

Sacred Violence and the Cross

A dialogue with René Girard¹

Why do religions engender violence? René Girard, the French anthropologist has developed a much discussed theory of ‘sacred violence’.² Over the past thirty years Girard has proposed in a series of studies that violence is foundational for religion but also for human social experience in general.³ In doing so, he has criticised positivist and freudo-marxist theories of the origin of religion and more recently deconstructionism. Since his later books become more explicitly Christian, he himself has become something of a scapegoat for the intellectual establishment.

Why *sacred*? In girardian perspective, violence is a pathological attitude in which the neighbour becomes an enemy. It is also an indicator of false transcendence. Human aggression has a religious character as it generates myths which universally have their genesis in the resolution of conflictual situations. Girard documents this with reference to pagan myth, biblical story and modern literature. As a result, the cross becomes central in his theory of sacred violence and its solution.

The Mimetics of Sacred Violence

For Girard, human aggression has its origin in mimetic behaviour, imitation and rivalry with regard to the neighbour, who becomes a threat and a reason for envy.⁴ In the process of hominisation domination becomes a factor of

¹ Published in *Christian Faith and Violence*, II, eds., D van Keulen et M. Brinkmann, Zoetermeer, Meinema, 2005, 192-201. A longer version in French in *La Revue réformée* 54 (2003:5) and *En toute occasion favorable ou non*, 392-409.

² René Girard was born in Avignon in 1923. Literary critic and anthropologist, he taught in the USA from 1947 onwards and from 1981 until his retirement in 1995 at Stanford University.

³ This study refers to four of Girard’s major works in French: *La violence et le sacré*, Paris 1972, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, Paris 1978, *Le bouc émissaire*, Paris, 1982 and *Je vois Satan tomber comme l’éclair*, Paris 1999. For critical studies see in particular: R. Schwager, *Must there be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, New York 1987; R.G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence. Paul’s Hermeneutic of the Cross*, Minneapolis 1992. An English bibliography is given at the end.

⁴ H. Shoek, *L’envie*, Paris 1995. Girard has written on this theme in *Shakespeare: les feux de l’envie*, Paris 1990.

survival and struggles intensify.⁵ This is explained by the ‘French triangle’. The main factor in desire is not the object *per se*, but the third element, the fact that an other transmits desire and so becomes a model. Objects are desirable only because of the existence of a mediator of desire. Animosity becomes more pronounced with diminishing distance. Possession requires the destruction of the obstacle to fulfilment. Violence is exponential. Elimination via death is the *dénouement* of rivalry between opposing parties.

The way of defusing antagonism is by focalising it on an excluded third party, or scapegoat, which is sacrificed in a double transfer. Death serves to eliminate violent aggravation by crystallising animosity, hatred and rejection in a victim, which assumes a mediatorial function between fractious parties. Furthermore, since the murder of the scapegoat has a cathartic function in eliminating violence through death, the victim becomes a god – a symbol of salvation and peace restored.⁶

Girard describes an invariable mimetic cycle, which applies to individuals and social groups and embraces rivalry and violence, the death of a victim and restoration of order. Human culture and religions are founded on a primal murder which is followed by the establishment of order. The fact that the victim becomes a god because of the positive resolution of conflictual crises has creative energy. Collective mimetism and victimisation is a ‘machine for creating gods’. In this way, from human situations of collective victimisation and scapegoating arises false transcendence, myths which are a ‘human abomination’.⁷ This is the structural principle absent from the structured texts, the ‘truth hidden from the foundation of the world’ in myths.⁸ Collective rivalry, the source of violence vented against the guilt-laden scapegoat in substitutionary death provides a palliative solution to conflicts in which the victim becomes an idol. However, since the reconciliation accomplished by primal murder is only temporary, ritual sacrifices symbolise the domestication of violence and

⁵ Girard, *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*, Paris 2001, 140; *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, ch.3.

⁶ *La violence et le sacré*, ch.1; *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, ch.1; *Le bouc émissaire*, ch.2 and *Je vois Satan tomber comme l’éclair*, ch.6,7.

⁷ *Je vois Satan tomber comme l’éclair*, 187.

⁸ *Le bouc émissaire*, 165, 182, 234.

maintaining order. Laws institutionalise prohibitions and repeated sacrifices serve to maintain purity and peace in human societies.⁹

In essence, the judeo-christian story has the same structure as all myths. On this point Nietzsche was right, says Girard – in Dionysus and Jesus the same horde violence is present. All the passion dramas of myth are similar. However the biblical *interpretation* is the diametric opposite of false transcendence, because it reveals the true meaning of violence and proposes a solution. ‘Whereas Dionysus approves and organises the lynching of the unique victim, Jesus and the gospels condemn it.’¹⁰ Violence is the fundamental ill of humanity and surrogate victims are not guilty but innocent. This is the specificity of Christianity and the meaning of ‘true transcendence’, which ultimately can only be revealed. Collective mob violence generating religious illusions is exposed by the Bible ‘from the foundation of the world’. Girard equates this with the inception of human culture. The murder of Abel by Cain is not a foundational murder, but an interpretation of all other myths which are based on the cycle of mimetic violence.¹¹ ‘All violence reveals what the passion of Christ reveals, the imbecilic genesis of bloody idols, of the false gods of religion, politics and ideologies.’¹²

Myth works in ignorance and lies, but the gospels are transparent as they reveal the mimetic cycle of myth based on the structure: crisis/mob violence/scapegoating/religious epiphany.¹³ In his later work, Girard goes as far to identify the politics of mimesis and those of Satan. Satan it is who incarnates mimetic desire, at least would do so, if by essence this desire were not disincarnate. Satan, the *éminence grise* behind sacred violence ‘expels

⁹ This would explain the prevalence of sacrifice in world religions, even though they constitute systems of ‘false transcendence’. Cf. M. Neusch, ed., *Le sacrifice dans les religions*, Paris 1994.

¹⁰ *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, 265ss.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 136, 286; *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, 215ss.

¹² *Le bouc émissaire*, 295.

¹³ *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, 166. In this context, Girard does not hesitate to speak of the specificity of biblical revelation, of an absolute truth and the ‘inspiration’ of its writers. Cf. 180, *Le bouc émissaire*, 230s.

Satan' (Mc 3:23-24) though repeated mythical crises in order to maintain his kingdom of dissimulation intact.¹⁴

Girard considers interpretations of the cross which are substitutionary and sacrificial in character to be intrusions of mythology into the biblical non-violent interpretation of the cross.¹⁵ To speak in this context of the honour of God or of divine wrath is to cultivate an impression of divine injustice.¹⁶ Rather than the false mythical identity between violence and the divine, the function of the cross is to reveal once for all the incompatibility of God and violence.¹⁷ The suffering of Jesus is typical of all victims of human conflicts:

‘The suffering of the cross is the price that Jesus accepts to pay so as to offer humanity a true representation of the primal order to which man remains a prisoner, with the intention of finally depriving the mechanism of victimisation of its power.’¹⁸

The cross demasks the illusions of power and domination through violence. It reveals the innocence of victims of oppression and is the means of breaking the infernal cycle of evil. Its result is a paradoxical triumph over evil through a radical refusal of violence.

Primitive Sacred and the Origin of Violence

A striking feature of Girard's work is the absence of reference to creational origins. ‘Man is fallen man... there is no other man than fallen man. At the start there is the fall.’¹⁹ For Girard there is no original righteousness, no

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 140ss; *Le bouc émissaire*, 233ss; *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*, 148ss.

¹⁵ Of the classic theories of the atonement, Girard really only has any time for Origen's theory of Satan being taken in by the cross, *Ibid*, 229ss. See also J.D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Grand Rapids 2001.

¹⁶ A recent commentator of Girard's has said that the first effect of the cross is to unveil sacred violence rather than being a transaction that appeases divine wrath. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, 79.

¹⁷ Cf. *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, 187ss. According to Girard, by desacralising the victims of violence and devictimising the divine, Judaism marks the frontier between God and human violence. Monotheism which is the cause and the consequence of this, prepares the way for the complete revelation of this separation in the cross.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 221.

¹⁹ *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*, 141.

covenant in creation and no historical passage from good to evil. Violence *is* the fall and original sin.

However, it is at this point that dialogue can be enjoined with Girard, using some of his own tools in the context of biblical theology.²⁰ In Genesis 1-3, it is not man who becomes conscious of violence; God himself uncovers the mystery of origins, original goodness and innocence, the first covenant, the appearance of sin and evil in transgression and the first sacrifice.

The primal prohibition (Gen. 2:17) is not restrictive in its intention, but indicates a positive destiny for man who is *neither a double nor an equal* of the divinity. Because of this, mimetic rivalry is excluded. Man's life cycle is pointed in the direction of what is good and the prohibition indicates, *a contrario*, the completeness of the image of God, male and female. The *harmonia mundi* includes balanced relationships with the Creator, the neighbour and the ecosphere.²¹ In this proto-eschatological situation, the first and great command, the original law, is to love the Lord, the neighbour as oneself, and the creation. Such obedience in love excludes sacrifice, which is a post-lapsarian adjunction, resulting from sin and the need for justice and redemption.²²

How is the primal transgression to be understood? In Genesis 3, 'man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil' (v.22) is the counterpart of Satan's promise 'you will be like God knowing good and evil' (v.5). Man's fallen estate corresponds to the divine menace 'when you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you will surely die' (2:17). Prohibition, temptation, desire, transgression, acquisition, opposition and curse constitute the ethos of human rebellion. Original sin, as transgression of divine law and goodness, is an act of sacred violence *directed against* God. Presumption, an injustice which demands justice, is the heart of sin and violence, as man aspires to divine omnipotence.²³

²⁰ A procedure also followed by Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, 90ss.

²¹ C. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, Carlisle, 1992, 99ss.

²² This explains why obedience and sacrifice are contrasted in Scripture. 1 Samuel 15:22; Ecclesiastes 4:17; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21ss; Matthew 9:15, 12:7. Proverbs 21:27 says 'the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination.' Cf. Hebrews 10:5,8 and Psalm 40:7-9.

²³ R.J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, Phillipsburg 1983, 323.

But *who* is the victim of sacred violence? God is not the subject of violence even though the curse introduces death and sanctions into a good creation. Appearances are misleading. God is the object of human violence in Eden, because in mimetic desire man has transformed the Creator into a rival and an obstacle to self-realization. Lawbreaking dispossesses God of his position and his rights and as a result, man acts like a god with respect to his neighbour.

God is the primary victim of human violence and as rival and obstacle to human pretensions, God himself ironically becomes the scapegoat of history. Alienation from God is the motivational factor of human guilt transference. When challenged, guilt is transferred from Adam to Eve to the serpent. The Creator becomes the accused. Man looks for scapegoats and is invariably a scapegoat himself.

However, as Paul Ricoeur would say, to guile corresponds double guile! God doubles man's guilt transfer and illuminates the injustice of the fault. God institutes sacrifice, a blood-victim from his own good creation, in order to signify that another sort of transfer is necessary to cover man's nakedness (Gen. 3:7,21). Sacrifice veils the identity of the true victim. God's reply assumes the weight of human guilt and inaugurates the process of justice through reconciliation by expiation.

Therefore it is not primarily man who is reconciled to God but God, the offended party, who reconciles himself to man.²⁴ By an unexpected act of grace, God is not the violent avenger, but the Saviour who makes peace. Sin is removed by sacrifice in an act which prefigures the one ultimate sacrifice of the cross. So the sacrificial system of the older testament, instituted by God, hides the identity of the real victim and reveals the divine reply to sin. God's response to human violence is not more sacred violence but pardon and grace through the reestablishment of right. The mosaic covenantal code establishes law and

²⁴ F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, II*, 181ss, Phillipsburg 1994, as over against C. Baxter's comments on B.B. Warfield and reconciliation in J. Goldingay, ed., *Atonement Today*, London 1995, 164. R.A. Peterson indicates that the notion of reconciliation of God to man is already present in Calvin, *Calvin and the Atonement*, Fearn 1999, 96.

sacrifice as a way of approach to God. Violence is contained and purification of sin through substitution restores right relations with God.²⁵

So the multiplicity of human religions is not the *cause* of antagonism or its mythical transposition but the *result* of rebellious sacred violence. False sacrifices and innocent victims express man's rejection of God's blessings of life and peace. Here lies the fount of every human aggression and vendetta. Religions are deadly, as Karl Barth pointed out, because they are essentially idolatrous. 'The human righteousness of religion, of *pious* man, of phariseism, the man-made righteousness, is nothing other than irreverence and insubordination.'²⁶

By contrast, the primal divine law of love and justice is resumed in the words of Jesus: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart... Love your neighbour as yourself.' (Lev.19:18,34; Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37,38) The Creator's intention for life and fellowship in a good creation was nothing other than ordered love, according to the laws of divine nature, which was forfeited when man put his own pseudo-power in the place of God's. As a fallen creature still in the image of a righteous God, and thus suffering from a constitutional contradiction, what man requires is not primarily love but justice. God's cure for human violence is not *homeopathic* – treating violence by counter violence, but *allopathic* – healing violence by restoration. Not vengeance, but justice and pardon.²⁷

Even if Girard's Jesus as exemplary victim has evocative power, the ultimate efficacy of the cross is the work of divine justice in judging sin.²⁸ Condemnation is abolished because 'one died for all, and therefore all died.' (Rom. 8.1; II Cor. 5:14). The sacred violence of 'false transcendence' is finished in an objective sense, not just 'representationally', because the ultimate sacrifice has been made and God is propitiated. Human rivalry, guilt, sacrifices

²⁵ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Harmondsworth 1966, 13, states that rituals of purity are positive contributions to atonement.

²⁶ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Grand Rapids 1956, 27.

²⁷ On vengeance see: R. Verdier, ed., *La Vengeance, 1,2 et 3*, Paris 1980-1986 and R. Verdier, G. Courtois, eds., *La Vengeance 4. La vengeance dans la pensée occidentale*, Paris 1984.

²⁸ Justice, pardon and forgiveness are terms infrequent in Girard's work.

and collective scapegoating are exposed as false expressions of man's pseudo-religious attempts to deal with the problem of hatred and aggression. As Rousas Rushdoony affirmed:

'Man cannot get rid of the burden of sin by himself. Man tries, *first*, either to pay for his sins himself by masochistic activity, a futile process, or *second*, to make others pay for them through sadistic activities. Both alternatives lead to sick lives and sick societies.'²⁹

The power of the cross is not illustrative of a possibility open to man, but results from divine substitution.³⁰ Romans 3:25 indicates that 'God presented Christ as a propitiation by his blood'. This refers not to the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement, but to the Passover sacrifices made for the expiation of sin.³¹ Biblical sacrifice does not primarily have a liturgical function³² or present an exhortatory symbol, but is an act of penal substitution.³³ As 'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn. 1:29,36), Christ on the cross is judged before the divine tribunal. Assuming our sin in an act of divine imputation, Christ dies in the place of the unjust (I Pet. 3:18) and so undergoes punishment in our place in judgment, merited condemnation, death, hell and separation from God.³⁴ The blood of Christ saves and blood evokes violent death.³⁵

Propitiation, the turning away of the anger of God against sin, is the summit of divine reconciliation and the presupposition of reconciliation and freedom. Covenantal mediatorial sacrifice reveals the fullness of the divine plan

²⁹ R. Rushdoony, *The Politics of Guilt and Pity*, Fairfax 1978, 17. Girard comments on masochism and sadism as forms of violence in *Des choses caches depuis la fondation du monde*, 457ss and in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 79-81.

³¹ Cf. Ezekiel 43:20 and 45:21ss. In our opinion Girard gives the scapegoat theme a centrality which it does not have in Scripture, where the Passover is the more important sacrificial event linked to exodus and salvation. The Day of Atonement signifies collective purification.

³² Cf. M. Winter, *The Atonement*, London 1995, 113, says that Christ procured reconciliation by intercession.

³³ P. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation. The Christian Idea of Atonement*, London 1989, proposes that Christ «for us» does not imply that Christ bears our sins, but that he makes confession for us.

³⁴ Cf. *in extenso*, R.L. Dabney, *Christ our Penal Substitute*, Harrison 1985(2), and J.I. Packer, 'What did the Cross achieve?', *Tyndale Bulletin* (1974), 1ss.

³⁵ L. Morris, *The Atonement*, Leicester 1983, 55. Of 362 times where blood is referred to in the Old Testament, 203 concern violent death.

of salvation which an exemplary abolition of sacred violence, *à la* Girard, could never attain. Wolfhart Pannenberg resumes:

'The vicarious penal suffering, which is rightly described as the vicarious suffering of the wrath of God at sin, *rests on the fellowship that Jesus Christ accepted with us sinners and with our fate as such*. This link is the basis on which the death of Jesus can count as expiation for us.'³⁶

The Morphology of Sacred Violence

Girard is correct in indicating the difference that exists between religions and biblical revelation.³⁷ Biblical history is told from the side of the victim; mythology narrates it from the side of dominant power. Scripture demythologizes the structures of sacred violence, rebellion against God and human self-salvation.

Girard is also right when he indicates that religions, Christianity included, become dangerous when they universalise their earthly claims. This engenders territorial struggles, refusal of cultural differences, rivalry and fear, exclusions and persecutions and ultimately creates guilty victims of dominant power systems.

If sin involves dissimulation, evil invariably shows its hand. In contexts of sacred violence the archetypical rebellion against divine justice follows certain set patterns. Progressive victimization follows a course of mental excommunication, psychological pressures, confiscation of free speech, categorization of persons as 'ill', physical isolation (the gulag), interrogation, torture and eventually death. In totalitarian systems, political or religious, pseudo-sacred awe is stimulated by shock and brute power.³⁸ Religions engender contagious antagonism, idolatry of ideology and ultimately horde violence, war and death. In the thought of Girard, attitudes and acts of exclusion are a litmus test that reveals the presence of sacred violence.

The relevance of such considerations to our world situation today needs little comment. The modern world has suffered from mimetic conflicts of all

³⁶ W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, II*, Grand Rapids 1994, 427. Italics mine.

³⁷ Cf. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, 37-39.

³⁸ See the analysis of Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 320ss., who speaks of 'a continual stepping up of the *intensity* and *perversity* of violence.'

kinds, ethnic, religious, ideological and national, between ‘brother enemies’. The illusion of planetary security in the euphoria following the end of the Cold War has been exploded by a multiplicity of local conflicts and, in particular, by Islamic resistance to a unipolar global liberal economy. Can what Samuel Huntington calls a conflict of civilizations be avoided in the light of the emergence of this ‘second pole’?³⁹ Islam certainly seems to have the marks of a religion of sacred violence, at least in its extreme forms: exclusivism, totalitarian uniformity, opposition to non-koranic expressions of faith and culture, jealousy of western economy, the singling out of target victims and aggressive expansionism. It seems to be a prominent threat to open society today, in east or west, and a major challenge to tolerance and freedom. But perhaps there are other forms of sacred violence that are less obvious and more insidious?⁴⁰

Conclusion

Girard, for all his insight, tells half the story. If Golgotha is a symbol of the triumph of good over evil, it is more than that. Christ establishes justice for humanity through active and passive suffering, so ‘making peace... through the cross, by which he put to death... hostility’ (Eph. 2:16). The atonement reestablishes the rights of divine justice over all of life and, as such, is the foundation of Christian social justice. ‘It is the cross from which the final stage of the world-process, as Christian thinking views it, takes its start; and in the Eternal Order the cross finds its place for ever secured.’⁴¹

Positive imitation of Christ, based on divine pardon through blood atonement, opens the way to liberation from violence and conflicts of all kinds. The Christian community and believers are freed definitively from the fear of guilt manipulation by others and also from the self-pity of a ‘victim mentality’. This freedom ought to foster courageous action against violence and in the interest of the victims of oppression. Conversely, freedom is also freedom from

³⁹ Cf. S. Huntington, *Le choc des civilisations*, Paris 1997, U. Middelmann, ‘Comment éviter un conflit entre civilisations’, *La Revue réformée* 44/3 (1980), 1-13.

⁴⁰ Girard speaks of ‘another totalitarianism’ which is the neo-pagan imitation of Christian values, *Je vois Satan tomber comme l’éclair*, 274ss.

⁴¹ H.W. Clark, *The Cross and the Eternal Order. A Study of Atonement in its Cosmic Significance*, London 1943, 254.

making others our victims and the liberty to fulfill the perfect law of love, which casts out fear, as in the parable of the good Samaritan.

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Books by René Girard (in reverse chronological order)

Celui par qui le scandale arrive, Paris 2001.

I see Satan fall like Lightning, Maryknoll 2001.

Quand ces choses arriveront, Paris 1994.

Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky, New York 1997.

A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare, New York 1991.

Job: The Victim of his People, Stanford, CA 1987.

Things hidden since the Foundation of the World, Stanford 1987.

The Scapegoat, Baltimore, MD 1986.

“To double business bound”: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, Anthropology, Baltimore 1978.

Violence and the Sacred, Baltimore 1977.

Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure, Baltimore 1965.

Some related works

Alison, James, *The joy of being wrong: Original sin through Easter eyes*, New York 1998.

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Bellinger, Charles, *The genealogy of violence: reflections on creation, freedom, and evil*, New York 2001.

Brensinger, Terry L., *Violence renounced: René Girard: biblical studies and peacemaking*, Scottsdale, PA 2000.

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La Revue réformée 54/5 (2003) 'Religions et violence'.

<http://www.cottet.org/girard>

Some Questions following on from René Girard

1. Why does religion seem to foster violence more than anything else?
2. What is the role of rivalry in the opposition of religious systems? How does this effect missions?
3. How is rivalry related to envy and hatred? What is the relationship between mimetism and violence?
4. Can the specificity of Christianity be maintained without psychologically belittling others? When does an attitudinal problem pass into acts of animosity? How can this be avoided?
5. Can Girard's model of sacred violence be applied to interreligious, ethnic or economic conflicts in indiscriminate fashion?

- 6. Is the model of the scapegoat pertinent to the reduction of violence in situations of conflict? Through what ritual practices?**
- 7. Is the exemplarism of the cross (as in Girard or theological liberalism) a satisfactory explanation? If so how does the exemplarism actually work in countering violence? If not why not?**
- 8. How has the “innocence” of the oppressors been a prevalent model in western (Christian) culture? Are the oppressed always victims of violence? How does one distinguish between an authentic and a false victim?**
- 9. Is the Sermon on the Mount a sufficient guide for Christian action in religion or politics? If not, what is the alternative in a multi-cultural society?**