This essay was prepared for a yet-to-be-published collection of essays under the title of *The Strategic Smorgasbord of Post-Modernity: Literature and the Christian Critic*, edited by Deborah Bowen and Jane Hogeterp-Koopman. (It was approved by the editors but cut by the publisher, and so now appears here.)

René Girard: The Anthropology of the Cross as Alternative to Post-Modern Literary Criticism

Paul J. Nuechterlein

Final Draft -- October 2002

It is sometimes said that the post-modern age is the post-Holocaust age -- the age of humanity trying to comprehend the horrific depths of its own violence. Or is it? The post-modern age is also one that might be said to have become preoccupied with texts -- to the point of analyzing them down to the letters, the signs, of which they are constituted. If we can no longer get beyond texts to "reality," then post-modernism might instead be a clever way to avoid being confronted by our violence once again. We can seemingly find violence in our texts, but we cannot get to a better understanding of "real" violence in the "real" world, of human beings *doing* violence. A wholistic kind of learning to not *do* violence tends to be narrowed down to learning how to purge our language of its violence.

Jacques Derrida, considered by many to be the chief spokesperson for post-modernism, is a case in point. As Andrew McKenna begins to outline Derrida's project:

> Derrida called his critique of philosophy a "grammatology," not in reference to grammar, but as a play on *gramme*, which refers to an arbitrary mark, an insignificant letter, the trace of a sign. Meaning is a network of traces, like a text; there is no arch-trace, no place in which language finds its own ground. (McKenna 1997, 35)

With no stable ground for meaning, the history of philosophy -- and of human thought in general -- is interpreted as one of a violent imposition of meaning that Derrida calls "logocentrism." Philosophy is seen as dealing in binary opposites of meaning, expelling one in favor of the other, awarding primacy to ideas over symbols, speech over writing, presences over representations, and originals over copies or substitutes. Deconstruction is the process of analyzing texts in order to show the artificiality of such preferences, the arbitrariness of such expulsions. We can access no Platonic forms 'out there' that give rise to our copies of them in words and texts. Derrida contends that neither can we access a point of origin of language. When it comes to language, the situation is one of "always already." Instead of violently expelling writing in favor of speech, Plato's basic philosophical move as represented in his dialogue *The Phaedrus*, we must learn to restore the "play" to texts which is stamped out by logocentric interpretations.

The career of René Girard -- who retired in 1995 as the Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language, Literature, and Civilization at Stanford University -- has spanned roughly the time period of the movement from modern to post-modern literary criticism. Less than seven years the elder to Derrida, his work parallels Derrida's in many respects but moves beyond it, especially in terms of the post-Holocaust issue of human violence. Once again, Andrew McKenna: "Whereas Girard advances a theory of violence, Derrida is concerned with the violence of theory" (McKenna 1992, 24). Derrida talks a great deal about violence in texts, but if, as could be argued of Derrida's earlier work, one's analysis has difficulty getting beyond textuality, then the effort to get to a deeper understanding of people doing violence against one another becomes bogged down. Examining texts may help us a great deal -- it is where Girard begins, as well. But for a deeper understanding of violence, Girard believes that thinkers need to be bold enough to theorize about matters of human origin, language included, something denied us by Derrida's post-modern methodology. The philosopher or literary critic cannot seem to get beyond theorizing about texts and language to the point of origins of anything human, since our way must always pass through texts which are "always already."

Theorizing about human origins, even if it is to deny our access to them, takes one into the realm of religion or theology, at least to the extent that one encounters the need to talk about a transcendent ground of meaning. For

deconstructionist method that means calling attention to the fact that logocentrism throughout the ages has been grounded in religious and theological categories. Derrida sometimes extends his nomenclature to read "theologocentrism." Accordingly, all systematic thinking is seen as having been at least quasi-theological, to the extent that it assumes a transcendent grounding of meaning in some originating presence -- in a manner of speaking, a god. Derrida contends that humankind has simply been wrong in thinking that it can get beyond texts to those authoritative presences which ground them in stable meaning. Derrida himself brackets the theological questions (though his recent writings show an increasing interest in theological matters), since his very method assumes that we do not have access to any originating presence behind the text. A Derridian theologian (if we allow for a moment for such an oxymoronic category) might say that it is idolatry, false transcendence, which is behind logocentrism.

The work of René Girard begins as literary criticism but ends up being centrally about religion and theological matters such as idolatry. Outflanking the four major categories of post-modern terminology put at issue in the editors' introduction to this volume -- philosophical, literary, semiotic, and political -- Girard's engagements with texts takes him into the *anthropological*. It is this category which he thinks offers the possibility of leading us to theorize fruitfully about human origins. Anthropology helps us to see, not completely unlike Derrida's conclusions, that human endeavors at finding meaning are religious (i.e., transcendental) and idolatrous. But, unlike Derrida, Girard proposes that a true journey into human origins also brings us into an encounter with the true God. How can one know it is the true God? Because at the origins of human religion are real victims of human violence and the false gods who demand such victims. The true God, on the other hand, is revealed as on the side of the victims, not that of the idolatrous perpetrators. If we maintain the post-modern concern that truth claims, especially about God, lead to violence, then Girard's answer is that

the true God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ is always the victim of human violence, not the perpetrator or instigator of any new violence. The fact that historical Christianity has been a perpetrator or instigator of so much violence in the name of its god only reflects on the colossal failure of historical Christianity, not on the true God revealed in Jesus Christ. Anthropology guides us into a true theology by understanding that the true God is nonviolent; humankind is solely responsible for its own violence. Girard's "mimetic theory" is, then, offering us an "anthropology of the cross."

If it seems oxymoronic that the science of anthropology would be linked with an event of such religious significance, the unusual nature of Girard's hypothesis is further demonstrated by his quoting Jesus in Scripture:

> "Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation." (Luke 11:49-51)

In Derridian fashion, Girard would offer "this generation" as a pun, a play on words. There is the obvious sense of designating the current population of adults in their prime: Jesus is indicating that something is about to happen that will make "this generation" realize humankind's responsibility for its murders in all times and places. But there is also the less obvious sense of "this generation" as pointing to a particular event of generative power among a category of events that are generative of things human. For Girard, the category of events that generate human culture are collective murders by the many of the few, or the one. And Jesus, in this "woe to the Pharisees," understands that his death on the cross will, by virtue of his resurrection on the third day, be the generative event which finally unveils humanity's responsibility for its own murderous foundations. The unveiling which the cross and resurrection of Christ make possible is that idolatry is essentially a matter for anthropology more than theology. It becomes possible for human beings finally to begin comprehending that our gods are generated along with human culture. We human beings unknowingly project our responsibility for violence onto the gods. In the human violence of the cross and the divine forgiveness of the resurrection, humanity is finally able to begin accepting its responsibility for the murders which have generated its societies and institutions "since the foundation of the world." In short, according to Girard, the work of the Gospel through the ages has ultimately enabled an anthropology of human origins as rooted in what we are confronted by in the cross, namely, the collective murder of a victim.

There are thus profound differences between the Girardian post-modern anthropology and Derridian deconstructionism. At the heart of things for Girard are excluded human victims. The primary concern which launched Derrida's enterprise (although it is less the focus of his later work) is the philosophical exclusion of writing. Andrew McKenna writes:

> The victim occupies the place -- within and without the community -- in Girard's view of cultural origins that writing occupies in Derrida's critique of origins or of original presence, of which language is but the representation and writing the secondary representation, the forlorn and occluded trace. The victim, like writing, is a supplement of a supplement (speech), a stand-in, an arbitrary substitute for any and all members of a community that does not exist prior to the victim's expulsion. (McKenna 1992, 16)

There is, then, a similarity in structure between Derrida's deconstruction of logocentric texts and Girard's deconstruction of human culture. They both involve investigations that take the thinker on a trail of supplements to traces of origin that disappear behind that which is "always already." But Girard finally dares to postulate an origin behind the trace -- namely, the collective expulsion of a human victim -- which enables the investigator to put forward a theory of human violence and not just the uncovering of the violence in theories.[(1)]

Girard's first major work launched his anthropological project by studying great writers of fiction -- Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky -- and developing a measure by which these authors displayed a truer understanding of human behavior -- usually a development within that writer's own corpus. Published in 1961 in French, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* introduced the core Girardian idea: that the most insightful authors see *human desire* as manifesting a triangular structure due to its *mimetic*, imitative nature. The "romantic," or lesser, understanding of desire sees human desire as linear, as simply a matter of a desiring person and his or her desire for the object. The misrecognition of desire assumes that it is of either objective or subjective origin, that is to say, that desire either resides in the desiring subject or is prompted in the subject by the desirability of the object. The more perceptive novelist comes to understand that desire originates with a third party who imparts the value of the objects to the

desiring subject. In short, Girard's is a social, or "interdividual," psychology of human beings around the phenomena of human desiring. [(2)]

This is akin to the Newtonian revolution in physics which transformed our understanding of the forces governing the movement of physical objects into a *relational* understanding. Gravity does not reside in any one object by itself; it resides in the relationship between objects. Similarly, desire is the force that governs the movements of living beings and should not be perceived as simply residing in those individual beings (which is the "romantic" notion); desire resides in the relationship between desiring creatures. You and I 'catch' our desires from each other. Desires are contagious, as modern advertising understands all too well. And so do the writers whom Girard counts as the most insightful authors of literature -- particularly, for him, Dostoevsky and Shakespeare.

Understanding human desire as mimetic leads to a deeper understanding of human conflict, suffering, and violence. Since we catch our desires from each other, we are bound to desire the same objects, bringing us into conflict over those objects -- *unless there is a process of deferral in place*, that is to say, that one of the two people in the situation of contagious desire lets the other have what they mutually desire. Perceived equality among the contenders for the objects of desire actually tends to have a negative effect on this process, since there appears to be less reason to defer to someone one sees as one's equal. It is the situation of "sibling rivalry," the realm of envy and soap opera intrigue. But if one perceives the other as being of higher station, or as outside one's more immediate sphere of relations, it appears more reasonable to defer, to let that person acquire the object. Perceived inequality helps to keep the peace -- though it may well be at the cost of unjustly perceiving inequality among those who should count as equals. So the triangular structure of desire leads to human suffering in this way: when we perceive ourselves as equals -- for example, as fellow children of God -- we also are more inclined to fall into envy and conflict

over our mutually desired objects. When we perceive inequality among ourselves -- most often unjustly or falsely -- we gain order and a relative amount of peace at the expense of the oppression of one group over another, a situation that describes our human history.

In his first book, Girard also introduced the notion of "metaphysical desire," the pinnacle in human suffering. This is desire whose focus increasingly shifts from the physical objects to the rivalrous relationship between the model and his and her subject. The model becomes obstacle and rival. Or the rivalries so define a person's life that he or she becomes overly fixed on one object -- in fact, addicted. What needs to be understood here, especially in the latter instance, is that the object of desire is not the cause of the sickness, but merely the occasion. The root problem is that relationships are stuck in rivalry. Girard has suggested in his later works that this is what Jesus meant with the crucial New Testament term *skandalon*, the "stumbling block," that to which we are drawn and yet against which we continually find ourselves stumbling.

Girard's analysis of desire gives us profound insight into the source and workings of human conflict -- in short, he offers in the first of his books the beginnings of a theory of human violence. Yet he does so without resorting to a theory of innate aggression. All that is "innate" is the mimetic nature of desire. Both the problem and the cure for human violence lie with the modeling relationship. Presumably, if we had the right model for our desire, we could potentially be redeemed from suffering. But the story of the fall into sin in Genesis 3 demonstrates the way in which forbidden desire is mediated by another -- in this case, first by the serpent to the woman, and then by the woman to her husband. The story suggests that, ever since the first man and woman, humankind has chosen to follow the desires of our fellow creatures rather than of the one in whose image we are made, the Creator. God's loving desire for the whole creation is the only desire that can save us from lives of suffering the consequences of our violence. Choosing our

fellow creatures as models for our desiring leads to a perpetual fall from paradise.

Consider for a moment the Christian doctrine of the Trinitarian nature of faith in God's salvation. It took the Son to come into human form in order to model for us the Father's desire, a desire which is *agape* love for the world, and in which the Father went to the lengths of sending His Son to save it. The Holy Spirit is this divine desire communicated to each person of faith who chooses the Son as his or her model of desire.

The modeling of one another's desire is only the beginning of the fall, however. Our uniquely human solution to the ensuing conflict completes the fall. In a word, our solution could be described as *sacrifice*. However, it is important to recognize that the use of the word *sacrifice* in today's language has been drastically reshaped by the cross: *sacrifice* has become short-hand for *self-sacrifice*. The original thrust of sacrifice was the opposite of self-sacrifice: to offer someone or something else in substitution for offering one's self, or in substitution of the whole community.[(3)] The logic of sacrifice, in the Girardian analysis, involves the attempt to ward off wider outbreaks of *profane* violence with small doses of *sacred* violence. In ancient Greece, sacrifice was known as a *pharmakon* (root for the English *pharmaceutical*), a drug, the poison that can also be the remedy if taken in just the right dosage. But sacrifice never totally frees us from violence, since it partakes itself in the poison of violence.

The Greek *pharmakon* gives us, in fact, a clear contrast between the methods of Derrida and those of Girard. Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" (in *Dissemination*) and Girard's second major work, *Violence and the Sacred*, were both published in the original French in 1972, and both deal with the Greek *pharmakon.* According to Derrida, Plato in the *Phaedrus* is arguing for the primacy of speech over writing and uses the word *pharmakon* for the latter, thus portraying it with the ambiguous

double meaning of remedy-poison. The related word *pharmakos* was the designation for the human scapegoat who, on occasions of crisis in Greek city-states, would be ritually expelled or sacrificed. Derrida calls attention to the *pharmakos* in arguing that Plato is performing a similar operation on writing. The human scapegoat provides a secondary support for Derrida's primary concern with the violence in Plato's text of expelling writing in favor of speech.

Girard agrees with Derrida's textual analysis but turns his method around to emphasize what Derrida takes to be secondary, namely, the violence to real human scapegoats. The expulsion of the *pharmakos* matters more than the expulsion of writing. Girard is concerned with dead human bodies, while Derrida seems concerned more with dead letters. Andrew McKenna comments:

> The effect on human bodies is disproportionate to that on dead letters -- indeed, incommensurate -- but the structure of the operation is the same. If this is not mere coincidence, a fluke, it is a warrant for the victimary hypothesis [i.e. Girard's theory] as a unified theory of cultural institutions, philosophy among them. It is thus not surprising that "Plato's Pharmacy" reads like an allegory of this theory, a symbolic representation of institutional occurrences. Philosophy is an institution like many another; if the origin of culture and cultural institutions is sacrificial, philosophy will not be immune to sacrificial mechanisms. Rather, philosophy is accomplice to them when it thematizes the*pharmakon* while remaining silent about the *pharmakos*. (McKenna 1992, 37)

How the victimary mechanism lies at the origins of all cultural institutions is what needs to elaborated further here, but McKenna's assessment poignantly highlights the difference between a philosophical and an anthropological approach to the Greek *pharmakon*/*pharmakos*. Derrida uses the *pharmakos* to reveal how Plato's *pharmakon* services an expulsion of writing. Girard shows how the ambiguity of a term like *pharmakon* derives from the human practice of expelling a *pharmakos*: that is to say, the ritual involving the *pharmakos* takes the poison of violence at just the right dose so that it becomes the remedy against even more poisonous violence. The *pharmakos* ritual is the original, and originating, *pharmakon*, the drug against humankind's number one illness.

In moving to the matter raised in McKenna's comments, of "the victimary hypothesis as a unified theory of cultural institutions," we might begin with the more obvious observation that the "logic of sacrifice" is what lies behind all ancient *ritual* sacrifice -- which, in and of itself, would offer a breakthrough in

beginning to explain the common denominator of ritual sacrifice in virtually all the diverse indigenous religions. But Girard goes far beyond this to hypothesize that the "unanimous victimage mechanism," as he calls it, is the logic behind the generation of *all* human cultures and societies.

It was admittedly a tremendous leap from his first insight into mimetic desire to this far-reaching insight into the cultural mechanisms that sprang into being as the human means for containing the conflict wrought by 'fallen' mimetic desire. And if there are a number of writers who, when Girard was writing that first book, seemed to convey a clearer understanding of mimetic desire, the field considerably narrows when it comes to understanding the victimage mechanism. He comments about his first book that "it deals with writers who, as a general rule, do not reach the unanimous victimage mechanism any more than I could reach it myself at the time. My only vital 'literary' interests, now, concern those writers who do reach that mechanism and, above all, William Shakespeare" (Girard, *"To double business...,"* 200).[(4)]

EFFORTS more fully to understand this expansive notion of sacrifice take us back in anthropological time to our human beginnings. Admittedly, this is a very daring thing to do. First, as we have already highlighted, it goes against a basic trend of post-modernism, in that Girard is bold enough to theorize about human beginnings at all. Second, it places Girard in a precarious position in terms of the other component at issue in this volume of essays, namely, *Christian* approaches to post-modernism. Daring to make hypotheses about hominization, the crossing of the threshold from primate to human, impacts another matter important to Girard: Scriptural interpretation. With his scientific approach to anthropology, Girard is in line with those who assume some form of evolutionary model for human beginnings, making him potentially unpopular with those who see the biblical account of creation as precluding an evolutionary model. This does not mean, however, that Girard is among those who would toss the Judeo-Christian

Scriptures into the same barrel as all other religious texts. In fact, he gives the Judeo-Christian Scriptures a unique place in terms of their revelatory power, in relationship not only to other religious texts but also to *all* texts of any kind. In taking an evolutionary approach to human beginnings, Girard is not conceding a lesser place to the Bible, but is considering that the Bible and scientific anthropology might be found to corroborate one another. Finally, there is the problem of evolutionary science itself, in that most of the direct data has long since passed out of existence. Similar to the case with fossils, the surviving archeological data is sketchy and highly incomplete. Thus, as with biological genetics, cultural genetics must simply do its best to formulate an hypothesis which gives the most comprehensive and reasonable explanation of the available data. This is the tall order that Girard purports to fill.

Even so, where does one begin? This is where Girard bears some kinship with structuralism. He turns to texts in order to locate the sacrificial logic as a kind of deep structure that one must learn to decode within the texts. But he is also decidedly post-structuralist with regards to viewing the deep structures as merely linguistic in form. Girard agrees with Derrida that language is for us "always already." There is something, however, about which we might theorize that more properly goes back to human origins. Whereas for a structuralist such as Lévi-Strauss, deep structure reflected in texts is traced to origins in language, Girard will trace the structure of human culture itself, including texts and language, to wholistic events of hominization. The advantage of Girard's approach is that Lévi-Strauss' point of origin, language, is something that is already uniquely human; language is a result of the generation of human culture, not that which generates it. Our proto-human ancestors did not yet have language. The question of hominization involves asking how those creatures became human, giving birth to language. One cannot give an answer to that question by postulating the sudden appearance of 'deep linguistic structures' in creatures not yet human, unless one makes the origin of language purely a matter of brain physiology. Though such

physiology does play a role in Girard's account of hominization, the central place in his hypothesis is occupied by an animal activity that gives rise to the deep structure of *sacrifice* in human culture, namely, an intra-species collective killing.

As a literary critic, and since texts comprise one of the primary categories of data for anthropology, Girard most frequently begins with literary texts. Specifically, he looks to that category of texts most closely tied with ritual sacrifice, namely, texts of mythology, and to those works of canonical literature that deal with mythology, and begins at least partially to decode the myths. In the Western canon of literature, there is even a category of mythological text that grew directly out of ritual sacrifice: the Greek word "tragedy" means "goat play," pointing to its origins in the drama of ritual sacrifice. In his first work of cultural anthropology, *Violence and the Sacred*, published in French in 1972, Girard looks at classical Greek tragedy, and in particular Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides' play about Dionysus, *The Bacchae*. According to Girard, Sophocles came very close to seeing what we need to see about ourselves anthropologically: the innocence of the one we make into our scapegoat. The drama of *Oedipus* revolves around whether the king is actually guilty of the crimes that purportedly lie behind the Theban plague. In the end, even a great playwright like Sophocles bends to anthropological pressure and finds Oedipus guilty. The scapegoat is punished and expelled.

The hypothesis of sacrifice as the generator of human culture makes possible a kind of deconstruction of mythological texts, a process that Girard generally calls "demythologizing." What is it that Sophocles comes so close to decoding, or "demythologizing," in the myth of Oedipus? That myths themselves are told from the perspective of the perpetrators of unanimous violence against a scapegoated victim, and thus require all those who accept the myth to accept the guilt of the victim. What deep anthropological origins does that, in turn, decode? That human

community itself -- human culture, if you will -- is founded in just such acts of unanimous violence against scapegoated victims.

This transports the theorist with a hypothesizing imagination all the way back to human origins, or to what Girard calls the "originary scene." We must have in mind not only our first human ancestors but also our proto-human ones who had yet to cross the threshold into what is uniquely human. We also must find a link with our animal ancestors (which is what structuralism fails to do by choosing language as primary), something we have in common with them that eventually helped to carry us across the threshold.

The link which Girard proposes is that of mimetic desire. Animals imitate one another and so come into conflict with each other over the objects of desire. But animals also have a seemingly natural mechanism of deferral which helps to contain the violence from continually escalating. That mechanism is usually referred to as the working of dominance-hierarchies. In social groups of the higher mammals, animals (males in patriarchal groups, and females in matriarchal groups) will periodically fight with one another but rarely to the death. They will fight until one of them establishes dominance, a point of inequality, and then a strict hierarchy is observed in the pack until another upstart comes along to challenge it. In the normal, everyday functioning of the group, then, the objects of desire are taken in the *pattern of deferral* established by the dominance-hierarchy.

The situation Girard envisions for our proto-human ancestors is one of escalating conflict and violence. We often use the word "ape" to talk about our imitative behavior; but Aristotle was correct in making the observation that human beings are even more highly imitative than apes. We are the most imitative of all creatures (*Poetics* 4.2). Thus, one effect of the proto-humans' larger brains and greater intelligence was to increase their mimeticism. But another effect was to

begin to whittle away at the effectiveness of the dominance-hierarchy mechanism to keep the peace. Learning to use a rock or a large stick could make a smaller animal more nearly equal to larger ones. And the fights for dominance would tend to become more vicious and more often fatal. Without this natural mechanism to contain the violence, our proto-human ancestors might have died out from Thomas Hobbes' hypothesized war of all-against-all.

Another 'natural' mechanism (decidedly *not* Hobbes' social contract of a monarchy) needed to move into the place of the defunct dominance-hierarchies. This new mechanism would be, in fact, what would begin to define us as human, as being set apart from other animals by virtue of our culture, the thing that would hold us together in *relative* peace within our communities. Girard's hypothesis is that the mechanism which moved into place is the "victimage mechanism," or "scapegoating mechanism."

The elegance of Girard's theory is that he puts mimeticism once again at the center of things. For our proto-human ancestors, before there was human language, there was the imitation of acquisitive gestures. Gestures of grabbing after the objects of desire prompted continual cycles of escalating violence, an apocalyptic violence of all against all, threatening to extinguish the group. But it is another imitated gesture that suddenly turns the community from chaos to order: the imitation of an *accusatory* gesture. The effect of everyone imitating the same acquisitive gesture had caused an avalanche of violence in everyone grabbing for the same object. But the effect of everyone imitating the same accusatory gesture has the opposite results: a lightning quick peace at the expense of the one accused. This "unanimity-minus-one" effects a great solidarity on the part of the majority against the minority, or the one. The accused is thus promptly killed, or expelled, which would have amounted to being killed, since proto-humans were not likely to survive on their own.

But a hierarchy of deferral of some fashion is still needed if the next acquisitive gesture is to avoid launching the next round of conflictual chaos. What is that hierarchy based upon, in the case of these proto-humans now becoming uniquely human? According to Girard, the experience of deity and the birth of religion. The victim who was killed or expelled was unfairly blamed for more than his or her fair share of the chaos. In other words, he or she was seemingly in possession of superhuman powers to create chaos. But, as the newly unified group stands around the corpse of their victim, there is the naive perception that this one was also responsible for more than his or her fair share of the peace. It is such a magical peace that there is literally a religious awe around this corpse. The naive religious interpretation of the whole event that gradually builds around these collective murders is that the community was somehow visited by a god, whose superhuman powers first sowed chaos and then brought about a magical peace.

Girard proposes that this "originary scene" occurred thousands, perhaps millions, of times over many millennia as it gradually gave rise to all that is human culture. And religion is at the heart of it. Our many false gods have arisen out of our primitive experiences of our scapegoated victims who visited us with first chaos and then order, an order out of which our societal order descends as commanded by the gods -- false gods who wield both curses and blessings, punishments and rewards. It is a hierarchical order, to be sure, but one that is now rooted in the uniquely human experience of the Sacred, that is to say, the divine sanctioning of sacred violence whose 'unconscious' foundation was a collective murder. The Religion of the Sacred is what distinguishes us from the other animals. It gives grounding to the 'natural' mechanism which replaces the mechanism of dominance hierarchies. The Sacred underpins the mechanism of sanctioned violence that provides order in the face of a threatening chaos of profane violence.

Language was born in the vital distinction of the sacred and the profane -- which Durkheim had argued years before Girard as being the most basic of human distinctions, the one from which all other distinctions descend. But Girard contends that even before language was born there was religious ritual. Ritual was a pre-linguistic form of representation. And the most primitive and ancient of religious rituals is blood sacrifice, precisely because it is a reenactment of the collective murders which founded human culture. Human communities must do the same thing over and over again in order to appease the gods and thereby to maintain societal order. Girard offers his "mimetic theory" (the term he most commonly uses himself) as the anthropological hypothesis which provides the best explanation for the widest range of data -- one that makes sense, for example, of why, amidst the extraordinary diversity among ancient tribal religions, the one common denominator is ritual sacrifice.

Language is born not only to give expression to these vital rituals and to their realms of the sacred and the profane, but also eventually in part to continue the process of unconsciously concealing the true nature and origin of human community as rooted in sacred violence. The language of myth is born to tell humankind tales of chaos transformed into peace from the perspective of the victimizing community, deflecting all the responsibility for the violence onto the gods. When one reads the available texts in light of this hypothesis, the amount of decoding of myths, or "demythologizing," that can begin to take place is astounding.

Consider the central Hindu "myth of creation" (*Rg Veda* 10:90) as a brief example. Purusha, the primal human being who is described with godlike, grotesque dimensions (symbolizing the chaos), is dismembered and made into an offering to the gods by the gods. From his body derives everything, but what is specified in the myth is not so much the universe in general as things of human culture and institutions: purified butter for the ritual sacrifice, verse and chants,

domesticated animals. Most telling is the Hindu hierarchical order for human community itself, the caste system: Purusha's head becomes the priestly class, the arms the noble-warrior class, the thighs the populace, and the feet the untouchables. The anthropologist can begin to deconstruct this myth: behind Purusha there is a real person collectively murdered who represents the chaos of mimetic crisis and whose murder brings the ensuing order. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard elaborates such demythologizing with numerous examples.

Much has happened in the development of human culture, of course, since those early millennia of human tribal communities. Humankind now even has desacralized ("secularized") bases for sanctioned violence, such as the Law. But Girard's proposal is that the logic of accusation and sacrifice has remained at the center of what constitutes human culture.

If myth veils the nature of human violence behind a cloud of religious mystification, how is it that humankind has ever begun to get out from underneath the cloud? Through lucid thinkers like Derrida and Girard? No, according to Girard: only an extended encounter with the true God over time could begin to blow us free from that cloud. And he contends that such an encounter is testified to most consistently through the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, especially through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is thus another important dimension of Girard's work which speaks to the Christian perspective on post-modern literary criticism thematized in this collection of essays. In his first two major works, Girard focused primarily on literary texts and mythological texts in seriously proposing an anthropological theory with considerable explanatory power for the academic community. In his third major work, however, Girard turned to another category of text that is largely scandalous (recall the Greek *skandalon*, "stumbling block") to the post-modern academic community: the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Even the title was

borrowed from scripture: *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Matt. 13:35). Here, Girard 'came out of the closet' with the proposal that his anthropological thesis is not only bold in being "generative" in scope, but that it is an anthropology divinely revealed through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He chose the title he did, in fact, because it is part of his thesis that these things hidden since the foundation of our human cultures would have remained so unless God had finally intervened to reveal them to us through the cross and resurrection of Christ. We would continue to have -- as Isaiah so aptly put it, and as Jesus so poignantly quoted him -- eyes without seeing and ears without hearing (Isaiah 6:9-10; Mark 4:12). Humankind never would have begun to come out from under the cloud of mystifying sacred violence which otherwise holds us blind and deaf to the true God, the God who is actually against the majority by being on the side of its victims.

Earlier I suggested the trinitarian faith as the shape of God's salvation from the human fall into the problems created by the trinitarian shape of our desire. We have been trapped in the effects of modeling each other's desires ever since the First Adam. It would take a Second Adam, someone entirely new, to model for us how to live in the love of the Creator, that is to say, a Second Adam who succeeds where we fail in being obedient to the loving desire of the Creator. But this previous suggestion was made before explaining the second, even more deadly and persistent anthropological reality, namely, that behind the cultures which cradle and form each of us is a deadly logic of sacrifice. For the Son to come into this world and bring God's salvation, his loving obedience to the Father would necessarily entail being handed over to our engines of sacrifice. The Son would also become the Lamb of God, so that in his being raised from the dead to grant unconditional forgiveness, he would also finally open our eyes and ears to the nature of our Sin, the sin which his death on the cross forgives. In John's Gospel, John the Baptist is the first to recognize Jesus and proclaims, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the world" (John 1:29).

One might be tempted to say that the cross forgives the sin at the same time that it reveals it to us. But it may be even more gracious and amazing than that: the cross forgives our sin *so that* it might begin to be revealed in the first place. Human beings have no hope of ever being able to see something so dark about ourselves unless we are first forgiven for it. It is the so-called "original sin," the sin that goes back to the origins which have generated the very cultures that form us. In Christ Jesus we have a sacrifice that God transforms into self-sacrifice, a life of loving service, which is the founding event of *God's Culture*, known in the Gospels as the "Kingdom of God."

As for human cultures, that which founds them is the thing hidden since the foundation of the world, the thing which Girard believes only the apostles' witnessing of the Risen Christ can begin to unveil. Unless the Risen Victim can begin to help the apostles to see the cross from the perspective of the victim, the cross and resurrection are simply another myth told from the perspective of the persecutors. But the victim who rises from the dead *as forgiveness* enables the turn-around of being able to demythologize conventional myths by adopting the perspective of the victim. Those whose encounter with the Risen Victim creates faith now have the calling to use the gospels to help humanity read and understand its own myths -- not the opposite tactic so common among biblical literary critics of today, that is to say, to read the gospels in the 'light' of mythology. For the 'light' of mythology is actually the darkness that would keep us blind.[(5)]

But how do we know, a post-modern disciple of Derrida might ask, that this version of "light" and "darkness" is not just another binary opposition of yet another version of logocentric theory? The question, as I would like to re-pose it in this essay, involves whether or not we let our collective horror at human violence in this post-Holocaust age become the impulse to perform yet another

violent expulsion, this time of the truth most pertinent here, namely, the truth about human violence. Or perhaps we re-veil the truth about our violence under a new cloud of mystification called the text, never being able to offer a theory of violence, only the violence of theories. Girard is bold enough in this post-modern context to offer a theory of violence. In the face of the post-modern anxiety over theories, let me give the last word to Girard.

In Part Two of *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Girard demonstrates a "non-sacrificial" reading of the Gospel, one which makes clear that the sacrifice of the Cross is about our need for sacrificial violence which we project as God's need. Human beings are the ones who, through our false idols, demand sacrifice, not God. Girard's next chapter relates how historical Christianity has lapsed back into a sacrificial reading of the Gospel in order once again to justify our violence. He concludes Part Two with a chapter that draws a dramatic distinction between the Heraclitean Logos of Violence and the Johannine Logos of Love. The Prologue of John (John 1:1-18) is about how the former is continually trying to expel the latter. I leave the reader with the posing of a universal truth which I do not think could be seen as imperialistic. Girard writes:

> The Johannine Logos is foreign to any kind of violence; it is therefore forever expelled, an absent Logos that never has had any direct, determining influence over human cultures. These cultures are based on the Heraclitean Logos, the Logos of expulsion, the Logos of violence, which, if it is not recognized, can provide the foundation of a culture. The Johannine Logos discloses the truth of violence by having itself expelled. First and foremost, John's Prologue undoubtedly refers to the Passion. But in a more general way, the misrecognition of the Logos and mankind's expulsion of it disclose one of the fundamental principles of human society.
>
> . . .This revelation comes from the Logos itself. In Christianity, it is expelled once again by the sacrificial reading, which amounts to a return to the Logos of violence. All the same, the Logos is still in the process of revealing itself; if it tolerates being concealed yet another time, this is to put off for just a short while the fullness of its revelation.

> The Logos of love puts up no resistance; it always allows itself to be expelled by the Logos of violence. But its expulsion is revealed in a more and more obvious fashion, and by the same process the Logos of violence is revealed as what can only exist by expelling the true Logos and feeding upon it in one way or another. (*Things Hidden*, pp. 271, 274)

It is my hope that such a theory of violence, which comes to light only when the truth about human violence *lets itself be expelled by such violence*, can begin to ease the post-modern anxiety about "logocentric" theories leading to violence. It is my faith that, in the light of the Victim raised as forgiveness, we can begin to follow the traces of an expelled human victim, not just the traces of an expelled *gramme*. In God's love, we would then become children of the Creator who learn to model the divine *agape*, increasingly leaving our violence behind. Is not this the goal worthy of the post-Holocaust age, rather than learning simply to identify violence everywhere in our texts?

WORKS CITED

Derrida, Jacques. "Plato's Pharmacy." 1972. Trans. Barbara Johnson. In *Dissemination*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.

Girard, René. *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1991.

_____. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. 1961. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1965.

_____. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. 1999. Trans. James G. Williams. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001.

_____. *The Scapegoat*. 1982. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1986.

_____. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. Research undertaken in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. 1978. Trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 1987.

_____. *"To Double Business Bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1978.

_____. *Violence and the Sacred*. 1972. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1977.

McKenna, Andrew J. "Derrida, Death, and Forgiveness." *First Things* 71 (March 1997), 34-37.

_____. *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1992.

Nuechterlein, Paul. "Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary." <http://girardianlectionary.net>

Notes

1. In the space of a brief essay, I have chosen to lay out a solid account of Girardian theory, but have had to forego giving any in-depth examples of an engagement of the theory with a particular text. In most of his books, Girard is able to lay out theory alongside examples of literary criticism. But *Things Hidden* is an example of a 450-page book focusing mainly on theory, whereas *Theater of Envy* is an example of the other sort: a 350-page close reading of Shakespeare's dramatic corpus. James Rovira's paper in Part III of the current volume offers an example of Girardian analysis of text. For further examples, I invite the reader to explore my website, "Girardian Reflections of the Lectionary," an engagement with the weekly texts of the assigned Sunday Bible readings in many churches. There is also an annotated bibliography to help lead the reader along further avenues.

2. "Interdividual," as an alternative to "individual," is a term that Girard did not actually coin until his third book, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1978), in which the third major unit is titled "Interdividual Psychology."

3. Cf. the letter to the Hebrews' clear picture of Jesus' ending of the old sacrifice by self-sacrifice (9:25-26): "Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself."

4. See, for example, Girard's analysis of *Julius Caesar* in *A Theater of Envy*, especially of Brutus' line "Let's be sacrificers but not butchers, Caius," pp. 212ff.

5. Girard's recent book, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, opens literally on page 1 with this reversal of contemporary biblical method with regards to myth and Gospel; it ends with his faith in the Resurrection as that which begins the unveiling process of Gospel as that which demythologizes myth, on p. 189: "To break the power of mimetic unanimity, we must postulate a power superior to violent contagion. If we have learned one thing in this study, it is that none exists on the earth.... The Resurrection is not only a miracle, a prodigious transgression of natural laws. It is the spectacular sign of the entrance into the world of a power superior to violent contagion."

http://girardianlectionary.net/girard_postmodern_literary_criticism.htm