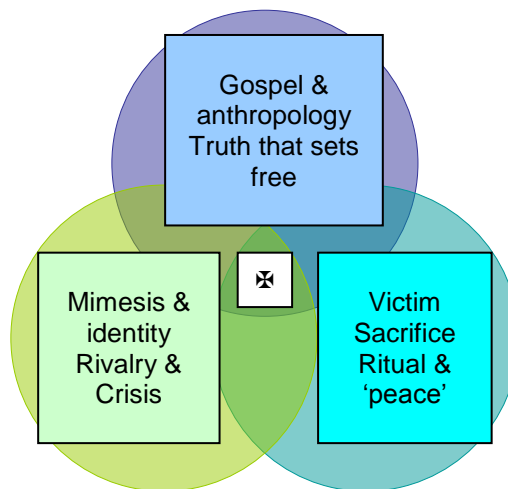


René Girard

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- 1 Girard and Darwin: big ideas born of delicate observation
- 2 Three inter-locking concepts:



- 3 Down in one gulp?

René Girard: Prophet for our Time

I would like to hope that, for most of you, René Girard is the mystery guest among the prophets invited to this table. A French American, born in 1923 in Avignon, Girard's thought has been breaking new ground for fifty years, up to and well beyond his retirement, in 1995, from a chair at Stanford University. His life's project, an exploration of intellectual new worlds, has a brave, even swashbuckling quality about it which hardly fits the mood or the academic sensitivities of our time. Just listen to the restless itinerary represented by his writings and you will understand that he leaves a multitude of specialists complaining of bruised toes. His first studies were in medieval history, then he turned to modern history, then to literary studies of the novel – of Cervantes, Dostoevsky, Proust – then to primitive religions and anthropology, then to biblical studies and theology, and all along with frequent forays into philosophy, too.

To cap it all, he makes the extraordinary claim, in his mature work, that the key to understanding who we are, how our cultures and societies came to be as they are, and how to find an authentic way of life is to be found in the Christian gospel, and there alone.

Naturally, plenty of critics see him as an old-fashioned intellectual and religious imperialist, imposing his own grand idea on all he surveys. But I beg you not to be put off. Girard himself – a brave but surprisingly humble man – would prefer a comparison with Darwin. Yes, the scope of his insights is vast, potentially world-changing, but its basis is in some very specific and quite tightly-focussed observations and interpretations. To these we must turn.

I have tried to represent a simple abstract of Girard's thought in a diagram. It shows three overlapping circles. We can best begin on the left at the bottom of the triangle, which means beginning with the concept of mimesis.

Mimesis is the Greek word for imitation: but for Girard it means far more than we usually mean by 'imitation'. Just suppose that my human identity or yours, and particularly our desires, were not the product of some innate instincts, but were acquired in and through a 'mimetic' process – not so much by deliberate mimicking of others as by a deeper interdependent imitateness. What if I learned what to want through seeing and identifying with what another, a very significant other, wanted? This would explain a lot about me and you, and, in particular, a lot about conflict and violence.

Girard understands human identity and desire (which is fundamental to our identity) as formed through mimesis. That means that objects become desirable by me because I see them desired by you. So it means that desire is intrinsically competitive, or (in Girard's language) rivalrous.

This built-in tendency of desire to lead to conflict and violence means that primitive societies, in Girard's view, will be always under threat of crisis– the crisis which occurs when mimetic tension becomes contagious. Think of a rugby match with two inebriated teams: the object of desire – the ball – disappears from view as rivals face up to one another and the confrontation of two individuals rapidly becomes a collective punch-up.

If this were the whole story, there could be no such thing as social stability. But (and note that here we are moving across the diagram to the right and into the second circle) Girard detects the shape of an ancient resolution of the disease of mimetic rivalry: he sees it half-hidden within certain characteristic myths and rituals of ancient cultures. These betray a pattern which we would now call 'scape-goating'. Girard imagines this pattern emerging as a chance discovery.

Lets go back to our pre-historic rugby match. At the height of the fray, an old man comes running onto the pitch to protest at the orgy of violence: by a swift mutual consent, both teams turn their rage on him, and when they have kicked him out of touch a strange peace descends on the pitch. The chance discovery of the power of victimisation becomes a precious memory, something to rehearse in story and symbolic action. The community wants, we might say, to bottle this cure. Myth and religious ritual, sacrifice, in particular, are the vessels in which the cure can be kept and regularly administered.

Here, then is a thread of understanding which links the way our desires are formed, the roots of violence in society and the foundational significance of sacrifice for religion and culture. Having detected it, Girard sees the evidence everywhere to hand, in the Oedipus myth, in the founding murder myths of Rome and Babylon, in the sacrificial ordinances of the ancient Chinese *Book of Rites*, in the plays of Euripedes, in the Levitical laws for atonement, and, of

course, in all the Jew-hunts of Europe up to and including the Holocaust.

We are nearly ready to move on to the third and final circle, but before we do that we have to note something important about the whole scape-goating cycle. It only functions while it remains un-recognised. Once the victim is seen to be (in our modern parlance) a 'scape-goat', which is to say, a random or innocent victim, the whole process is undermined.

Take this example which Girard draws from the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus. The people of Ephesus are afflicted by a plague which nothing will remedy. They call on Apollonius, who appears as if by miracle:

'Take courage' [says Apollonius] 'for I will to-day put a stop to the course of the disease.' And with these words he led the population entire to the theatre..... And there he saw what seemed an old mendicant artfully blinking his eyes as if blind...and he was clad in rags and was very squalid of countenance. Apollonius therefore ranged the Ephesians around him and said: 'Pick up as many stones as you can and hurl them at this enemy of the gods.' Now the Ephesians wondered what he meant and were shocked at the idea of murdering a stranger so manifestly miserable.... Nevertheless Apollonius insisted and egged on the Ephesians to launch themselves on him and not let him go. And as some of the began to take shots and hit him with their stones, the beggar who had seemed to blink and be blind,

gave them all a sudden glance and showed that his eyes were full of fire. Then the Ephesians recognised that he was a demon, and they stoned him so thoroughly that their stones were heaped into a great cairn around him.

[*I see Satan Fall Like Lightning*, pp 49f.]

Subsequently, when they remove the cairn of stones, they see the beggar's corpse transformed into the shape of a massive hound – a monstrous beast.

The human sacrifice could not have been a 'success' for the Ephesians, had the murdered beggar remained, to them, a poor beggar. They would have remembered the incident with confusion, probably with shame. He had to become demonised, to show his fiery eyes and eventually be revealed in the shape of a lion-sized hound. As soon as it becomes apparent that the mechanism is 'victimising' that the choice of a sacrificial victim is arbitrary, the whole process ceases to work.

This marks a vital difference between our age and previous ages. Not that victimising no longer happens, but that the process is frequently spotted and subjected to criticism. Even to the extent that (as Girard points out) the accusation of 'victimisation' can be used as a means of victimisation: just who was victim and who victimiser in the case of Gordon Brown's letter of condolence?

Be that as it may, the main point remains. Somehow, in the course of history, the veil has been lifted on a deep-rooted and powerful means whereby social violence has been siphoned off and peace maintained.

To that extent, sacrifice no longer works. (Now we are looking at the upper circle.)

Girard himself, seems to have recognised this lifting of the veil for the first time in certain nineteenth-century novels, most clearly in Dostoevsky. He found in his novels both the powerful depiction of rivalrous desire, jealousy and resentment and also (especially in *The Brothers Karamazov*) the revelation of the overcoming of this demonic order by a Christ who does not resort to violence or even to argument – in the parable of the Grand Inquisitor – by kissing his opponent. As James Williams puts it: Girard ‘was inspired by Dostoevsky not merely to *allow* his Christian faith into his research, but to dare to see the Christian revelation – the Gospels in particular – as its very foundation.’

Girard had become a Christian not long before he published his two novel studies (in 1961 and 1963). It was a two-part conversion, it seems, first of the mind, then of the heart and soul. The intellectual conversion was the consequence of his coming to see the gospels in an entirely new light – the light, very specifically, of revelation. To understand that revelation – that ‘truth that sets free’ – we must go back first to the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible.

Girard reads the Joseph saga in Genesis and what does he see? He sees a fundamental contrast between the viewpoint of this narrative and the viewpoint (say) of the narrative of the Oedipus myth. In the latter, Oedipus is expelled quite rightly, being seen as guilty and responsible for his own demise.

In the former, the story is based on another expulsion – that of Joseph by his brothers. But the narrative sides with the victim, refusing, as Girard sees it, to validate the rationale of the scapegoating community.

In the Psalms, too – especially the ‘cursing’ Psalms— Girard sees the scripture as, uniquely among ancient texts, giving expression to the voice of the victim – ‘Why go I so heavily while the enemy oppresses me?’ Finally, in the servant songs of Isaiah, the victim – reviled and treated like a sheep for slaughter, is actually recognised as God’s servant. For all the marks which the Old Testament bears, of a religion of sacrifice and expulsion, it is more deeply marked, Girard believes by the ‘intelligence of the victim (James Alison) and by the awareness that God speaks (as he did to Abraham on mount....) against sacrificial violence, not for it.

So we are led towards the Gospels and the figure of the crucified. Here, for Girard, God is openly seen occupying the place of the victim. Here the whole story, from betrayal to trial to crucifixion and to resurrection is a ‘tell-tale’ train of events, one which shows up the mechanics of social order attained through the cycle of violence, unjust expulsion and sacrifice.

When, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says from the cross, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34), his words are to be taken with much more direct and literal force than we usually allow them. ‘We should always’, says Girard, ‘take Jesus at his word. He expresses the powerlessness of

those caught up in the mimetic snowballing process to see what moves and compels them. Persecutors think they are doing good, the right thing; they believe they are working for justice and truth; they believe they are saving their community'. (*I see* p.126

The revelatory narrative of the crucifixion of the 'lamb of God', the voluntary victim, is what gives the final lie to all such blind assumptions. 'It is the unveiling of the violent origins of culture' (*I See* p 190). As such, it is the victory of Christ over Satan—whose power over this world has been maintained by the fiction that atonement, peace and order can only be gained by casting out. This is where Christ, 'disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public spectacle of them...' (Colossians 2:15)

The vision of a non-violent God and a 'good' religion to supplant the satanic 'bad' religion of sacrifice finds its focus here. The Holy Spirit, the 'advocate' and 'defender of the accused' gives to the disciples the power to see the depths of their own collusion in the work of Satan, the 'accuser'. Later the same Spirit will enable Saul to see whom he was persecuting. And in place of this contagion of destructive imitation, the Spirit inculcates benign mimesis – the imitation of Christ—in a life of love and a community of faith which does not cast out.

Well, that's the fifteen-minute version of the plays of Shakespeare, only without the costumes! It is hardly fair to expect anyone to swallow the whole Girard oeuvre in one gulp—even if I have managed to do justice to the range and depth of his thinking.

But it is as *a chain*, a linked succession, of insights that Girard's thought works, if it works. A chain of insights which aim to disclose meaning, even in areas where most people have given up looking for meaning.

And if Girard is indeed a prophet, it is in this sense: that a prophet enables his contemporaries to *understand* their world, to grasp some inkling of where it is going and to see it, present and future, as God's world.

Girard dares to reject the nineteenth century masters of suspicion – Freud's account of human motivation, Marx's of social order—and the post-modern flight from explanation. 'Man cannot live', he writes, 'on bread and sexuality'. We need *meaning*, above all. And he offers it in the string which binds mimetic theory, violence, sacrifice and the Gospels together. In doing this he offers a multitude of hostages to fortune: he is open to critique and airy dismissal. But could he be right?

Now his outlook is not cheery. 'The Christian revelation,' he writes, 'clarifies not only everything that comes before it, the religion and culture of myth and ritual, but also everything that comes after, the history we are in the process of making, the ever-growing disintegration of archaic religion, the opening into a future joining all humankind into one world. It is more and more liberated from ancient forms of servitude, but, by the same token, it is deprived of all

sacrificial protection.’ (*I see* p.184). We are, he believes, living in an apocalyptic age. His latest book (2007) links the work of the great military theorist, Clausewitz, with the message of the apocalyptic passages in the New Testament. He sees no easier way that the God of non-violence can lead us from the governing myths of the past to a knowledge of true peace. Yet, he writes, ‘I always cherished the hope that meaning and life were one’. Me, too!

Peter Fisher November 2009

Books for further study:

René Girard: I saw Satan Fall like Lightning
Orbis Books/Gracewing 2001

James G. Williams (ed) The Girard Reader
Crossroads, 1996

James Alison: The Joy of being Wrong
Cossroads 1998 (or anything else by James Alison