

## THE THEORY OF RENE GIRARD AND ITS THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS - PART II

### INTRODUCTION

René Girard in defining his theory does not claim to be doing theology, but rather emphasizes the anthropological dimension of his thought. His theory it is proposed explains both the root cause for violence and the origin of archaic religions and cultures, and then offers a strong apologia for the truth revealed in the Gospels. Theologians Gil Bailie, James Alison, Raymund Schwager, Robert Hammerston-Kelly, James Williams and others have worked extensively on the Girard thesis and will be variously referred to in this paper. Their work has contributed much to the understanding of the theological implications of Girard's work especially in the areas of Christology, Eschatology, Ecclesiology, the Trinity and especially Redemption.

### MIMESIS

The anthropological characteristic that Girard sees as most fundamental to human behaviour is mimesis. Human beings are creatures who imitate. Without mimesis, there would be no human culture. We only learn to talk and act in society by copying the behaviour modelled to us by others. While mimetic desire discussed later is more intrinsic to Girard's theory and has greater significance, the theological implications of mimesis are also worth considering.

From a Christological perspective for example, how did Jesus being "fully human" come to understand his divinity? In his book "Conspiracy of God", John Haughey suggests Jesus knew his divine origin yet as a child understood it as well as the heir to an earthly throne understands their destiny. Jesus had to discover the significance of his destiny. Jesuit Raymund Schwager, professor of dogmatics at the University of Innsbruck in Austria, has taken this theme up in his work. In his book "Jesus of Nazareth: how he understood his life", Schwager, while clearly acknowledging that he is writing fiction, attempts to capture the inner thoughts of Jesus. For him, "the tension of Jesus is how to (learn to) be a pious Jew while being true to his own mystical religious experiences. His tension is increased to the breaking point by self-serving authorities who interpret the Torah in ways Jesus finds discordant. Jesus, in turn, interprets the scriptures in ways that are outrageous to the authorities and shocking to the unlettered who had never heard anyone with his exegetical prowess come to far different conclusions than their legal professors."<sup>1</sup> How did Jesus arrive at these conclusions if he was brought up as a strict Jew? Schwager suggests the Spirit of God brought him in time to this understanding. James Alison's explanation is that for Jesus what lies in the eschatological "future" was for him the present and that Jesus' preaching was the announcement of a state of affairs that both is and is to come. "The realization of a 'realised eschatology' we might say began in one man's imagination of God."<sup>2</sup>

From the perspective of our vocation to be models of faith to others, however, the importance of mimesis and imitating others is perhaps more relevant. Schwager<sup>3</sup> points out that Jesus studied

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson, Clarence, Peeking inside the mind of Jesus, *National Catholic Reporter*, November 20, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Hefling, A view from the stern: James Alison's theology (so far), p. 694.

<sup>3</sup> Schwager, *Must there be a scapegoats? Violence and redemption in the bible*, 1987.

carefully the models of the Messiah offered in the Old Testament and he was very selective as to which models he followed. The term "Son of Man," for example, had two contrary images in the Jewish world of Jesus' time. One image was that of a powerful warrior appearing from Heaven to avenge all of the enemies of God with violent wrath. The other image was derived from the Songs of the Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah, which stressed the suffering of the Son of Man at the hands of the people. It was the latter model that Jesus chose to follow. When Peter rebuked Jesus for predicting an ignominious death, Peter was called "Satan," a stumbling block (skandalon), because he was tempting Jesus to follow the former model. When Peter later refuses to allow Jesus to wash his feet, we see Peter still does not understand.

The latter model of a non-violent suffering messiah is the one offered to all who would be followers of Jesus and accept the kingdom he proclaimed. In the famous hymn in Philippians, St. Paul enjoins all Christians to follow the model of Christ "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." (Phil. 2:6-7) Many times St. Paul stresses the importance of being an example for others. (Phil. 3:17, 1 Th. 1:7) All of us are called to model Christ to each other. James Alison<sup>4</sup> suggests that the more an infant receives a sense of life as a gift from its parents, the less need the infant has to grasp at life in a competitive way. Hence the importance of our not being a skandalon to the "little ones." We are called to imitate one another in love, with no competition between us. This is the model revealed by Jesus which we should model to others.

## **MIMETIC DESIRE**

Girard's theory on the origin of violence is based on mimetic desire. Through mimesis, our thoughts and desires are intertwined with the thoughts and desires of others. Mimesis does not have to lead to conflict as a matter of principle, but as a matter of daily fact it does. The conflictive aspect of mimesis can be observed in the nursery. When one child reaches for a toy, another child suddenly wants that same toy, but not any of the other toys in the room. As adults, we might manage to repress acquisitive mimesis in this open a form, but this restraint does not necessarily save us from acting like children. Two men might create a triangle because one man's desire for a woman inflames the other man's desire for that same woman.

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."<sup>5</sup> The desire that is subject to mimesis is "that 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.<sup>6</sup> Everything in the theory follows from this insight.

Mimesis inevitably leads to rivalry and rivalry if unchecked leads sooner or later to chaotic, self-perpetuating, reciprocating acts of violence, the violence Girard discovered in his study of literature

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<sup>4</sup> Alison, James, *Raising Abel : The Recovery of Eschatological Imagination*, p.18-19.

<sup>5</sup> Hammerton-Kelly, *The gospel and the sacred: poetics of violence in Mark*, p132-3.

<sup>6</sup> Schwager, *Must there be a scapegoats?* p.235.

and later in the Hebrew scriptures, the same violence which we regularly witness in our everyday lives and world. This violence escalates to what Girard calls “mimetic crises”<sup>7</sup>, crises we observe today in places like the Middle-East and elsewhere. The rivals are models/obstacles to each other in a struggle no longer for a specific object but for prestige!

The human propensity for mimetic desire if it remains unchecked leads to violence. Indeed Girard would have it that all violence stems from this human trait. So what theological implications does this human trait have? We suspect violence is not God’s way. The Gospels (eg. the beatitudes) tell us this is so but if we had only these words, would we be convinced? If we learn by mimicking another, then who can we learn from? Jesus is again the model for us; indeed this is his intention, his choice. He died showing us it is possible to avoid the contagion of desire by desiring instead the will of God. In doing so, he expressly loosed humanity from being bound by the Law and its rules and rituals. In the founding events of culture, the violence is hidden (mythologised) and the victim deified. In the case of Jesus’ death, the violence perpetrated and the victim who is already divine are unveiled; it is more than coincidence that this event and the victim are remembered more than any historical event. Jesus in both his radical life and sacrificial death shows us that it is possible to undo this cycle of violence and the associated entrapment.

In the Gospels then the victim is fully revealed. 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.”<sup>8</sup> Girard recognised the strong links between a culture’s founding event and its sacred narratives and religious symbols. This is true for the Christian Church as well. It was founded in violence and the narratives and symbols are rooted in the founding event of Jesus’ death. But there are some notable differences of theological significance. While ancient religions have their holy places where remains are supposedly buried and remembered, the Christian faith’s icons are the risen Jesus and the empty tomb (grave).

When a culture’s sacrificial crisis has run its course and social harmony is restored, an important key to continued 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”<sup>9</sup>. When Jesus instituted the Eucharist prior to his death, significantly I think he gave us the ritual memorial before the founding act took place. The mass then is a remembering of the undoing of the cycle of violence Jesus’ death proved to be. Rather than seeking to appease a god who was likely to unleash violence on his followers, the Christian ritual joins us to the once-and-forever event on Calvary. The community (culture) that resulted was maintained not by ritual that bound its members through fear (the Law) but rather by remembering the founding event.

## SCAPEGOATING

Mimetic desire leads to violence and often scapegoating. Hammerton-Kelly provides an important

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<sup>7</sup> Girard, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*, p.78-79, 287-289.

<sup>8</sup> Schillebeeckx, Edward, *Jesus: an experiment in Christology*, p.134.

<sup>9</sup> Bailie, *Violence unveiled*, p.106.

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.”<sup>10</sup>

For the human species then there is no natural relief mechanism as it is with animal mimesis. Girard’s theory tells us that relief is only possible if a suitable scapegoat can be found. The origin of the scapegoat in the Hebrew scriptures is a direct result of this conclusion. 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 is 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.”<sup>11</sup>

In Isaiah 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. The same is true of Jesus whose death is foretold in these verses from Isaiah. Jesus was a scapegoat; the difference is He was innocent. God incarnate appeared in history as the innocent victim who goes to his death as the scapegoat. God then 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.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed Girard laments that throughout its history, the church has largely ignored this message. Some have 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 continue the cycle of Scapegoating; the persecution of the Jews, the Crusades and the Inquisition are but a few examples..

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<sup>10</sup> Hammerton-Kelly, *The gospel and the sacred*, p136.

<sup>11</sup> Bailey, *Violence unveiled*, p.152.

<sup>12</sup> Lefebure, *Victims, violence and the sacred*, p.1228.

Alison tells us<sup>13</sup> “that out of a very typical Scapegoating of the one to which the Christian gospels bear witness, God has made a revelation of himself and because of the resurrection the definition of God can be known to include a man who died. Human history can be seen to be an elaborate cover-up that hides complicity in the making of victims. All this is not, however, merely a statement of certain facts. The disclosure is identical with salvation or redemption in that it is “constitutive and creative of a new human reality;”<sup>14</sup> that reality consists of interpersonal relationships, inaugurated, or better refounded, by the (re) appearance of the innocent victim Jesus to his friends and followers. In the resurrection, the forgiving victim models God’s way of responding to violence and a new community (Church) results.

“The resurrection is the event of forgiveness. Forgiveness occurs in the presence of the victims, not as avenger but as ‘counsel for the defence.’ Forgiveness is to do with memory; memory is the chief constituent of one’s self; selfhood is mediated through mimesis; hence memory is constituted by cultural mechanisms rooted in victimage. To be forgiven is to have one’s memory healed: the presence of one’s victim in memory is then no longer an accusation or a threat, because memory is no longer so structured.”<sup>15</sup> As a result, Alison can reinterpret original sin because the “question is not so much how Adam’s sin affects us, as how Christ’s forgiveness ... affects Adam.”<sup>16</sup>

### **THE INTELLIGENT VICTIM**

Alison also points out that any act or even any thought of making a victim of another casts a veil over the truth. It follows that only the voice of the victim can reveal the truth, what Alison calls the “the intelligence of the victim.”<sup>17</sup> The writers of the Gospels do not tell the story of Jesus’ judicial murder from their own point of view. “It is the victim’s intelligence that is allowed to provide the lines which make the story what it is.”<sup>18</sup> The victim’s intelligence also reveals that God has nothing to do with death. “Jesus was working out of an imagination which was simply untinged by death, so that he could work beyond it.”<sup>19</sup> Jesus demonstrated that by commending his life to his heavenly Father, he received life from his heavenly Father. The voice of the victim is now heard.

We might assume then that possession of the Gospel saves us from continuing to perpetrate violence; not so. The disciples, when fighting over who was the greatest, prove to be a more attractive model to Christians than Jesus, who “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.” (Phil 2:8) Because of our tendency to perpetuate the mimetic rivalry of the disciples, we perpetuate the exclusionary mechanisms that we still prefer as a means of holding society together. The process of absorbing the “intelligence of the victim” is at best a slow one.

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<sup>13</sup> Hefling, *A view from the stern: James Alison’s theology (so far)*, p.690.

<sup>14</sup> Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong : Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, p.84.

<sup>15</sup> Hefling, p.691.

<sup>16</sup> Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong : Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, p.243.

<sup>17</sup> Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, p.31-59.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p.39.

<sup>19</sup> Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.42.

Equally important, it is now politically correct to show sympathy for the victim, from whales to the unborn. Unfortunately this sympathy also creates victims; an example in the extreme is the bombing of abortion clinics. Now a victim may claim entitlement to vindictive behaviour that keeps the cycle of violence going. Alison writes “If you know the crucified and risen victim, you know that you are not yourself the victim. The danger is much more that you are either actively, or by omission, or both, a victimiser...The person who thinks of himself or herself as the victim is quick to divide the world into 'we' and 'they.' In the knowledge of the risen victim there is only a 'we' because we no longer need to define ourselves over against anyone at all.”<sup>20</sup>

Girard's theory tells us Jesus has destroyed the mechanism of sacred violence once and for all and so the old ways of stabilising society are lost. When we try them anyway, we fragment society splintering it into small groups, each united around one victim or group of victims. Instead of one victim providing the centerpiece of a society, we have several victims providing several centres, which is to say there is no centre at all. Since these acts of violence no longer work, the violence escalates. Add the tendency of reform-minded people to defend victims in ways that create more victims, and we have the perfect recipe for social chaos. So where is our hope? Surely it is the Advocate (of all victims) Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit.

## CONCLUSION

Not all readers of Girard are convinced about the conclusions of his work otherwise his theory would have had a far more reaching impact on both society and Christian beliefs. Some remain sceptical, perhaps unwilling to accept the prevalence of the contagion of mimetic desire. The brief discussion here of the theological implications of his theory however provide some plausible explanations to support existing theological beliefs from a new perspective (a view from the stern as Alison suggests); his work also challenges some existing beliefs based on somewhat questionable arguments and are well worth further consideration. Perhaps the most significant contribution Girard has made is the reminder that theology should indeed must look to other disciplines (eg. science and anthropology) for confirmation of its beliefs.

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<sup>20</sup> Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, p.92.