

*Paul Dumouchel**

“Sacrifice and the Sacred”

Violence and the Sacred (1972)¹ the book where the literary critic suddenly transforms himself into an anthropologist and a theoretician of religion and culture is certainly the most academic of all of Girard's book. “Academic” in the sense that in that book more than in any other Girard agrees to follow the rules of the game of social sciences. The book is well and clearly documented, references and footnotes abound and it contains an important bibliography. In short it is a book that is primarily addressed to academics, anthropologists, sociologist, psychoanalysts, philosophers, historians of religion and others rather than to the general public. As such it played an important role in the subsequent reception of his work. At first it was enthusiastically received but soon became the object of severe critics on the part of anthropologists, psychoanalysts and philosophers. His later books which were seen as lighter essays addressed to a more general public were mostly disregarded by academics. Following *Things Hidden since the Foundation of World* (1987) the discussion moved and became centred on his interpretation of Christianity. To some extent Girard failed his entrance exam into the academic world of the social sciences and even today, fifty years later, many academics still consider that, though he may have had interesting and important insights, he is not really a scientific author.

In this paper I want to review, to analyze and to reject two interpretations and criticisms of *Violence and the Sacred* that were first made soon after the book originally came out in French. One is that the book's objective is to present a new theory of sacrifice which like that found in Hubert and Mauss famous essay views sacrifice as the primordial ritual from which all religious phenomena emerge. This rests on a fundamental misinterpretation of the place and role of sacrifice in *Violence and the*

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¹ 1972 is the date of the original French book *La Violence et le sacré* published by Grasset. The English translation only came out six years later.

Sacred.² The second reproach addressed to the book is that Girard proposes an extremely deterministic and mechanistic explanation of culture. This criticism rests, I will argue, on a misunderstanding of his project. If Girard failed his entrance exam into the academic world of the social sciences, it is not because what he submitted was insufficient, but because his would be examiners failed to understand what he was doing. His conception of science was far beyond what was common among social scientists at the time, and for the most part even today.

Sacrifice and Violence

Sacrifice occupies in *Violence and the Sacred* a very important even central place and many critics interpreted the book as claiming that sacrifice is the first and most fundamental of all rituals. More precisely they argued that Girard's theory requires sacrifice to be both universal and primordial. Given this, it was relatively easy to show that sacrifice in the strict sense of the word is not found in all societies and to claim that the theory is false or at least has excessive ambitions, that it lacks rigour and knowledge of the facts it pretends to explain. In short that it is unscientific. I will come back later on the importance of the "in the strict sense of the word" proviso in this critique. However, I think that there is here a kind of optical illusion that grants sacrifice a priority which it does not have in the economy of the theory. An optical illusion somewhat similar to that which brings some analyst of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1966) to reify triangular desire, to understand it as a special type of desire, something which exists 'in itself' rather than to see the figure of the triangle as a pedagogical explanatory tool and a criticism of the classic conception of desire as a straight line, a binary relation between subject and object.

The first chapter of *Violence and the Sacred* is entitled 'Sacrifice' and begins on its first page with a criticism of Hubert and Mauss, more precisely of the use of the term 'ambivalence' to account for the "dual aspect of ritual sacrifice – the legitimate and the illegitimate, the public and the all but covert"³. Girard does not accuse the term of being false or inappropriate, but rather of having little or no explanatory value. To say that

² H. Hubert, M. Mauss, *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice*, in "Année sociologique", II:29-138, 1899.

³ R., Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 1. (Professor Dumouchel used the recent Bloomsbury Academic edition which is a reprint to the 1978 Patrick Gregory translation published by The Johns Hopkins University Press. Nevertheless, we provide the page numbers in which his quotes appear according to the latter's reprint).

something is ambivalent does not of itself tell why it is so. It is in the relation of sacrifice to violence that Girard will seek the cause and explanation of why sacrifice appears at times as a sacred obligation that cannot be neglected and at other times nearly as a criminal act. This first chapter presents a series of anthropological examples and of examples taken from ancient literature or the Bible which illustrate how often criminal violence is presented in religious and sacrificial terms and how frequently the violence of ritual escapes from the bounds of sacrifice, invades the city or destroys those who are close to the ones sacrificing the victim. The ambivalence of sacrifice argues Girard is rooted in its violence.

There is here a particular and important methodological choice. Most authors view sacrifice essentially as an offering or oblation, that is as a gift made to the gods or to the ancestors. Girard analyzes it in its relation to violence, rather than seeing its violence as secondary and only required as a means in view of the supposed function of sacrifice. Since the objective would be to give up something and to offer it to the gods, the death and destruction of the victim seems like an appropriate means to satisfy that goal, the best way to transport it to the 'other side' where the gods are thought to reside. Violence in such a conception of sacrifice is exterior to the institution. It is only a means to an end, a way of doing that which constitutes the essential: making an offering to the gods. According to Girard, to the opposite, it is violence that is first and the relationship to the gods is second and secondary. He even claims that the relation to god does not add anything to our understanding of sacrifice or its function. Throughout the analyses found in this chapter, the gods are either absent or very distant.

What constitutes the heart of his analysis is violence and the tenuousness of the line that separates the legitimate violence of sacrifice from the illegitimate violence that threatens the community and how easy it is to travel, to slide or to slip from one side to the other. The relation to or the belief in the gods, rather than an element of the explanation – sacrifice is a gift that men make to the gods, and therefore no gods, or at least no belief in god and no sacrifice – appears here as an enigma and, as Girard often repeats, as an obstacle to our understanding of the institution. The important place which the gods occupy in the classic conceptions of sacrifice is, according to him, a later theological development, one which does not correspond to the original state of affairs. Therefore the questions that we need to answer are: Why is violence so often done in the name of the gods? Why is there such a thing as sacred violence? What explains the proximity between this sacred, saintly violence characteristic of sacrifice and the evil, atrocious violence that rips apart cities and families?

In fact, Girard in a sense remains true to the project of Hubert and Mauss, at least as it is defined in the title of their essay "on the nature

and function of sacrifice". Essentially, his reproach is that they did not keep their promise, and that they relegated the institution of sacrifice in its entirety to the realm of the imagination⁴. Once an explanation makes of a false belief in the gods, or as more modern authors tend to say, of a cognitive mistake,⁵ the foundation of the institution it becomes difficult to attribute to sacrifice any real function. Research on the nature and function of sacrifice tends in consequence to be replaced by reflections on its meaning or symbolic dimension. What Girard reproaches nearly all scholars who addressed the question of sacrifice before him is that they see it as a purely imaginary phenomena. Or even, as claimed by Levi-Strauss, one that we should not hesitate to qualify as false or meaningless. False and meaningless because sacrifice aims to do something which is by definition impossible, to make an offering to gods that do not exist. Such a gross mistake cannot serve any useful purpose, it cannot have any particular function.

As we will see in greater details later on, according to Girard mistakes and misunderstandings can have, and often do play, a very positive role. That the gods to whom peoples sacrifice do not exist does not entail that the institution does not have any function. Unlike those who banish it to the realm of the imaginary, Girard, already in this first chapter, will on the basis of his analysis of the relations between sacrifice and violence define its function as "to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting"⁶. Or, to put it differently, "sacrifice serves to protect the whole community from *its own* violence; it prompts the community to choose victims outside itself"⁷. This last point is fundamental, one of Girard's goals is to evidence that we are not simply dealing here with a psychological mechanism, but with a social phenomenon. Sacrifice has a real function and to fulfill that function various social requirements need to be satisfied. Protecting a community against its own violence is not something that merely takes place in the heads of agents. It requires that the violence of members aimed against each other be diverted towards "others" who are either exterior to the community or individuals who are dispensable, that the community is, in other words, ready to sacrifice. In consequence, it can be claimed that the institution also has a "nature" which is to be violent. This violence however aims at peace. This is why the violence of sacrifice is viewed as saintly or sacred. Thus we begin to

⁴ R. Girard, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁵ For example, P. Boyer, *Religion Explained*, Basic Books, New York 2001; R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2006; D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Viking Press, New York 2006.

⁶ R. Girard, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁷ Ivi, p. 8.

understand better the ambivalence of sacrifice. What grounds and supports the legitimacy of sacrificial violence is that peace is its goal. If sacrifice at times seems to be just the opposite – illegitimate, criminal – it is because it is a form of violence. One that is dangerously close to the violence it seeks to divert and to deflect. Its ambivalence is rooted in the tension between its nature which is to be violent and its function which is to bring peace to the community.

Taken alone, by itself, the first chapter of *Violence and the Sacred* seem to adopt a 'functionalist' approach and this has sometimes been reproached to Girard. Functionalism in social science is an approach that was once popular but that has been discredited and is today abandoned. It considers that institutions fulfill various social functions and that these functions are what explain the existence of the institutions which we encounter in different societies. For example, the army and the police provide protection, law facilitates the settlement of conflicts, hospital provides health services, schools and universities education, and so on. The evident criticism that was addressed to functionalism and that brought about its downfall is simple. It is not because a social need arises that the appropriate institution will necessarily appear to satisfy that need. In other words, if the function which an institution fulfills may help to explain why it is stable and maintains itself, clearly it cannot explain the origin of the institution. There are no reason to believe that an appropriate institution, whatever it may be, will arise simply because it would be useful to have it.

However, in *Violence and the Sacred* it is not the function of sacrifice that explain its origin but its origin that explains its function. There is nonetheless an important functionalist dimension in Girard's approach. Sacrifice has a function which is to solve (or more precisely to help resolve) a fundamental problem that is common to all human societies. A problem that already arises therefore at a biological level, but which the book mainly present as a problem for societies which do not have a judicial system⁸. That problem is what in the book Girard calls *essential* violence, violence which is interior to the community. According to me, the recognition of this problem and its conceptualization, first in relation to societies which do not have a judicial system and then in relation to all human societies constitutes perhaps the most fundamental contribution of Girard. He identified a problem which in a way was there for everyone to see, but to which most did not pay any attention. He showed that it

⁸ Girard makes it clear that he is aware of the biological dimension of this problem and actually rests his argument on the fact that this problem presents itself in a very different way in societies which have a judicial system. On this last issue see also P. Dumouchel, *Girard et le politique*, in "Cités, Philosophie, Politique, Histoire", 53, 2013, pp. 17-31.

was the first and most fundamental problem that every society has to face and that its solution conditions all of human history. Human culture he argues was born out of an effort to resolve this problem, but because – like the problem of feeding humans – it is a problem that can never be definitively solved, it is always with us. It permanently threatens us and constrains our choices. The problem always arises again, differently in each different situation, but it is nonetheless always the same problem and its solution though different is also always in a way the ‘same’, since it consists in managing our own violence. A management of violence that is always a more or less violent process. We can never, so to speak, step outside of the problem. It can never be solved once and for all.

Throughout *Violence and the Sacred*, sacrifice constitutes the guiding thread or leitmotif until the last chapter entitled “The Unity of all Rites”. It seems therefore to hold in this book and in Girard thought a privileged position as the first and most fundamental of all rituals. This, as mentioned earlier has often been reproached to Girard, because not all societies or religions have sacrifices. That objection however depends on how we understand sacrifice and how we view its place in Girard’s work. For Girard, sacrifice is the paradigmatic ritual in the sense that it is the one that most resembles the foundational event, the collective murder of the surrogate victim that puts an end to the mimetic crisis of violence and reconciles (at least momentarily) the divided community. Sacrifice tries to re-enact this original event in a way that reproduces the beneficial effect of the victim’s death without calling back the orgy of destructive violence that preceded it.

However this resemblance does not mean that it is the first ritual, from which all others derive, nor does entail that it is universal, that we should find it in every culture. What is first, according to Girard, the event from which all rituals and not only sacrifice derive is the violent mimetic crisis and the self-regulating violent mechanism that puts an end to it. This original first foundational event nonetheless is not unique, in the sense that it did not happen only once. To the contrary it was repeated numerous times and these multiple foundations are what explains the diversity of myths and rituals and the multiplicity of gods. Contingent, accidental aspects of the event or how it impressed participants in different location or at different times lead to different rituals and images of the sacred. These rituals can all be called sacrificial, not because they necessarily include a sacrifice proper, but because they serve the same function as sacrifice: to protect the community against its own violence. They are also sacrificial in that they resemble sacrifice⁹ and fulfill their function

⁹ See P. Dumouchel, *Il sacrificio e la caccia alle teste*, in U. Cocconi, M. P. Gritti (a cura di), *La pietra dello scandalo*, Transeuropa, Massa 2013, pp. 361-372.

violently by diverting violence towards dispensable individuals or at least towards individuals against who violence can be exerted without fear of revenge or retaliation.

Understood in this way, the priority of sacrifice is epistemic and pedagogical. The reason why sacrifice is the guiding thread of *Violence and the Sacred* is because it is in the analysis of ritual sacrifices that traces of the original crisis and of its resolution are more easily discovered and recognized¹⁰. Beginning with the analysis of sacrifice can in consequence help us understand and decipher other rites and rituals, which seem quite different and distant, like ritual incest, the exposure of twins, or masks, or the particularities of various religious festivals. Nonetheless, like all other religious institutions sacrifice is second in relation to the violent expulsion of the surrogate victim. Hubert and Mauss, writes Girard, "present sacrifice as engendering all religious phenomena" and he adds that "this means, of course, that we cannot expect to learn anything about the origin of sacrifice from Hubert and Mauss"¹¹. To the opposite, *Violence and the Sacred* proposes a theory of the origin of sacrifice as one among other religious phenomena.

Contingency

It is interesting that few of the original readers of *Violence and the Sacred* paid much attention to the important place that contingency, accidents and arbitrary decisions occupy in Girard's explanation. Most of his early readers, including this one, failed to understand what was involved¹². This led to somewhat confused discussions concerning freedom and determinism as well as the place of novelty in human affairs.¹³ In fact, contingency plays, according to Girard, a fundamental role in the development of human knowledge and culture. The importance of contingency is already evident in the first chapter of *Violence and the Sacred*, but as the book develops it becomes more and more clear that Girard recognizes an important role to random, arbitrary events and as well as

¹⁰ Or perhaps because that is how Girard first discovered and recognized them.

¹¹ R. Girard, *op. cit.*, p. 89. I slightly modified the translation to keep it closer to the original French.

¹² To my knowledge only J.-P. Dupuy who in 'Le signe et l'envie' (in P. Dumouchel, J.-P. Dupuy, *L'Enfer des choses. René Girard et la logique de l'économie*, Seuil, Paris 1979) defined mimetic theory as a morphogenetic theory really grasped the importance of random, contingent events in Girard's explanations.

¹³ See for example P. Dumouchel, J.-P. Dupuy (a cura di), *L'auto-organisation de la physique au politique*, Seuil, Paris 1981, especially the discussion between Girard and Castoriadis.

to serendipity, chance discoveries. He does not use any of those terms – apart from the adjective “arbitrary” – but from a conceptual point of view it is clear that what is involved is how contingent events participate in his explanations and in the development of religious institutions and rituals.

What Girard criticizes in traditional approaches to sacrifice conceived as an exchange with or a gift to the gods is not only that it transforms it into a senseless purely imaginary institution. It is also the cognitive imperialism and arrogance of such explanations. Arrogance and imperialism which consist in thinking that we know better than those who take part in it the meaning of the institution. Because the premises of the institution are false we conclude that it cannot have any role or function. By condemning the institution of sacrifice to meaninglessness in this way, we imply that our own intellectual life is characterized by perfect transparency and that only an exact knowledge of the world leads to useful effects. Such presumptions, insists Girard, are false, something which he shows by observing how ritual prescriptions that aim at protecting the community from the contagion of violence can also succeed in protecting it against contagious diseases. Such happy accidents only gain their significance and become useful, he shows, on the background of ritual practices that absorb them after accidentally stumbling upon them in the dark. That is why he claims that “ritual empiricism” constitutes the original foundation of all knowledge. (2013:40-42)¹⁴.

There are two aspects to this conception of the role of contingency. One is that we need to recognize that what agents (and we) do not know and cannot predict can play a fundamental and positive role. In other words that perfect mastery or complete knowledge is not an ideal. The second is that the function which is served by sacrifice, its usefulness, does not require men to know or be aware of what that function is. Otherwise, as we will see, the birth of sacrificial institutions would be impossible. There is according to Girard, an accidental dimension to the growth of knowledge and to the development of culture that cannot be eliminated. An accidental contingent dimension that is ultimately linked to the fact that, according to him, practice comes before knowledge.

At the origin of sacrifice, of human culture and of symbolic thought is, according to Girard, foundational violence, the collective murder of the surrogate victim that puts an end to violence and brings peace to the community. Here also, contingency plays an essential role in at least three different ways. Foundational violence is a self-regulating mechanism of violence. A collective process of reciprocal violence through which violence spontaneously brings the violent conflict to an end and without which

¹⁴ R. Girard, *op. cit.*, p. 29

the entire community would be destroyed. A first form of contingency is simply that this result was neither planned nor aimed at by anyone. For the mimetic doubles engaged in the pursuit of their own violent enterprise this "happy end" is a perfect accident. Something that could neither be foreseen nor anticipated. Peace comes to them as an incomprehensible gift, something for which they do not feel responsible. It is an event that happened, that was suddenly there, but which they did not make.

How does it actually take place according to Girard? His hypothesis rests on the observation that violence is contagious, mimetic. In the absence of institutional barriers, in a small group violence can rapidly contaminate the whole community. Violence, according to Girard, does not only destroy persons and material objects, houses, orchards, fields, factories, buildings and bridges; it also destroys social and moral differences between agents. This should be understood in a real sense. The American philosopher Quine once wrote that 'a difference that does not make any difference is not a difference' or to put it otherwise, a difference that does not have any consequences does not constitute a difference, it does not exist as a difference. This is precisely what happens in a conflict as violence becomes more and more intense. As violence grows, the agents opposed in the conflict do not anymore take into account the differences which in normal times distinguish between individuals. Women, men, children, older persons, hospital patients or healthy individuals, whether they are submissive or aggressive, asking for mercy or shouting insults to the enemy, it does not make any difference anymore. All are "legitimate" targets. Violence has destroyed these differences, rendering them without meaning or consequences. In such conditions, it is possible for one individual to become, so to speak, the enemy of all. That is to say, through a process of imitation the violence of everyone can become polarized against a unique person. All liberating themselves of their violent hatred by exerting it simultaneously against the same enemy, appeasing their reciprocal anger by diverting it upon to the same surrogate victim.

Who however is this victim? Since all differences between individuals have now disappeared it can be anyone. No one in particular is destined to play that role. The choice of the surrogate victim is arbitrary, contingent. There is no reason to it. It is thus according to the theory a contingent accident that brings peace back to the divided community.

A third form of contingency concerns whether this beneficial resolution necessarily takes place in every sacrificial crisis. If nothing requires or determines that it necessarily is this individual rather than that person who becomes the surrogate victim, is it at least necessary that every mimetic crisis should end in this way? Girard's answer, which he repeats in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* is unambiguous. Many communities in the clutch of violent mimetic crisis may have been de-

stroyed without this self-regulating mechanism of violence ever 'kicking in' so to speak. Randomness, uncertainty and contingency play an important role here. We do not know what minute event may bring about the resolution of the crisis rather than the destruction of the community. There is no perfect simple determinism in this process. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

Comparison with natural selection in which random events have a fundamental place may be useful at this point. Mutations in the genetic code that give rise to modifications which are sometimes useful, sometimes neutral and sometimes lethal are random. This does not entail that the process through which they arise is not deterministic, but simply that this process is unrelated to the environmental and systemic features that determine the adaptive value of the mutation. To put it otherwise the process responsible for the mutation is blind relative to the environmental conditions of the organism. The same applies here. There is nothing random or non-deterministic about the fact that an individual who survived small pox is now immune from the disease. However, the functioning of the immune system is perfectly random relative to the ritual process that elect such individual as priest in charge of those who suffer from the disease. Two completely independent causal chains meet here to create this happy coincidence. Just as in biology, though most mutations are either deleterious or neutral natural selection provides a way of capitalizing and taking advantage of the few good mutations, here the self-regulating mechanism of violence can profit from rare accidents that bring about a polarization of violence against a unique victim. Many groups may have destroyed themselves to their last member in an endless orgy of violence, but we (necessarily) are the descendants of groups where this positive outcome took place and that is why we have the cultures that we have.

The effect of this spontaneous self-regulating mechanism of violence however do not last forever. As time goes by new occasions of conflict arise and violence sooner or later will not only break out between members of the community but become uncontrollable. This entails that this origin, foundational violence, as mentioned earlier does not correspond to a unique event that took place once and for all in the distant pass. Rather this origin is always nearby. It can repeat itself and we have good reasons to think that it has done so numerous times in the past. This is a fundamental difference relative to the theory of natural selection, more precisely of descent through modification by natural selection. Its central hypothesis is that we are all related. There is only one origin of life and bifurcations through innumerable chance events over the ages lead to the incredible diversity of living creatures which we now encounter and to all those which once existed and are today extinct. Mimetic theory posits that the origin happened many times. Therefore resemblances between

cultures and institutions do not necessarily (though they sometimes may) come from a relation of 'descent' between them, but from the fact that the same mimetic mechanism of increasing violence and sudden polarization is at the origin of all. All human institutions according to Girard grew out of this spontaneous self-regulating mechanism of violence and they can be understood as attempts to reactivate the positive effects of the crisis and its resolution without falling prey to its destructive dynamism. The goal is to protect the community from the return of essential violence.

According to Girard sacrifice and other rituals arise out of this spontaneous mechanism. However, their development is not spontaneous though it is to a large extent blind. It comes from the efforts of the community to reproduce this extraordinary event, to reactivate its beneficial effects. This repetition takes place behind a veil of misrecognition, that is in the context of very imperfect knowledge and understanding of how it happened and even of what happened. Those involved necessarily misunderstand how and why the most extreme violence suddenly gave way to calm and peace. In consequence, argues Girard, all sacrifices will have characteristics that correspond to different aspects of the foundational event and mechanism, but they will not all have the same in view of various contingent accidents. There will often be a victim that will be destroyed and its destruction, sacrifice, will be understood as beneficial to the community. While other rituals may be non-violent and have no victim, they will nonetheless keep some trace of the original event.

Conclusion

Soon after the original French publication of *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) there came out in the newspaper *Le Monde* a full page article signed by Georges-Hubert de Radkowski which claimed that Girard had proposed the first *atheist theory of religion*. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* was yet to be written and Girard's deep commitment to Christianity at that time was not public knowledge, but it was certainly known by de Radkowski.¹⁵ Furthermore, some have claimed that though the article was officially signed by de Radkowski, it had actually been written by Girard himself. However that may be, Girard's theory developed in *Violence and the Sacred* still remains, I believe, the only atheist, purely naturalist theory of religion.

¹⁵ Georges-Hubert de Radkowski (1924-1986) was a French philosopher and anthropologist of Polish origin who taught in the Institut des études urbaines de Paris. He was a friend of Girard and was also the director of the collection "A la recherche de l'infini" where Girard first published his book on Dostoevsky.

Most early historians of religions and anthropologists, like Rudolph Otto or Frazer, understood the belief in gods and the sacred as a kind of displacement of the awe of primitive men confronted with violent natural phenomena: thunder, storms, earthquakes. Or they simply thought that it was rooted in their admiration and fear of a mysterious and incomprehensible nature or in the fear of death. Religion, belief in the gods, and the sacred were thus viewed as more complex elaborations of these primitive feelings and they were destined to disappear as science progressively replaced these irrational beliefs with sound explanations. Later anthropologists were less interested in the issue and recent approaches that consider religion to be a form of cognitive mistake ultimately simply are more complex versions of this same conceptual scheme which grounds religion in a mixture of ignorance and emotions. What could be a more atheistic understanding of religion than this?

From Girard's point of view such explanations of religion fail because they give to themselves what they want to explain. They explain the fear of the gods as a transposition of the fear of natural phenomena and in that sense they explain the sacred in function of itself (of what they say it really is). However, a good scientific explanation should avoid such circularity. It should explain one thing in function of another, in function of what it is not. Because of their circularity these different explanations remain enclosed within the domain open by religious belief. Like Hobbes, they posit that the original seeds of religious beliefs are eternal (or to be found in nature) and that mankind has only elaborated on them. In consequence such explanations cannot tell us anything about these 'original seeds' or beginnings of religion. That is the limit of their claim to be atheistic.

Girard is much more radical. According to him there is no proto or pre-religious meaning or emotion out of which people evolved complex creeds and strange rituals. At the origin of religion there is *no meaning at all*. There is only violence which suddenly ends with the collective, unanimous minus one, murder of a unique victim, a blind meaningless self-regulating mechanism of violence. At the source of religion or the sacred is the fear of the recurrence of this incomprehensible event and the desire to reactivate its beneficial effects. Religious feelings and meanings are born out of rather than they give rise to rituals, prohibitions and prescriptions. That is why it is a purely atheist theory of religion, because it does not postulate that what it wants to explain in some way already exists. To the opposite mimetic theory explains the emergence of belief in the sacred out of what it is not, a blind self-regulating mechanism of violence. In *Violence and the Sacred* there is no room for any kind of original religious disposition in primitive humans. It is not out of our fear of the unknown or awe of the mystery of nature that religion and the sacred are

born, but out of a blind meaningless natural event we were born simultaneously religious and symbolic animals. Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* proposed an atheist, purely naturalist non-reductionist theory of religion and of culture. No one understood how radical his claims were, no one really understood what he was doing.

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