of the familiar finger-pointing theory of human wickedness."³⁸

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to describe Girard's anthropology of humankind founded on the two fundamental human characteristics on which culture is based, mimetic desire and the surrogate victim mechanism. This anthropology was then contrasted with what might be called an anthropology of God (revealed by the person of Jesus) which is slowly unveiled in the Hebrew scriptures and fully revealed in the person, life and mission of Jesus. Jesus's mission was to rescue humankind from the cycle of violence, not by sacrifice (to a vengeful God who sought atonement for the sin of Adam and Eve and all humankind) but by example, showing us how to be human, how to respond to our propensity for mimetic desire and scapegoating. This new understanding of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus has considerable theological implications. It confirms from a different viewpoint what already is held true and at the same time opens up new insights into theologies such as Christology, eschatology, original sin, ecclesiology and the Holy Spirit.

³⁷ L Jones, Roots of Violence (school murders by school students), *Christian Century*, July 15, 1998

³⁸ Bailey, p.218.