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“Violence and the Sacred at Fifty: Mimetic Desire, the Scapegoat Mechanism, and its Destructive Revelation”

Prologue

I am honored to be part of the celebration of René Girard’s work and of *Violence and the Sacred* in particular and to contribute an essay to *Il Giornale di Filosofia* of Sapienza Università di Roma, edited by Tania Checchi and Marco Stucchi. I am especially honored because I was there at SUNY Buffalo as a graduate student in the academic year of 1972-1973 working for René Girard when he submitted the manuscript to the French press, Grasset, along with the preface that he wrote for the book that he ultimately retracted, a preface in which he forecasted a final chapter on Christianity that eventually became the basis for a subsequent book, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (*Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*) and later *Le bouc émissaire* (*The Scapegoat*)¹.

I remember feeling at the time that here indeed was man of special abilities and insights – an individual akin to Albert Einstein, or Sigmund Freud, or Emile Durkheim, or Charles Darwin, or Friedrich Nietzsche – one who would change the way we think about the world around us and its inhabitants, a sense bountifully confirmed of course both within academia and without.

On a personal level, I stayed in touch with Girard the entirety of my academic life after graduate school – at first, through extended phone calls, then through visits to his office, his home, and his family, in addition of course to written communications, and finally, through attendance at most of the international conferences run in his honor. I was there when Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort arrived from France at his door one day in Aurora, New York, in the mid-seventies to work on *Des choses cachées*. I was there at Cerisy-la-Salle in France in 1983 when Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy brought together René’s stu-

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¹ R. Girard 1978 and 1987. Girard 1982 and 1989.

dents (like myself), professional colleagues and friends from the University of Innsbruck, writers and journalists from France, Latin American, Japan, and elsewhere to celebrate his work. I was there at Provo, Utah, at the conference in the mid-1980s that Terry Butler organized, and at the Stanford conference in the late 1980s that Bob Hamerton-Kelley organized and that preceded formation of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (or COV&R, as it came to be called). And I was there at most of the meetings of COV&R from the early 1990s through 2008 when Girard delivered his final lecture at the University of California at Riverside on the findings at the neolithic site of Çatahöyük in Turkey on which he had been working with Ian Hodder.

I rehearse this history for a reason. Because he was a “great man”, and because I was there – “up close”, so to speak – and offered by virtue of that proximity something of an inside view of his thinking, I find myself, in something of a unique position fifty years after these events, obligated to address what I see as some considerations I feel it is important to address if we want to “get him right”. These considerations concern what I see as the centrality of *Violence and the Sacred* to the body of his work, and its constancy throughout his publishing career, despite some subsequent vocal opinions to the contrary. As his work continues to gain in appreciation internationally, it behooves us, I would suggest, to speak accurately of his writing, to appreciate with as much precision as possible what René Girard’s work is saying to us along with what it is not – which strikes me in this circumstance as equally important. My concern here is that we not mis-understand or mis-recognize what he is saying, especially since such mis-recognition or *méconnaissance* turns out to be at the heart of his subject matter, and so, to do so would be to enact or perform the very behavior about which his work may constitute both a history (or archeology) and a kind of prophetic warning.

But what does that mean – to “get him right”? We are, of course, perfectly free to make of his work whatever we wish to make of it. If we want, for example, to read William Faulkner’s short story “Dry September” – which is presumably about a lynching in a small town in the American South – as really about firefighting in Alaska, then we are certainly free to do so, although we should probably include at least an excursus on how “fighting fire with fire” echoes some of the oldest collective and sacrificial mechanisms of our culture. What sustains one reading over another here, Girard never tires of telling us, is not a measure of its correspondence with or failure to correspond with some posited external standard, but rather how comprehensive it remains in explaining or assisting us to understand a writer’s thoughts, ideas, and expressions within the larger body of his work.

And that is what I will attempt do here. After sketching the corpus of writings that constitute what Girard calls his “système”, I will outline

what I take to be some common misconceptions of his thinking, misunderstandings, or *méconnaissances*, that are, in my view, ironic since his work is already clearly about such sacrificial misrecognitions². Thirdly, I will argue that as such to view Girardian thinking as a whole as an ethics or a version of social advocacy of some kind is complicated from his perspective since what he offers us, in his own words, is an “instrument” or critical diagnostic “tool” or set of tools that act as or may be characterized as prophetic thinking along with other examples of prophetic thinking mentioned above³.

Finally, I will attempt to confirm what I say about the centrality and constancy of Girard’s view with reference to two brief texts that have recently become available: 1) an English translation of an exchange that took place shortly after its French publication in 1973 at the journal *Esprit* that preceded Girard’s meeting and subsequent engagement with Father Raymund Schwager of the University of Innsbruck in 1974; and 2) the brief introduction that Girard wrote in 2007 to the volume collecting the first four of his major books (and identifying in his view the entirety of his “système”) in which he speaks specifically about the issue of sacrifice within the context of Christianity, and of the scientific and non-theological and non-transcendental nature of his critical enterprise. That volume was published the same year that he published *Achever Clausewitz* (2007) which was his last major book publication, and one that registered, as *Des choses cachées* did previously, some extended conversations in which he engaged this time with Benoît Chantre, a French writer and critic currently at work on his critical biography.⁴

Part One: Girardian Thinking

Girardian thinking begins with the emergence of hominid communities – which is to say, in effect, that for Girardian thinking, the human community we recognize today is the primate community that survived

² R. Girard, *De la violence à la divinité*. Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris 2007a, p. 27.

³ *Ivi*, 7.

⁴ R. Girard, *Discussion avec René Girard*, *Esprit* 11 (Novembre 1973), pp. 528-563, tr. ing. di Andrew J. McKenna as *Violence, the Sacred, and Things Hidden. A Discussion with René Girard at Esprit (1973)*. With a foreword by Andreas Wilmes. East Lansing: Michigan University Press 2022. For Girard’s correspondence with Father Schwager see Girard, René, and Raymund Schwager, *Correspondence 1974-1991*, tr. ing. di Chris Fleming and Shelia Treflé Hidden, Bloomsbury, New York 2016. For Girard conversations with Benoît Chantre, *Achever Clausewitz. Entretiens avec Benoît Chantre*, Carnets Nord, Paris 2007, tr. ing. di Mary Baker as *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2010.

through the sacred technology of the mechanism of the surrogate victim. Put somewhat more succinctly, René Girard seems to have stumbled upon the origin of culture in the primitive and modern universe, an account of order and disorder in which human beings kill each other to put to rest their own persistent individual malaise, a collective substitute lynching of a surrogate victim designed to preserve peace and harmony in the relation of violence to the community bound or tied together by what is called today (from Latin *religio*) a religious order.

But Girard himself did not start there. His first book, *Romantic Lie and Novelistic Truth*, which appeared in 1961, recognized a common structure of borrowed desire and its conflictual consequences in five major novelists of the European tradition: Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoyevsky. The book was widely heralded as a breakthrough in understanding the literary commonality among such disparate settings, languages, and cultural milieus. Rather than deriving their desires from either subjects or objects, internal inspirations or external exigencies, these characters appropriated their desires from other individuals whom they took as their models or mediators and the closer those mediators were to their ongoing lives, the more likely the potential for obstacles, rivalries, and violence to kick in and spread. Don Quixote was never likely to encounter Amadis of Gaul in his daily adventures and so his triangular antics could appear alternately as comical, eccentric, or even heroic, while Dostoyevsky's Underground Man could in fact one day meet on the street the officer who so nonchalantly moved him aside one ordinary night in a tavern in St. Petersburg and to whom he has devoted some two years of intense mental energy contemplating the dramatic literary potentials of such a monumental interaction. And Girard places special emphasis upon the final moments of the major novelistic projects of these writers in which their author (who is often also the protagonist of these books) strikingly renounces the prison house of mimetic desire in which they had previously been living and embraces autocritically an unexpected religious orientation.

Afterwards, of course, Girard could readily have continued to ask whether other writers recounted such borrowed desire in the same way, and if not, why not – Shakespeare, for example, about whom he did later write extended accounts. But at the moment, he chose not to do that and instead to ask a different question. How did we get into this mess? How did we come to find ourselves in a situation in which such runaway imitated or mimetic desire dominated so much of our lives? And that inquiry led him in the mid-1960s to examine Greek tragedy, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, or *Antigone*, and Euripides' *The Bacchae*. More specifically, his interest led him to turn to myth, ritual, and especially sacrifice, stories and institutions that had long been said by Aristotle (among

others) to underlie Greek tragedy. And in that context, he began to investigate not only Aristotle (for whom tragedy was famously a mimesis leading to a catharsis) but the so-called cultural “experts”, those interested in the same texts in their work or their lives: Claude Lévi-Strauss and the French structuralists, Sigmund Freud and the English and European psychoanalysts, and Sir James Frazer and the so-called Cambridge anthropologists – Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, Francis Cornford, and others.

In the book that emerged from that inquiry, Girard set out to elaborate a highly nuanced four-pronged system in which he postulated that all archaic cultures participated in one fashion or another in a move from difference or distinction to the breakdown or crisis of difference, to a heightening and climactic moment of that breakdown in the exclusion of surrogate victim from the community, to a newly differentiated cultural and/or religious order, now founded upon sacrificial substitution and its regular commemoration.

The conceptualization of a governing *ur*-myth was hardly new. Lévi-Strauss had used it in analyzing myth in founding his own structural anthropology, in fact, in an analysis of Oedipus. The logic is that of a continuing hypothetical narrative structure nowhere in evidence in its entirety but evident in enough pieces to hint at the model’s governing structure. Girard freely adopts the postulate employed by French ethnologists within the Durkheimian tradition that the fabric of culture is itself understood as differences or separations or boundaries that are independent of and prior to empirical considerations, an order of the social that gains the designation “symbolique” in the work of both Lévi-Strauss and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and is often linked in Durkheim to the sacred. “The order of the sacred is greater than the sum of its individual parts” is one way the idea is commonly put. Girard’s strategy in that context is to understand the linkage of the cultural and/or religious order with violence. It is to understand the sacred (in contrast to the Frazerians for whom the scapegoat remained a product of superstition) with reference to “real social relations”.

The strategy is a straightforward one for Girard. The two are one and the same. The sacred is violence that has been safely sequestered outside of the city where it can do no harm, and violence is the sacred that has entered the city and is circulating within it, doing its dirty work, so to speak. Thus, the two designations are categories rather than substantives, detailing the locus of this ongoing social process and its beneficial or deleterious effects upon the operative community. What Girard contributes to the discussion is how the change occurs, the making of the violent into the sacred, the making of the sacred into the violent, the process, in short, of sacrifice (to “make sacred”, from Latin *facere* and *sacer*). How does

difference (separation, from Latin *fero*, “carrying away from the sacrificial altar”) become “undifferentiation” (or “indifférentiation”, Girard’s French neo-logism) and then subsequently new differentiation? How does difference (which may be understood in this context as violence working well) become violence (understood here as difference working poorly, the good gone wrong, “la difference qui tourne mal”, the difference that turns bad)?

Girard’s answer is the four-part process. Differences are everywhere in cultural life. All of social and individual experience is governed by them. In this regard, Girard and the structuralists agree – although Girard would argue the structuralists fail to account for their breakdown. His goal in some sense is to show how that happens, the role that such a “crisis of differences” plays. Words, people, and things break down, he argues – in the elemental universe, the social order, the heads of individuals. And when that happens, crisis occurs. Differences that otherwise function normally are interrupted, and in their wake, are reasserted. But their repetition now fails to solve the problem they were intended to solve. The assertion of difference in the face of its inefficacy occasions only further breakdown and deterioration.

Girard names this stage the “sacrificial crisis”, the moment when the assertion of difference (understood as instances of beneficial sacrificial violence) actually exacerbates the problem and leads to the felt need for its renewed assertion. What worked in other circumstances to resolve things now only compounds them further. And as individuals continue to assert their distinctions, they begin to resemble each other increasingly. Viewed from the outside, what we observe more and more – whatever distinctions they would make – is their identity. Each has become in effect the enemy twin of the other in the assertion of difference and the uniqueness of individual concerns. In the extreme, the situation begins to resemble “the war of all against all” that the English political theorist Hobbes once described.

When things have reached this extreme of the collapse or crisis of differences, something unexpected may occur. The war of all against all may suddenly give way to “the war of all against one”. The differences that occasion such a galvanizing change may be relatively insignificant. Hair color, skin color, hair length, physical stature or height, walking with an unexpected gait, physical deformity according to conventional standards, presence or absence – traits that would normally not occasion sustained notice – suddenly taken on extraordinary significance. And in these circumstances, a change may take place that reorders everything. Now suddenly, one individual may stand in for everyone as the opposing aggressing enemy that each imagines sacrificing. Girard identifies this stage as the paroxysm of the crisis, the third after differentiation and “undifferentiation”.

Suddenly, an explosion happens. Someone is lynched. An individual is expelled, or stoned to death, or murdered in some other manner. And then perhaps the strangest development of all occurs. Some new observations are made and new conclusions reached. The first is the distinction between peace now and violence just a moment ago. A second is the continued identification of the victim of the expulsion or sacrifice as the guilty party but with the new recognition that this victim must have been “the god all along”. A third is the considered development, in the wake of that newly perceived divine intervention, of a series of prohibitions designed to protect the community from such impending danger. A fourth is the development of regular (perhaps yearly) commemorations or representations intended to reproduce the original event (that seems to have ended the crisis) but only up to a point, so that its beneficial effects may be acquired without causing the war of all against all to break out again. Thus, the development of an elaborate system of story or myth and patterned ritual behavior designed to repeat the event to some extent and to protect the community by extending what happened this time.

Violence and the Sacred describes this four-stage process in the archaic universe, a process for which there is no direct evidence and yet which marshals extraordinary explanatory power across diverse institutions and cultural settings. Again, Girard could easily have stopped with that elaboration, or extended it within the human science of cultural anthropology. But again, instead, he asked a different question. How have we come to know about this archaic situation? How has it become possible for us to read it today without being victimized ourselves by it? In the archaic community, none of the sacrificers say we are arbitrarily substituting a scapegoat victim for the war of all against all. How has it become possible, Girard asks, for the sacrificers to know the victim is innocent of the crimes with which he or she is charged – namely, with responsibility for all the violence in the community – without that knowledge destroying them?

His answer, of course, is Christian scripture. And here perhaps the deathbed conversions of the writers he studied in the early sixties gave him a clue. The Gospel account of the Passion relates in his view the sacrificial process in full. The Christian Passion enacts the sacrificial in a way that undoes it, that generates not a new refreshed sacrificial system as happened in the archaic community, but something closer to the end of sacrifice. The account of the crucifixion, Girard now argues, is in effect a “sacrifice to end all sacrifices”. Jesus reads the passage from Psalm 118 for example in which “the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” and becomes himself the stone, so to speak. He enacts or performs that passage in real life in order that it may be read, that the word may “become flesh”. He becomes himself, as the apostle says, the

word incarnate. The Gospel texts read not with an eye to reestablishing ritual and mythic narrative but with an orientation toward the anti-sacrificial or non-sacrificial, toward undoing archaic sacrificial institutions and seeking alternative means of surviving.

Thus, Girard publishes in effect the final chapter initially imagined for *Violence and the Sacred* that he concluded was better left for a separate occasion. Oughourlian and Lefort arrive at his door and the three of them assemble the volume of *Things Hidden* in which the theory is completed. What led us to be able to write the European novel in which unsatisfied imitative desire reigns? How did we demystify sacrifice that had been so much a part of the primitive religious community and the ancient Western tragic cultural scene? The Hebrew Bible, Christian scripture, and Freudian psychology needs to be rethought from this perspective.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees”, Girard reads Jesus as saying to his co-religionists. You say that if you had been there, you would not have stoned the prophets. But don’t you see that in saying as much, you are stoning the prophets once again? It is not matter of whether what you say is true or not true. Whether true or not, in saying as much you are performing the act in front of us. You are stoning the prophets yourself once again – in the very act of denying that you would do that. What’s more, in time you will be stoning me for telling you this. And those who come after you will do the same to you, and they will do so, ironically enough, in my name, calling themselves “Christians” and you “Jews”⁵. Anti-Semitism Girard argues is not a matter of one more social group attacking another. It is rather for him a turning of one’s back upon the Christian revelation itself.

Things Hidden and later *The Scapegoat*, in other words, complete for Girard the exposition of the theory, the set of tools or system by which one may read the mimetic theory in its entirety. Discussion of the European novel and its common peculiarities led us to Greek tragedy and the latter’s embedding within myth and ritual led us to the archaic universe and sacrificial practices around the world, practices that continue in some measure today. *Romantic Lie and Novelistic Truth* described the novel. *Violence and the Sacred* laid out in full the hypothetical stages of the sacrificial process as reflected in the ancient world, its interpretations, and the primitive universe and its interpretations. *Things Hidden* gathers the results. Part One summarizes the way understanding mimetic desire and dynamics of the sacrificial in the real world offer a new hypothesis regarding the order of culture. Part Two carries the analysis forward, exposing the Biblical and Christian scriptural foundations that have ena-

⁵ R. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, tr. ing. di S. Bann and A. Meteer, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1987, pp. 158-167.

bled our understanding, first among the Jews, later among the Christians. And Part Three asks: what are the implications of these sacrificial mimetic scriptural dynamics for understanding contemporary psychological behavior independently of reigning interpretations in France and elsewhere. *The Scapegoat* updates these dynamics provisionally in the post scriptural European world as the practices of scapegoating continue in medieval history where the anti-Semitic myths and narratives of the practice of witchcraft abound.

Taken together, these four books for Girard lay out the mimetic sacrificial theory in its entirety⁶. But the history of the understanding of that theory he notes is a slow one. Two thousand years is a drop in the proverbial bucket. The fact that the arbitrariness of the scapegoat process, and the innocence of the victim of the crimes with which he or she is charged, is suddenly available, is no guarantee that the sacrificial practices will end, or not quickly become neo-sacrificial, acting as if the revelation was never given at all. Historical Christianity in Girard's view stumbles continuously back into neo-sacrificial behaviors much as any new insight that takes hold within a group acquires it only gradually and with much backsliding. We live in a perpetual "sacrificial crisis" in his view as we struggle to recognize the sacrificial behaviors that still work, to separate them from those that do not, and to seek out alternatives to the sacrificial practices that are not disguised repetitions of it. Two thousand years later, Christians are still assuring themselves in papal documents that the Jews are no longer to be condemned for the act of deicide.

Part Two: Méconnaissances

Fifty years after the publication of Girard's key ideas, the digesting of his insights remains a work in progress. And in that process, misunderstandings persist. What are they? In my view, at least four have taken hold.

For some reason, we do not yet get it that *Violence and the Sacred* is the central critical diagnostic text of his canon. A large number of readers have identified their "center of gravity" in *Romantic Lie*, or *Things Hidden*, or in some other book or essay of his. No doubt, there are three big separable ideas in his work: mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the exposure of the system, the revelation of sacrificial substitution as violence in the scriptural narrative of the Passion. In the "Introduction" to *From Violence to Divinity*, for example, where the first four books of Girard are collected, Girard calls these three ideas "instruments of analy-

⁶ "Pour la première fois, tous les éléments qui s'articule dans la théorie mimétique se trouvent rassemblés en un seul volume". R. Girard, *De la violence à la divinité*, cit., p. 27.

sis” and appends descriptions to each of three separate books naming them “1) mimetic desire, 2) the scapegoat mechanism, and finally 3) the destructive revelation of this mechanism”⁷.

But he includes all three ideas within a single volume – his original conception of *Violence and the Sacred*. After writing about “Sacrifice” and the “Sacrificial Crisis” in the “Table of Contents”, he writes about “Oedipus”, “myth and ritual”, “Dionysus”, “mimetic desire”, “Freud”, “Lévi-Strauss”, “sacrificial substitution”, and the “unity of all the rites”. And Andreas Wilmes notes that the text that Girard reads at the session of *Esprit* in June 1973 on Christianity is later replaced in publication the following November by what was to be the final chapter of *Violence and the Sacred*, the one he retracted at the suggestion of his book publisher⁸.

In some regards, Girard is a kind of intellectual archeologist, in the manner of Michel Foucault, first writing about the novel and its mimetic dynamics, then showing, that mimetic theory is as old as the archaic universe where it is linked to the sacrificial mechanism which is in turn made readable by Greek tragedy, the Hebrew Bible, and Christian scripture. But the dynamics of mimetic desire within the novel remain a separate topic. And in 2007, it is the three tools that he is thinking about and that constitute mimetic theory as a whole, even if they are expanded upon in four separate volumes. *Things Hidden* reveals what allows us to read the sacrificial dynamics at play in archaic culture (without being destroyed by it in our own context) and thereby serves as a bridge between archaic culture and the novel. *The Scapegoat* updates that connection. And the obsession in the novel with mimetic dynamics points to a crisis that only the sacrificial crisis of archaic culture will unravel for us. Like Oedipus, Girard solves the mystery of sacrificial enigma only in *Violence and the Sacred* for which *Romantic Lie* provides the preface and *Things Hidden* and *The Scapegoat* bring us up to date.

Secondly, we do not seem to get it that Girard’s view never fundamentally changes from *Des choses cachées* in 1978 to *Achever Clausewitz* in 2007, and that in his readings of Christianity, or other topics within the Christian fold in the intervening years, he has never seriously strayed from the position argued already in *Violence and the Sacred* and completed in *Things Hidden* (whether on sacrifice, Satan, self-sacrifice, or whatever), and only further elaborated their implications. The core remains *Violence and the Sacred* from 1972 to 2007.

Minor changes of course accrue. The Book of Hebrews is now to be included along with others as anti-sacrificial rather than the one exceptional sacrificial text of the Christian canon. The counter sacrificial becomes now

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See A. Wilmes in *Violence, the Sacred and Things Hidden. A discussion with René Girard at Esprit (1973)*: Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2022], pp. X-XI.

perhaps a better characterization of what is happening than the non-sacrificial. The word “sacrifice” itself can acquire alternative meanings from the archaic one. For Girard, the anti-sacrificial is now a gradual and relative movement (not an all or nothing proposition). If he were to condemn Christianity in his view, he would be doing the same thing he is identifying the text as exposing. The Passion remains for him the original deconstruction of the sacrificial and it is consistent as such from 1973 to 2007.

Here for example is Girard on Christianity in the 1978 version of *Things Hidden*:

It is not a question for us of bearing against Christianity the condemnation without nuances toward which we would seem to be led, above all, by the obligation to disengage the radical incompatibility between the sacrificial reading and the non-sacrificial reading.

If we believed ourselves justified in condemning sacrificial Christianity, we would be repeating against it the same type of attitude to which it has itself succumbed. We would avail ourselves of the Gospel text, and of the non-sacrificial perspective it installs, in order to recommence the historic horror of anti-Semitism against Christianity in its entirety. We would cause to function once more the sacrificial and victimary machine in applying from it upon the text which, if it was really understood, would definitively put it out of use.⁹

And here then is the passage from a footnote on page 1001 in *From Violence to Divinity* to which he refers:

The opposition between a thought designated as “sacrificial”, one always unfaithful to the Gospel inspiration, and a “non-sacrificial thought”, alone faithful to the contrary, to this same inspiration, reflects an ultimate humanist and “progressivist” illusion in its interpretation of Christianity.

I did not disabuse myself of this illusion except after the original publication of the present book [*Things Hidden*]. To my eyes, henceforth, the true opposition between the Christian and the archaic must define itself as opposition between sacrifice of self and sacrifice of the other individual.

This opposition defines perfectly the relation between archaic sacrifice founded upon the founding murder, that which reclaims from the ritual immolations and the sacrifice of Jesus in the Gospels, the gift of self within the crucifixion.

The Christian meaning is always present, at least implicitly, in the meaning that is the most current of the word sacrifice in our days, that of a renunciation to the object desired, that of a privation that one imposes upon oneself, of a *mortification*, not strongly neurotic since it alone remains capable of putting an end without violence to rivalries.

... Such is my thought today on this capital subject¹⁰.

⁹ R. Girard, *Des choses cachées*, cit., p. 268, my translation.

¹⁰ Id., *De la violence à la divinité*, cit., p. 1001, my translation.

True, he “disabuses” himself of “a thought designated as ‘sacrificial’, one always unfaithful to the Gospel inspiration, and a ‘non-sacrificial thought’, alone faithful to the contrary, to this same inspiration’ as a ‘humanist’ and ‘progressivist’ illusion”. But in the main Christian text of forty-six years earlier, he does the same thing. He writes that he cannot condemn Christianity without falling into the trap of the Gospel itself which, as pointed out above, has Jesus noting that to condemn those who stone the prophets is to continue stoning the prophets. “If we believed ourselves justified in condemning sacrificial Christianity, we would be repeating against it the same type of attitude to which it has itself succumbed”.

And so, in Girard’s view, the development of an alternative practice is understandable, one he finds in the opposition between sacrifice of self and sacrifice of the other individual, an ethical choice Girard points out in the Solomon story.

This last definition [regarding sacrifice and self-sacrifice] corresponds perfectly, in the judgement of Solomon, to the opposition between the bad prostitute, the one who accepts the murder of the child in order to appease her mimetic passion, and the good prostitute, who sacrifices even her maternal love and sacrifices herself as a consequence, for the survival of this same child. The good prostitute sacrifice herself *in order that the child may live* and her sacrifice corresponds admirably to that of Christ who sacrifices his own life in order to do the will of the Father and save humanity, not only in dying for us but in clarifying for us by the same stroke regarding our own violence¹¹.

It is a response not unlike the articulation of the sabbath in Genesis 1 with its endorsement of a practice of ceasing or resting, which is also of course what Jesus does in John 8 when they would accuse him of not adhering faithfully to the law. He bends down to avoid their “stones” and stirs the sand on the beach, a locus comprised of the future of stoning and a reference to one of the three covenantal formulas, as well as the destination to which such accusations inevitably lead.

Which lead us to another potential misunderstanding of Girard’s ideas.

As in the case of the centrality of the scapegoat mechanism and the constancy of its articulation through its deconstruction in the Gospel account of the Passion, we similarly do not yet get it that Girardian thinking is not an ethics or advocacy of some kind – of social justice, for example – but a form of knowledge and understanding, including (and especially) regarding its own limitations. Girardian thinking is offered as a way of knowing, a diagnostic tool, a critical methodology, an

¹¹ *Ibid.*

instrument designed to generate increased understanding of certain aspects of our cultural and individual lives. It is not a prescription but a description, not an ethical, or religious, or literary, or literary critical, or anthropological, or archeological, or philosophical or any other kind of advocacy, although any individual who employs it as knowledge may of course also be committed to one or another such orientation. The fact that Girard identified himself as an “ordinary Christian” does not in any way challenge this idea. If Girardian thinking borrows from philosophic or literary or anthropological or religious or cultural studies, it does so in pursuit of what Girard names its explicitly “scientific” aim which is to understand the order of culture in its relation to violence or breakdown, to understand human community and hominization from the perspective of the technology in whose context it appears to have emerged, namely, a unique sacrificial scapegoat mechanism endemic to this emergent primate community, and critical to its prospects for the future in context of its exposure by the so-called “revealed” religions, and the great literary texts of the ancient world. “It is a question”, Girard writes, “of violence in its relation with the religious”¹².

As a result, the search for a so-called “positive mimesis” in Girardian studies is necessarily complicated – if what is meant by positive mimesis is a unique trans-contextual view. There is, we may say, as a colleague of Girard’s at Johns Hopkins, Stanley Fish, often did, always a positive mimesis, but it’s never the same one. Positive or negative here are categorical responses, not a substance or quality or content determination, a measure of the outcome in this or that situation and not an account of its being or essence. In fact, in so far as we do seek out a mimetic perspective that is “transcendentally unique”, we border on reproducing ourselves the very sacrificial situation we have entered this inquiry to avoid, namely, the “sacrificial crisis”, the one in which no sacrificial solution would appear to work, and any and all such sacrificial implementations lead only (by virtue of the looped and “möbian” logical structure of the sacrificial itself) to a compounding of the initial problem and increased demand for its resolution.

Once again, the alleged cure may only exacerbate the given disease, a process that turns out in fact to be at the heart of what the so-called revealed religious structures themselves are describing. The problem of the modern world, for Girard, which is to say, the world in which the anti-sacrificial is a given by its scriptural foundations, is precisely to learn how to avoid the neo-sacrificial, how to avoid the law of the anti-sacrificial becoming only the newest form of the sacrificial, the hardest problem to

¹² Ivi, p. 8.

deal with perhaps since it has all the devices and mechanisms of the sacrificial at its disposal. In that regard, the scriptural writings associated with the five so-called revealed religious traditions may be little more than the compendium of cultural circumstances in which the same problem arises, how in this or that specific circumstance the ethical may issue in justice, to use the language of a thinker like Emmanuel Levinas.

And finally, the question of the genre in which Girard works. We do not yet get it that Girard is a prophetic thinker and that he is operating with the field or discipline within which an entire range of thinkers have operated – perhaps starting with the protagonist of Christian apostolic scripture himself. Girard is not primarily an archivist, a literary critic, an anthropologist, a theologian, a philosopher, although he has written extensively on texts in all of these fields and his writing reflects a passion and enthusiasm for them to the extent that the mimetic and sacrificial dynamics remain in them at play. Nor is he an “essayist” in the French tradition of the term. Girard continues to insist he is none of these¹³. He maintains explicitly he is systematic thinker. Not unlike the Greek tragic writers he reads, or the scriptural figures whose apostles declare their testimony, he seeks out and demystifies the origins, strategies, and violent consequences of the behaviors he observes – which may be why he once termed those writers the “tragic-prophetic”.

Why do such potential misconceptions matter? They do not, of course, ultimately. We can choose to read Girard (or not read him) in any manner we wish. But getting him right from his own perspective may help clarify *for ourselves* what we are really seeking in turning to his work in the first place, and where we may find what it is we want if we are not finding it where we expect it.

Epilogue

Girardian studies will no doubt continue to flourish for some time to come. It may even constitute a veritable cornerstone text for several new fields of studies, with all the implications such a pivotal status implies within his work. Much like the work of Einstein in the physical sciences, or Nietzsche in philosophy, or Darwin in the evolutionary sciences, or Durkheim in sociology and anthropology, or Freud in psychology, Girard’s work I suggest may prove a foundation text for future scientific discussion in all fields in which the origins of human community and its relation to violence within the larger ecosphere are critically examined. It

¹³ *Ibid.*

behooves us to get him right and identify an independent ethical practice or advocacy compatible with it but not a substitute for it. Our survival might depend upon such a gesture.

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