

René Girard¹ and Violence

Love to God and love to neighbor are like two doors that open simultaneously, so that it is impossible to open the one without opening the other, and impossible to shut one without also shutting the other. - Søren Kierkegaard

by Wayne Northey

Introduction

The Anglican apologist C.S. Lewis wrote of reading George Macdonald for the first time, and knowing he had just crossed a great frontier. About fifteen years ago, I was asked to review René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), and felt a similar sense of having encountered a "great frontier". Evangelical author Donald Dayton wrote of so connecting to Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* that he fairly had to go out for regular walks during reading them to burn off the excess energy. Likewise, in engaging a few Thanksgiving weekends ago the anthology of Girard's works entitled *The Girard Reader* (Williams, 1996) while accompanying my sons salmon fishing on the Chilliwack River, at times it was all I could do to restrain myself from overwhelming the roar of that river - and totally embarrassing my sons! - with wild cries of **YEEESSS!!!** A few years later, I felt similarly thrilled in reading two brand new books, one in part about, and the other by, Girard: *The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil* (Bellinger, 2001), and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Girard, 2001). For my tastes, this is theology (Bellinger's book), and anthropology (Girard's book) as good as it gets!

John Howard Yoder had first written to my predecessor in the work I do in criminal justice with the Mennonite Central Committee to suggest that Girard's writings might have specific pertinence to non-retributive responses to crime. At around the same time, I read in Jacques Ellul's book, *Jesus and Marx*, about a non-academically trained theologian, René Girard, who probably would never attract the notice of his biblical scholarly counterparts because of his nonsacrificial and non(traditional)-theological way of reading the Bible. I was intrigued.

But I wish I had begun reading Girard's second major book, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987), and not his first, *Violence and the Sacred* - as I set out to do for a review request. It is the only book I have attempted to review and never did. As I look through its pages again, I see that I underlined much and put points of emphasis beside many a passage. Still, I wrote back that I would not review the book for I did not understand adequately what Girard was getting at. This was in part due to my relative ignorance of ancient Greek literature and of psychoanalytic theory.

A colleague, Vern Redekop, was asked by the same person to do something with the Girardian material. Vern, who since completed a doctoral dissertation on the thought of Girard (1998), produced an essay that I eventually had published in an "Occasional

¹ Please see an obituary, including links to many others, [here](#).

Papers” series I co-edited for Mennonite Central Committee Canada. It was entitled *Scapagoats, the Bible, and Criminal Justice: Interacting with René Girard* (1993). It remains a fine brief introduction to the thought of Girard. Girard himself gave his *imprimatur* to the book. It has been especially helpful to understand criminal justice in light of Girardian theory.

I proceeded to read other essays on the thought of Girard in fits and starts. At times, part of me felt overwhelmingly like dropping everything in order to pursue uninterrupted further exploration of Girardian theory. I thrilled to the reading of his second major work, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, knowing that indeed at last I *had crossed* a great frontier! Vern Redekop began attending an annual international gathering of scholars investigating the ramifications of Girard’s thought, the first one of which, as mentioned, was held in 1990. The conference is called: [Colloquium on Violence and Religion](#), and attracts mainly scholars in a variety of disciplines, in particular literature, the social sciences, and yes, theology - thankfully to prove conclusively Jacques Ellul’s prediction wrong. Papers are presented, invariably one or more by Girard himself, and workshops held.

Why All the Fuss?

“Why all the fuss?”, one might ask.

Though he himself eschews any aspiration to or claim of originality, in the words of Gil Bailie: “... Girard has made the most sweeping and significant intellectual breakthrough of the modern age....

“....The unedifying spectacle of Marxist and Freudian doctrine collapsing in intellectual and spiritual exhaustion has left the human sciences understandably wary of unifying theories. In a desire to avoid further embarrassment, modest goals and modest hopes have been the order of the day. About the only sweeping theory that has recently found favor is one that holds that sweeping theories are no longer possible. [In a nutshell, this is the message of post-modernism.] When, in this milieu, René Girard proposed a sweeping new theory and argued for its universal applicability, it seemed almost a nuisance to have to reckon with it (1995, pp. 5 & 6).”

On March 5 to 9 of 2001, CBC IDEAS broadcaster, David Cayley, did [five hours of radio programming on the thought and influence of French literary critic, anthropologist, and social scientist, René Girard](#) (Cayley, 2001). Girard is considered by a growing number of scholars worldwide to be the major theorist on violence and its origins in the 20th century. Charles Bellinger (2001) also opines this.

A reviewer in *Comparative Literature* writes: “René Girard’s work suggests the projects of those nineteenth-century intellectual giants – Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud – who still cast such long shadows today.”

Philosopher Paul Dumouchel of the University of Québec, at the end of a 1983 Symposium on his thought, wrote: “Beginning from literary criticism and ending with a general theory of culture, an explanation of the role of religion in primitive societies and a radical reinterpretation of Christianity, René Girard has completely modified the landscape in the social sciences. Ethnology, history of religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis, psychology and literary criticism are explicitly mobilized in this enterprise. Theology, economics and political sciences, history and sociology - in short, all the social sciences, and those that used to be called the moral sciences - are influenced by it (quoted in Bailie, 1995, p.6).” On the CBC IDEAS series, he added that Girard’s anthropology provides the way for an entire recasting of human epistemology – how we know what we know.

Whole international conferences have been convened to discuss Girard’s contributions to human knowledge. Since 1990, there has been an annual gathering in Europe or North America of international scholars (mainly) across a broad spectrum of disciplines, and some activists around Girard’s discoveries. It is called: *Colloquium on Violence and Religion*. I have been privileged to present workshops at some of those gatherings.

Girard delineates three great intellectual discoveries that have informed his development throughout a long and distinguished academic career. They are: *mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the absolute uniqueness, anthropologically, of the Bible*. I shall return to these. But, leaving aside the first two, Girard writes of his third and most formative discovery thus:

I certainly do not believe that the Bible gives us a political recipe for escaping violence and turning the world into a utopia. Rather, the Bible discloses certain truths about violence, which the readers are free to use as they see fit. So it is possible that the Bible can make many people more violent...

In the Hebrew Bible, there is clearly a dynamic that moves in the direction of the rehabilitation of the victims, but it is not a cut-and-dried thing. Rather, it is a process under way, a text in travail... a struggle that advances and retreats. I see the Gospels as the climactic achievement of that trend, and therefore as the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world (Hamerton-Kelly, ed., 1987, p. 141).”

In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, he adds:

The Passion accounts [the stories of Jesus’ crucifixion] reveal a phenomenon that unbeknownst to us generates all human cultures and still warps our human vision in favor of all sorts of exclusions and scapegoating. If this analysis is true, the explanatory power of Jesus’ death is much greater than we realize, and Paul’s exalted idea of the Cross as the source of all knowledge is anthropologically sound.

The opposition between the scapegoat concealed in mythology and unconcealed in Judaism and Christianity illuminates not only archaic religions, not only many neglected features of the Gospels, but above all the relationship between the two, the unique truth of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Since all this knowledge comes from the Gospels, the present book can define itself as a defense of [the] Judaic and Christian tradition, as an *apology* of Christianity rooted in what amounts to a Gospel-inspired breakthrough in the field of social science [i.e. anthropology], not of theology (2001, p. 3).

In a world grown weary and in fact downright suspicious of any universal claims to “truth”, Girard emerges, insisting that there is revelatory truth to be discovered in all great literature, and therefore language itself still, *à la* Shakespeare and *over against* post-modernism, “signifies something.” He also claims that the ultimate and unique revelation of the human predicament and humanity’s liberation is found in the Bible. Girard stands over against a pervasive “hermeneutics of suspicion” applied to every traditional text and interpretation in a post-modern world, one populated by cultural sycophants convinced that the only real clothes for the “Emperor”, contemporary culture, are various forms of nihilism. Instead, he takes on the role of the little boy in the Andersen fable who cries out: “But the Emperor has no clothes!” And those alerted by his cry suddenly see that our contemporary culture is indeed shivering naked in the cold winter winds of a ubiquitous skepticism about knowing universal truth, especially Christian truth. In contradiction of a post-modern world that has given up the hope of ever discovering truth outside of “my own privatized truth”, religious or secular, Girard joyously declares that there are warm clothes available for everyone after all, and the wardrobe containing them is Christian revelation.

As Charles Bellinger says, Girard in fact reverses the tables: “[Girard] accomplishes this revelation by applying a hermeneutic of suspicion to social phenomena... The scapegoat mechanism is one side of the great either/or of human existence: either a society will sacrifice victims to meet the psychological needs arising out of its ‘ontological sickness,’ [Kierkegaard’s term] or human beings will follow the way of the Kingdom of God, which is the way of love of the neighbor (Bellinger, 2001, p. 79).”

“If,” he says in an interview, “you believe that Christianity is truth, including societal truth, you are not going to reach truth by bracketing it out [for the ... idea of silencing Christianity in the name of Christian humility is a Christian idea gone mad]. You can see the result of this method all around us, in the current academic debacle for instance.” He continues: “The biblical scholars who are still talking in terms of bracketing truth out are still thinking in nineteenth-century terms. They are on their way to a goal which the deconstructors reached long ago. If we must have nihilism, let us not dilute it with water and let us drink it full strength, with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the deconstructors. In order to reach the end of the present crisis we must first experience it fully, we must not interminably repeat attempts which already failed a hundred years ago, like ‘the quest for the historical Jesus’. [He has in mind undoubtedly The Jesus Seminar scholars and others.] (p. 288)”

The image here is of a culture entirely stripped of all clothing, naked, and buffeted by howling winds in minus forty winter conditions. This is the enterprise of post-modernism. This is the cup of nihilism - nothingness - drunk in its full potency. This is the extreme folly of our skeptical age. The pretence of people like the Jesus Seminar scholars actually claiming to have found superior new clothing for our culture through speculative historical reconstructions of the Jesus story falls apart dramatically with Girard's cry: "...we must not interminably repeat attempts which already failed a hundred years ago, like 'the quest for the historical Jesus'."! What historical Jesus questers of the Jesus Seminar ilk think of as "new clothing" is like wrapping a person shivering naked at minus forty with yet one more layer of human skin (call it "christian" nihilism, which denies the substance of the Gospels), when what is wanted is a full skidoo outfit (the truth of the traditional Gospels). Theirs is an "Eighteen Percent Solution" in finding only that portion of sayings authentically from Jesus, when a One Hundred Percent Jesus of the traditional Gospels is desperately called for.

Girard does not stop with a negation however. He proceeds to offer those with "eyes to see, ears to hear" (through no credit to them!) real clothes, warm, inviting, and protective against all the elements, if only we dare risk putting them on; if we in fact, as the Apostle Paul repeatedly admonishes, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" as found undiluted in the New Testament!

Girard says at the conclusion of the above interview: "Mine is a search for the anthropology of the Cross, which turns out to rehabilitate orthodox theology (Williams, 1996, pp 287 & 288)." On another occasion he writes: "It should be noted however, that the discovery of this evangelical anthropology in no way contradicts traditional theology. On the contrary, it reinforces its now threatened credibility (Bailie, 1995, p. xii)." Girard indicates elsewhere that "Christianity" in the academy is the "last politically correct scapegoat (Hamerton-Kelly, 1994, p. xi)." Or again: "The intellectuals and other cultural elites have promoted Christianity to the role of number one scapegoat (Girard, 2001, p. 179)." We will return to this understanding that Christianity, and the text of the Christian revelation, in fact undergo an expulsion akin to the crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of misguided "questers after the historical Jesus", would-be discoverers of anti-Semitism in the New Testament, many other "demythologizers", and deniers of the faith. (Incidentally, the best book I know of in response to the historical Jesus questers is *The Real Jesus* (1996) by Catholic New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson.)

So why all the fuss about Girard? *Why all the fuss?!* Do you not feel, as you are full participant in the twilight of Western culture, the cold blast of the winter blizzard all around us? Do you not (sometimes) desperately long for the warm clothing Jesus offers but find it repeatedly snatched away by the likes of Jesus Seminar scholars and a host of naysayers who shout "Crucify him!" all over again? Only this time they direct their cries towards the New Testament text, while claiming to be doing so in the name of the very cultural values birthed through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus!

Girard is on to something in this third millennium that we miss or reject to our own despite. That's why all the fuss! Let me explain a little more by looking at some of Girard's key insights. Before that, however, I wish to tell you a little about Girard the person.

But first a *caveat*, a warning: don't expect the warmth of the clothing Girard offers you automatically to feel that way when the storm still is raging. And warm clothing is no immediate antidote for frostbite and hypothermia already set in. Time and other medicines and shelters all must be applied and sought out appropriately for the full remedy to the profound religious and cultural crisis of the twenty-first century to begin to take. And please, do not expect immediately to grasp what Girard is about - even if my attempt is reasonably faithful. (As said: I wrestled with these ideas for a long time, still do.)

Girard the Person

René Girard was born in 1923 in Avignon, France. In 1947 he had the opportunity to spend a year in the United States. He never returned to live in France. He was first trained as an historian, and completed a Ph.D. in 1950 in that discipline. But he was early in his career assigned to teach courses in literature, a fateful turn for him, leading to his eventual international reputation as a literary critic.

In the winter of 1959 Girard underwent a conversion to Christian faith. He describes it thus in an interview with James Williams (J.W. in the interview):

“When I wrote the last chapter of my first book, I had had a vague idea of what I would do, but as the chapter took form I realized I was undergoing my own version of the experience I was describing. I was particularly attracted to the Christian elements, for example, [Stepan Verkhovensky's](#) final journey and turn to the Gospel before his death. So I began to read the Gospels and the rest of the Bible. And I turned into a Christian.

“Now this experience of an intellectual-literary conversion, as you might call it, was an enjoyable one. I was teaching at Johns Hopkins at the time, and I had been invited to teach a course every week at Bryn Mawr. So I traveled there and back every week by train. I remember quasi-mystical experiences on the train as I read, contemplated the scenery, and so on. But this initial conversion did not imply any change of life... up till the day I found out that I had a cancerous spot in the middle of my forehead. I went to a medical doctor, a dermatologist, who was--how shall I say?-- remote, unsympathetic, distrustful of me. Perhaps he feared he wouldn't be paid. He removed the bit of tissue which turned out to be cancerous. From that time on I was pretty scared, because he never told me that this type of cancer was eminently curable and usually did not return after it was removed. So to me it was as though I was under a death sentence. For all I knew, I had melanoma, the worst form of skin cancer. A complication was that I had some swelling of that area of the forehead, which turned out to be due to acne.

“So my intellectual conversion, which was a very comfortable experience, self-indulgent even, was totally changed. I could not but view the cancer and the period of intense anxiety as a warning and a kind of expiation, and now this conversion was transformed into something really serious in which the aesthetic gave way to the religious.

“So I had an extremely bad period, and this period coincided with the liturgical period of Lent in 1959. I was thirty-five years old. I was aware of the liturgical period, though I had never been a practicing Catholic. The doctor himself had been somewhat concerned about the swelling, so he evacuated it. I will never forget that day. It was Holy Wednesday, the Wednesday before Easter. Everything was fine, completely benign, no return of the cancer.

“Immediately after that experience, I went to confession and I had my children baptized. My wife and I were remarried by a priest. The priest to whom I went for confession was an Irishman, whose religious and cultural background was a little alien to me. He had a hard time understanding my experience.

“JW: You noted in [another interview] that Holy Wednesday is the traditional end of the period of penance.

“RG: It is the beginning of the holiest part of Holy Week. So on Holy Thursday I went to Mass after going to confession. I took the Eucharist. I felt that God liberated me just in time for me to have a real Easter experience, a death and resurrection experience.

“JW: So resurrection and conversion are very difficult to distinguish....

“RG: Conversion is resurrection. But conversion is a more objective reality than what we call objective the rest of the time. Awareness of guilt is forgiveness in the Christian sense. Since I tend to analyze everything to death, I might not have believed in my own experience of conversion if I had converted as a result of fear rather than before I had experienced the fear. The prior conversion was too easy; it entailed no demands or commitments which I perceived at the time, but it prepared the way. So with the definitive conversion I was both emotionally and mentally prepared to accept God’s grace and believe.

“JW: Your experience is similar to the Gospel pattern of discipleship. Recently, in preparation for writing a paper on discipleship, I conferred with scholars in Judaism, Hinduism, etc., and I found that the Gospel pattern is evidently unique: the disciples are initially called, but they fall away and then return through a kind of second conversion, which is associated with the resurrection.

“RG: That’s true... true of all the martyrs in fact (*Williams*, 1986, pp. 285 - 286).”

In 1981 he began to teach at Stanford University, where he remained until his retirement in 1995.

Two further questions were posed by the interviewer above, one about sharing the Christian faith, another about Christian faith and other faiths. Before proceeding with some key Girardian concepts, I will give the questions, then Girard's answers:

“JW: What about non-Christians and a pluralistic society: Do you favor converting all non-Christians to Christianity?”

“RG: Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life,’ and he told his disciples to go into the world and make converts. If we give that up, are we still Christian? The idea that if we respect other religions more than our own and act only according to PC [political correctness] peace will break out all over the world is fantasy and delusion. The Christians should certainly enjoy the freedom to spread their faith as much as the other religions.

“You see, is Christianity really so powerful that it should be forbidden to spread its ideas, whereas other religions should be allowed that same right?”

“JW: You are advocating freedom of religious expression...”

“RG: Of course. I think the Christians who do not want to share their faith do not really believe. The fear of religious tyranny is an anachronism, a false issue which puts political correctness ahead of the truth. I believe there is a truth, and the only way of telling it is by connecting with people.

“JW: A question related to the conversion of others, yet distinct from it, is whether one's Christian faith should enter into one's approach to other religions and cultures? Or is it necessary to ‘bracket out’ one's faith in order to do scholarly work or to be a thinker?”

“RG: I don't think you can bracket out a faith which is responsible for the best in the modern world. That is totally artificial. I don't think you bracket out an idea or ideal that you really hold -- or that holds you. If you bracket out something that is central to your life, you become a shadow of yourself and your intelligence is not effective. There is no science without faith. Everything great is always a question of faith. Of course, I suppose you could speak of a kind of *kenosis* of faith, that is, emptying yourself of mimetic rivalry as you approach others and your intellectual work. This is a sort of *kenosis* from below, as contrasted to the *kenosis* of Christ from above according to Philippians 2. As your faith grows, the more you empty yourself of rivalry and self-aggrandizement, the more you feel impelled to communicate to others, *with* others, the truth you have experienced. This belongs to the essence of Christianity. The idea of silencing Christianity in the name of Christian humility is a Christian idea gone mad -- as Bernanos used to say: *une idée chrétienne devenue folle*, like much of the madness in our world (Williams, 1996, pp. 286 & 287).”

Girard did not begin with Christian revelation and move to his great literary and anthropological discoveries. He began instead with literature and culture, then encountered the Bible's liberating power for all cultures in all times. He says however,

“It should be possible, especially for a Christian scholar, to reverse this order and analyze myth and culture from the standpoint of the Gospels (Williams, 1996, p. 264).”, which is “a more fundamental understanding (Williams, 1996, p. 266).”

I will now share some of Girard’s key ideas. I will begin with his unique biblical *perspective*, reading the Scriptures in light of anthropology.

Anthropology

Perhaps what first struck me as most remarkable about Girard was his anthropological emphasis on Christian revelation, the reading of the Gospels from the horizontal, not the vertical plain. This is to be distinguished from Friedrich Schleiermacher of the 19th century, who simply replaced theology with anthropology: who made God over in the image of humanity and human culture, an ever-tempting enterprise throughout judeo-christian history, in which historical Jesus questers and others before and since continue to participate.

Girard writes that “The problem with Christians is that they have lost all confidence in their Scriptures ...the Gospels contain an anthropology of religion far superior to anything the social sciences can provide...” Girard in fact has led in “... the discovery of a most neglected dimension of the Gospels, their anthropology, which too exclusive an emphasis on theology has obscured (Bailie, 1995, p. xii).” As already indicated however, Girard is at pains to tell us that the anthropological understanding of the Gospels reinforces the threatened credibility of traditional theology. He says in an interview: “what theology needs is a corroborating anthropology (Williams, 1996, p. 282).” This has been his offering in witness to “the faith once delivered (Jude 1:3, KJV).” His most comprehensive presentation to date of this anthropology is *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*².

When the Bible is approached through the lens of anthropology, a whole new set of questions is brought to the texts that leads to some remarkable insights. The entire enterprise of the Gospels for Girard is in fact the application of Jesus’ repeated admonition to have “eyes to see, ears to hear”, such that the various violence oriented lenses we all wear begin to be removed and the filters fall away³. For “anthropology” as a science was birthed by the judeo-christian tradition which taught in the first place the stepping outside of culture to question or “demythologize” it, in particular, the violence of all cultures. Says Gil Bailie: “Anthropology has rightly been recognized as Western civilization’s quintessential science. Anthropology can, of course, explain many things, but, until it acknowledges its debt to the biblical tradition, it cannot adequately explain itself... Anthropology is simply the study of culture by people who are no longer *entirely* contained within one, and Paul, along with the Hebrew prophets before him, is its originator (p. 38).”

² He says: “My research is only indirectly theological, moving as it does across the field of a Gospel anthropology unfortunately neglected by theologians (Girard, 2001, pp. 191 & 192).”

³ The Latin saying is *à propos*: “Quidquid recipitur per modum recipientis recipitur” – Whatever is received is received according to the capacity of the receiver.

According to Girard, Christian revelation first taught the art of “demythologizing.” “Myth” in fact according to him is a “narrative centered in [violent] scapegoat events (Williams, 1996, p. 294).” - a narrative whose legitimization in all cultures in all times is undone definitively only and uniquely in the story of Jesus. Without Christian revelation, Girard teaches, there would only be the unanimity found in all cultures that always supports violence towards scapegoats, towards victims. For violence is the core of every culture, the essential building-block upon which all cultures are erected.

So when the text of Scripture is approached *anthropologically*, which the prophets and supremely the Jesus story first taught its adherents to do in response to all cultural and religious phenomena and texts, the myths that justify violence in all cultures begin to evaporate under the strong rays of Gospel glare. To repeat, Girard writes: “I certainly do not believe that the Bible gives us a political recipe for escaping violence and turning the world into a utopia. Rather, the Bible discloses certain truths about violence, which the readers are free to use as they see fit. So it is possible that the Bible can make many people more violent...”

“In the Hebrew Bible, there is clearly a dynamic that moves in the direction of the rehabilitation of the victims, but it is not a cut-and-dried thing. Rather, it is a process under way, a text in travail... a struggle that advances and retreats. I see the Gospels as the climactic achievement of that trend, and therefore as the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world (Hamerton-Kelly, 1987, ed., p. 141).”

So Christian revelation gave the world anthropology, and when the Bible is approached from this perspective, some remarkable discoveries are made about the human condition and humanity’s liberation.

Girard’s Three Great Discoveries

But as indicated, Girard did not approach the Bible anthropologically until he had already encountered two of “three great moments” of discovery in his own thinking and writing: *mimetic desire* and the *scapegoat mechanism*.

Mimetic Desire

Robert Hamerton-Kelly explains that in Girard, “Desire is mimetic in the sense that it imitates desire, it *copies the other’s desire for an object* and not the outward form of the other’s actions (1994, p. 132).” When two toddlers are in the nursery surrounded by toys, one child is perfectly content to let a certain toy lie untouched beside him until the other child suddenly wants it. That demonstrated desire by one child suddenly awakens desire in the other, and literally, “all hell breaks loose” - if we understand hell in the biblical sense to be the self turned inwards, without loving reference to God or humanity. Violence erupts, violence which is always the outcome of the contagion of a desire whose origins are Satan.

James puts the matter succinctly: "...each one is tempted when, *by his own evil desire*, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death (James 1:14-15)." This is mimetic desire gone amok, derivative from Satan who is "the personification of the rivalrous mimesis [imitation], the mimesis engendering accusation and violence (Williams, 1996, p. 293)." As Jesus himself says: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your *father's desire*. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44)." The same Greek work (*epithumia*) is used in both texts for "desire."

Girard understands desire ultimately to be metaphysical: it wants *to be* the other, who acts both as a *model* but then as an *obstacle*. "This is the source [for Girard] of fascination, hypnosis, idolatry, the 'double', and possession (Williams, 1996, p. 290)." As one interpreter explains: "The experience of the double occurs when the model-obstacle as overpowering other is so internalized that the subject does not experience a distinction of self and the model-mediator." He continues: "The extreme alternatives are suicide or murder of the model-obstacle. Other possibilities are schizophrenia, escape into a new identity, and liberation through the release experienced in love and forgiveness ."

The writer concludes: "This latter is the work of a good or conversionary mimesis (Williams, 1996, p. 290)." For mimetic desire is not inherently bad or destructive, rather it is the means whereby we become open to God and others. "If," the same author explains, "it becomes effective in a fundamental change of personality through the imitation of God or Christ, it could be termed 'conversionary mimesis' or 'conversionary imitation (Williams, 1996, p. 291)." A classic text is Ephesians 5:1 & 2: "*Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*"

Put slightly differently: the desire for a self ever found in the well-being of the other, which is a life of "embodied forgiveness" according to Gregory Jones (1995), and the true "life craft" of every human, a consciousness that Jesus can be discovered, as Mother Teresa puts it, even "in the most distressing disguise" - and always in everyone, is mimetic desire gone good, and the ultimate and only antidote to violence. For the test case of love of God is love of neighbour. And the test case for love of neighbour is love of enemy - therefore an ultimate test of love of God. "Love" in New Testament parlance is *a concrete action designed without limit to make the other a friend*. For it is, again to use the earlier image of clothing oneself, putting on the only clothing capable of withstanding the winter storm in this culture and all cultures, namely, in the often repeated Pauline admonition, "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ".

For Girard, good mimetic desire towards God in Christ spells an explicit end to all legitimized scapegoating violence by the state or society, and all illegitimate violence proscribed by law. "Just war" and "just executions" are therefore a *direct contradiction of the fundamental revelation of God in Christ*. They are in fact a perpetuation of a scapegoat mechanism of sacrificial violence Jesus explicitly reversed. In Girard's words:

“Not to love one’s brother and to kill him are the same thing. Every negation of the other leads, as we have shown, toward expulsion and murder. The basis for all of this lies in the fundamental human situation of a mimetic rivalry that leads to a destructive escalation.... To kill is to die, to die is to kill - for both stay within the same circle of evil reciprocity, in which reprisals inevitably take place. Not to love is to die, therefore, since it is to kill.... It is quite literally true, when we are concerned with the confrontation of *doubles*, that he who wishes to save his life will lose it; he will be obliged, in effect, to kill his brother, and that means dying in a state of fatal misunderstanding of the other and of himself [and one could add of God]. He who agrees to lose his life will keep it for eternal life, for he alone is not a killer he alone knows the fullness of love (1987, pp. 213 - 215).”

According to Girard, Jesus died because he gave the lie to legitimized violence. The “atonement” therefore is in fact, the direct inversion of legitimized violence, and therefore the very antithesis of all [Just War, Just Deserts, and Just Hell](#) (of eternal conscious torment).

Scapegoat Mechanism

Herein is the irony, which arises from the second great moment of discovery for Girard, the “scapegoat mechanism”. The irony is precisely this: the faith that was initially built upon the revelation of God in Christ of a totally nonviolent mimetic desire centred in Christ turns the symbol of that very rejection of violence, the Cross, into the model for how Christians have interpreted the work of Christ, the atonement, ever since. Because God ordered the execution of Christ, the dominant theology goes – all the way back to Saint Anselm in the 11th century – he not only therefore models an ultimate violent response to enemies, but as well decrees violence upon all who literally or vicariously participate in crucifying the Lord of Glory - the very execution God ordained! Says Bailie: “The most familiar form of the atonement doctrine... supposes that a wrathful God demanded that a victim pay in blood for human sin... and that God chose to take a human form and pay for the sin ‘Himself.’ It is an understandable doctrine, given the religious and cultic backdrop against which early Christian thought was first forming. But the doctrine is not only logically incoherent; it is morally and theologically inadequate as well (p. 37).”

The above is what usually is called the “satisfaction theory” of the atonement, reflective of an 11th century feudal culture where the lord of the manor demanded violent “satisfaction” of his serfs for offences committed. Girard throughout his writing anathematizes it, and another interpreter dubs it a “mysticism of pain which promises redemption to those who pay in blood (Gorringe, 1996, p. 102).” (Incidentally, it is this theory that originates the dominant form of Western criminal justice, “retributive justice” (just deserts) that has bequeathed a nightmare of horrific pain upon convicted criminals to this day. You can read more on this [here](#) – and the related idea of just hell of eternal conscious torment.)

The second great moment of discovery - of the “scapegoat mechanism” - completed the mimetic theory for Girard. Scapegoating is “The age-old way of gaining release from the violence or potential violence that mimesis produces ... through nonconscious convergence upon a victim (Williams, 1996, p. 293).” The Holocaust directed toward the Jews by the people of Germany in the Second World War is a clear example of a centuries old practice by Christians both productive of, and resulting from in part, a “satisfaction theory” of the atonement.

Girard understands the birth of all cultures, including Christendom and Christian culture, to arise from the unanimity achieved by scapegoating a victim or victims. Ritual, prohibition, and myth dominant in all cultures religious and secular arise in the repeated exercise of a sacrificial mechanism designed to re-establish the peace. Cultic rites the world over in archaic religions and scapegoating interpretations of Christianity demonstrate the phenomenon; as mentioned, the criminal justice system in a secular society serves a similar “scapegoating mechanism” function (Redekop, 1993, pp. 32ff) - though this was not initially recognized by Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977, pp. 22 & 23).

The “scapegoat mechanism” is “simply a generative scapegoat principle which works unconsciously in culture and society (Williams, 1996, p. 294).” A mundane example. I return from work troubled by mimetic conflict with a colleague. I begin yelling at the kids. My wife, ever patient, gently asks if it was another difficult day with Sam. I suddenly realize my violence towards my kids is an unconscious scapegoat mechanism. If I am sensitive, I hopefully stop immediately yelling at them and make amends⁴.

Gil Bailie supplies a more sinister example, the 1989 execution of serial killer Theodore Bundy, when hundreds of men, women and children camped outside the Florida prison in a festive spirit one reporter likened to a *Mardi Gras*. The same reporter described the event as “a brutal act... [done] in the name of civilization (Bailie, 1995, p. 79).” Bailie reflects on that commentary thus: “It would be difficult to think of a more succinct summation of the underlying anthropological dynamic at work: *a brutal act done in the name of civilization*, an expulsion or execution that results in social harmony. Clearly, after the shaky justifications based on deterrence or retribution have fallen away, this is the stubborn fact that remains: a brutal act is done in the name of civilization. If we humans become too morally troubled by the brutality to revel in the glories of the civilization made possible by it, we will simply have to reinvent culture. This is what Nietzsche saw through a glass darkly. This is what Paul sensed when he declared the old order to be a dying one (I Cor. 7:31). This is the central anthropological issue of our age (*ibid*, p. 79).”

⁴ I could, however, also turn more violent! This is perhaps why Christ said: “*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law - a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.’* (Matt 10:34-36)”

And this is the grand enterprise of the Gospel impetus: to reinvent culture consonant with the Peaceable Kingdom: “*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea* (Isa 11:6-9).”

What Girard considers the most difficult aspect for others to grasp of his understanding of Christianity is “that scapegoating does not play an essential role in the Gospels, whereas it has an enormous role in myths since it generates them.” In fact, says Girard, “...Christianity ... [witnesses] to the God who reveals himself to be the *arch*-scapegoat in order to liberate humankind (Williams, 1996, p. 263).” **Now that turns the traditional doctrine of the atonement on its head, and reveals the scapegoat mechanism to be part of the murderous lie upon which all cultures (including Christendom) are founded and from which the Jesus story is the Ultimate Declaration of Emancipation!**

The Bible as Demythologizer

Finally, Girard explains in an interview: “The third great moment of discovery for me was when I began to see the uniqueness of the Bible, especially the Christian text, from the standpoint of the scapegoat theory. The mimetic representation of scapegoating in the Passion was the solution to the relationship of the Gospels and archaic cultures. In the Gospels we have the revelation of the mechanism that dominates culture unconsciously (Williams, 1996, p. 263).”

Girard suggests that this order of discovery should in fact be reversed, that Christians should work from the Bible to myth and culture. Walter Wink in his trilogy on the Powers, in particular *Engaging the Powers* (in which he incidentally devotes a whole chapter to Girard) is an illustration of this. Wink begins his study: “Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world.... Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works (1992, p. 13).” His entire life’s work, and this book the final of a trilogy on biblical “powers”, was a challenge to what Wink calls “the myth of redemptive violence” which dominates the world like no other.

The biblical text, in a travail of discovery and rejection of the scapegoating mechanism in the Hebrew Bible, climaxed in the story of Jesus who eschewed all violence and all “domination systems”, to use Wink’s term.

But the irony is, the Gospels themselves have now come under attack as sources of scapegoating and demonization. They are seen for instance as the ultimate generation of anti-Semitism, oppressive patriarchy, and scapegoating violence in direct contradiction to their reality, claims Girard – and I find convincing! Weddig Fricke, for instance, in a

claim to be devoid of any “faith” bias in his conclusion that “the Jesus portrayed by the Church and from the pulpit differs in a number of decisive ways from the Jesus who emerges from the historical record insofar as it can be established (1987, p. 5).”, demonstrates a most remarkable faith (and overweening arrogance!) in the “necessary truths of reason” (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s term – he a 17th century German skeptic) he applies to the Gospels. He fails to see the hidden scapegoating dynamic in his own naïve faith in a historiographical methodology he applies to the New Testament text in the interests of (imagined) “objective” historical research. So he says, “History teaches how easily naive faith can degenerate into fanaticism and persecution (p. 5)”, then proceeds with a book-length study *demonstrating precisely a remarkable fanaticism and persecution towards and of the New Testament text!*

Likewise, American Episcopalian Bishop John Spong demonstrates in all his writings a virulent intolerance towards Christian fundamentalism befitting the worst of the “fundamentalists” he excoriates! “We go on persecuting,” Girard says, “but in our world everybody persecutes in the name of being against persecution; that’s what we call propaganda. We have our own scapegoats, but they are always the people who make scapegoats, and we never persecute directly anymore (Hamerton-Kelly, 1987, p. 142).”

So Girard responds to an interviewer’s comment, “To take the Gospels seriously in the way you do is extremely difficult”: “It is difficult because it is too simple. Everything that happened to Jesus is happening to the texts of revelation themselves. This scapegoating of the Gospel texts is probably a necessary – but not excusable – phase that we are going through. It is a form of ingratitude toward God, and one should say so, boldly (Williams, 1996, p. 264).” This is reminiscent of Jesus’ words: “*Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!* (Matt 18:7).” For it is a participation in the violence of the world upon which all culture is founded, a violence that first of all crucified the Lord of Glory, and now seeks to cover the murder by expelling the very and only text that teaches humanity definitively that all such murder and violence are wrong!

Girard adds: “Political correctness is good to the degree that we now have an awareness of victimization and victimary mechanisms. But now this awareness supports attacks on Christianity and its texts, which are the very inspiration of our modern concern for the victim (Williams, 1996, p. 265)⁵.” This is of course the ultimate instance of the dog biting the hand that feeds it. Do you see the scapegoating dynamic hidden here? And therefore why Jesus continually admonished, “*If you have eyes to see, see*”?

I have relatives and friends who have long since left the church and with it have scapegoated traditional orthodoxy, while failing to understand the violence in that expulsion, and that the origin of the very sensibility at back of their rejection is the truth of the traditional Gospels about scapegoating violence and the way out, a truth designed to set one free. Yet the wellspring of that truth is one that God patiently risks seeing repeatedly turned on, such that “church, creed and canon” are scapegoated like no other in the academy and in wider society. Some of my friends and relatives, caught in a web

⁵ Girard (2001) develops this insight at great length.

of allegiance to “political correctness” that would preclude them from letting drop a negative sentiment about the gay lifestyle, feminism, pro-choice, non-Christian spiritualities, etc., freely excoriate traditional Christianity, apparently oblivious of their own intolerance and prejudice!

So Girard envisions the ongoing emergence of new ideologies continually presenting themselves as better than the Gospel, which they will in turn routinely demonize. Marxism was a past example, some forms of radical feminism are current instances. Many more will come, ironically all indebted to the victim-sensitive Jesus story! So Girard comments: “All the excesses of the modern world are distortions of Christian truth.” He continues: “The only difference is that our narcissistic culture, which is really intensely mimetic and [rivalistically] other-centered, is a deviation and a caricature of the Christian person, not its fulfillment (Williams, 1996, p. 279).” Girard adds in 2001 book: “The most powerful anti-Christian movement is the one that takes over and ‘radicalizes’ the concern for victims in order to paganize it. The powers and principalities want to be ‘revolutionary’ now, and they reproach Christianity for not defending victims with enough ardor. In Christian history they see nothing but persecutions, acts of oppression, inquisitions.

“This other totalitarianism presents itself as the liberator of humanity. In trying to usurp the place of Christ, the powers imitate him in the way a mimetic rival imitates his model in order to defeat him. They denounce the Christian concern for victims as hypocritical and a pale imitation of the authentic crusade against oppression and persecution for which they would carry the banner themselves (Girard, 2001, pp. 180 & 181).”

Bailie sums up the situation thus: “The Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel did not say that the greatest commandment was to *believe* in God and love humanity. He did not say that we should be nice to one another because that’s the way God would like us to behave. He said the first and most essential thing is to *love God* with a paramount love. It is the most hackneyed notion in the world, but once or twice in a lifetime its dulling familiarity vanishes, and one feels for a moment the unfathomable significance and centrality of Jesus’ suggestion for breaking the grip of sin and death: *to love God*. Partly due to the humanists’ romantic idea of basic human benevolence and partly to the rationalistic “where-there’s-a-will-there’s-a-way” spirit of the Enlightenment, the modern world came to believe that it could fulfill the requirements of the second commandment without having to bother with the first. We moderns came to believe, in effect, that, by itself, the second commandment was a civilizing force sufficient to the task at hand. The creaking and groaning, indeed, the shouting and shooting, that we now hear all around us [are] coming from the collapse of the assumption. If we need an epitaph for it, this from Girard will serve:

‘In reality, no purely intellectual process and no experience of a purely philosophical nature can secure the individual the slightest victory over mimetic desire and its victimage delusions. Intellection can achieve only displacement and substitution, though these may give individuals the sense of having achieved a victory. For there to be even the slightest degree of progress, the victimage

delusion must be vanquished on the most intimate level of experience [quoted from Girard, 1987, p. 399]’ (p. 272)”.

Conclusion

In many ways, René Girard’s project is an extended commentary on I Cor. 1:18 - 31⁶, a passage which in turn anticipates two great watersheds of the Christian era: the Constantinian Embrace of the Christian Church; and the Enlightenment. In the former case, the Church definitively took up violence as its *modus operandi*, moving from its initial position of *ecclesia abhorret a sanguine* (the church abhors the shedding of blood) to *in hoc signo vinces* (“in this sign [of the *labarum*⁷] you will conquer”). In the latter instance, the church began to accept, as Lessing taught, that there was indeed an “ugly broad ditch between the accidental truths of history [Christian revelation], and the necessary truths of reason [culturally dominated definitions of truth].” Over against a culture unable to accept Christ as “the truth”, Girard presents Jesus Christ as the Wisdom of God who alone is able to liberate us from the cultural snares of scapegoating violence. And over against a world and a Christian tradition too often bathed in violence at their very core, and fundamentally opposed to Christ as “the way”, Girard presents Jesus as Stumblingblock (Greek, *skandalon* - a model/obstacle in Girard’s understanding) to the Powerful who only know violence as the ultimate resort, and therefore repeatedly crucify the Lord of Glory in endless persecutions. To embrace Christ in this context is indeed to discover Jesus as ultimately “the life”, which all of us are offered “abundantly (John 10:10 and 14:6).”

Can you now feel some appreciation for why I wanted to thunder **YEEESSS!!!** across the Chilliwack River on a past Thanksgiving Weekend, and many times since!

I can do no better than conclude with the final two paragraphs in Gil Bailie’s work: “At the outset, I had no intention of ending it, as I have, on such a confessional note. It has ended that way because writing it has drawn me ever deeper into the mysterious power of the Christian revelation, and it would be silly to put on a wooden face and pretend otherwise. While one needn’t wear one’s faith on one’s sleeve, neither is there reason to equivocate. In writing this book, I have grown ever more aware of how great is my intellectual debt to René Girard. More importantly, however, I have come to realize the degree to which his groundbreaking work is part of what Andrew McKenna has called ‘the legacy of the crucifixion narrative.’ Mediated as it is through the example, work and

⁶ Girard ends his 2001 book by quoting I Cor. 1:18 – 25, preceding it with this comment: “Far from minimizing Christian transcendence, attributing purely earthly, rational meanings to themes such as Satan or apocalyptic danger renders Paul’s ‘paradoxes’ of the Cross more relevant than ever. I think that through our engagement with some of the most astonishing texts of Paul we have already found enlightenment for the true demythicizing of our world, and we will find enlightenment even more in the future, as Gil Bailie foresees [a footnote points to Bailie, 1995]. This enlightenment can only come from the Cross (Girard, 2001, p. 192).”

⁷ The *labarum* was a vexillum [military standard] that displayed the "Chi-Rho" symbol $\chi\rho$, a christogram formed from the first two Greek letters of the word "Christ" — Chi and Rho. It was first used by the Roman emperor Constantine.

thought of others, I now believe that legacy to be the world's wellspring of moral and religious truth and its ultimate guarantor of intellectual clarity.

“Grateful for his inspiration and friendship, I want to give the concluding word to René Girard, for he summarizes best the work he so profoundly inspired:

‘Beyond the misunderstandings, calumnies and encroachments of which it is the object, beyond the historical reversals and even the disasters that result, and beyond all that disfigures it in our eyes, the truth of the victim that we at last possess is the greatest, most fortunate event in the history of religion and the whole of humanity [quoted from Girard, 1987, p. 108].’ (pp. 275 & 276).”

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[October 18, 2016 NOTE: All publications listed are the English titles and dates. All book publications by and about (recent) Girard in English are listed, whether used in the essay or not. A listing of other language books by and about (recent) Girard, and articles in French or English by Girard, is at the back of Williams (1996). This list below was last updated in 2001 – obviously significantly out of date now. Girard died in November 2015.

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Related websites: [The Cornerstone Forum: Reflections on Faith & Culture](#)—full of information on Girard's theories, and the work of a significant interpreter of Girard, Gil Bailie, often quoted in the above paper, who has much to offer in his own right.