

*Silvio Morigi**

Λέγειν / Κρίνειν

The violent origins of *logos* and a paradox in the writing of the Gospels

*Christianity is not a "religion of the book"
the way Islam and Judaism are*
René Girard

Scriptura crescit cum legente
Gregory the Great

If Girard stands out, as M. Treguer says, within contemporary thought as a “scandalous”, “monstrous foreign body”, it is certainly also for his uncompromising epistemological realism. He believes that language is capable of accessing the truth of reality. This in the face of a “rejection of reality”, as the “number one dogma of our times”, which equates the referent of every assertion to a sort of residual “precipitate” (to use a chemical metaphor) of the ever changing, arbitrary syntactic configurations of language. If J. Derrida proclaims: *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, Girard denounces in this a “textual nihilism” for which “there is nothing but language, and language always works in vain because it can only refer to itself”¹.

For about twenty years we have been told that the referent in a text is practically inaccessible. On the other hand, it matters little whether or not we are able to access it: the naive concern for the referent can only hinder, it seems, the modern study of textuality. Now only the always-equivocal and slippery relationships of language with itself matter².

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¹ R. Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront*, Arlea, Paris 1994, p. 7; Id., *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, Grasset, Paris 1999, p. 113. Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, Grasset, Paris 1978, pp. 138-139. The quotes in the footnotes refer to Girard's original French texts, translated, while taking into account their English translations, in a way that is often different from them.

² Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, Grasset/Fasquelle, Paris 1982, p.17.

A cultural climate, at which Girard points a finger, of which a verse by T.S. Eliot in *Choruses from "The Rock"* could appear incisively emblematic: "A thousand policemen directing the traffic cannot tell you why you come or where you go".

The peremptory semiological assertion of the gesture of the policeman who regulates traffic in the *city* would seem to provide reassuring coordinates that give a precise meaning to the movement of each individual within the urban labyrinth. But this meaning is purely "syntactic" and its geometries are always changing. It can do nothing but ignore and totally evade the sense that every single man, within that "lonely crowd" of which D. Riesman speaks, always has to give to his path, the assertive decision, in its primary semantic value, which motivates him to take it.

It is precisely this epistemological realism (like listening to a *voix méconnue du réel*) that leads Girard to highlight an alienating, nihilistic detachment from reality in the two essential human phenomena that he investigates: "mimetic desire" and "scapegoat mechanism". Girardian "mimetic theory is a realistic theory of why humans are not able to be realists"³.

Early Girard already implicitly demystifies the primacy of the syntactic, by emphasizing how the structure of every existential world is based on the concreteness of *mimesis* that is equivalent to the prevailing attitude of man. But it is precisely this *rootedness* in it that produces an *uprooting* from reality: singularly analogous to the way in which today's cultural *koiné* considers linguistic textualities of all kinds as "solipsistic structures", "structures floating in the void"⁴. An uprooting that is equivalent to a distortion, which Girard calls "metaphysical", of the concreteness of *physis*. He equates it to an "ontological sickness" for which "in desire, as the role of the *metaphysical* grows greater, that of the *physical* diminishes", and "the object is emptied of its concrete value"⁵. In fact, the role played by mimetic (or "triangular") desire is relevant in the configuration of every existential world. Within that, there is a sense of "*lack of being*" that produces the mimetic "impulse" of the subject towards a claimed "superiority", "plenitude of being" (*plénitude d'être*) that he attributes to a "model"⁶. The subject then becomes his or her "disciple", leading him to mimetically pursue the same objects (or people in the erotic triangles) that the model, "mediator" of desire, desires or possesses. These objects, whatever their real value is, are considered only as his "relics" (*reliques*),

³ Id., *Le désir mimétique dans le souterrain* (1997), in *La voix méconnue du réel*, Grasset, Paris 2002, p. 207.

⁴ Id., *Differenciation et reciprocité* (1977), in *La voix méconnue du réel*, cit., pp. 98-99.

⁵ Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Grasset, Paris 1965, pp. 93, 92.

⁶ Ivi, pp. 19, 99; Id., *La violence et le sacré* (1972), Hachette/Pluriel, Paris 1998, p. 217.

the acquisition of which is experienced as participation in a sort of sacredness recognized in the model-idol⁷.

Early Girard criticizes too a conception, which he calls “romantic”, of the imagination, understood as an unconditioned, springing and transfiguring act. This criticism is explicitly directed against symbolist poetics. But it is not wrong to also detect an implicit reference to Sartre. In fact, in Sartre’s first works (*L’Imagination* and *L’Imaginaire*) an essential role is attributed to imagination in the creation of an existential world. It prefigures that which in *L’Être et le Néant* is the self-transcending of *pour soi* towards ever new existential projects, horizons of meaning. But for Girard, the imaginative production should not be assimilated to a virginal “parthenogenesis”. For its “conception, a masculine and a feminine element are necessary”: the “female imagination remains sterile until it is fertilized” by the former⁸. In triangular desire, this “masculine element” is the model. In fact, it is the *mimesis* of the model that causes the subject, inasmuch as it configures his own world as a horizon of meaning, to *imaginatively* transfigure the objects within it as “relics” of the model.

For Sartre, an existential world (analogous to Heidegger’s *Welt* opened in *Sein und Zeit* by *Dasein*) is equivalent to an organic structure in which each entity has meaning only by virtue of its connection (which could be called “syntactic”) to the other entities of that world. But no *center* can be found within it, no privileged entity from which the web of meanings radiates. For Girard, on the contrary, in the world of the subject dominated by triangular desire, this *center* exists and corresponds to the *model*. It is from it that “a mysterious ray descends” which makes “objects shine” with a presumed “brilliance”. “All the elements” in the “existence of the disciple are as if they were attracted by the mediator” of his desire, “their hierarchy is derived from him” as well as their “meaning”⁹. If the *transcendance* in Sartre, the *Transzendenz* in early Heidegger, which is constitutive of human existence, is *immediately* facing a world opened up as a horizon of meaning, for Girard, contrarily, this self-transcendence corresponds *primarily* to the mimetic “impulse” (*élan*) towards the model by the disciple, and it is that which establishes his existential world. Therefore this does not correspond only to a syntactic structure of meanings but is always rooted in a precise and objective reality: the disciple’s model and his *mimesis*.

Sartre’s notion of the existential world is intimately connected to the theme of *nothingness*. The *pour soi*, as one of the two phenomenal

⁷ Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, cit. pp. 11-13, 89.

⁸ Ivi, p. 25.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 26, 95.

poles, together with the *en soi*, of a “transphenomenal” *être*, causes this “being” to be corroded by the “worm” of nothingness. Not only because every world that the *pour soi* is planning is always a “nullification” (*néantisation*) of other previous or alternative worlds, but mostly because the *pour soi*, in its “facticity”, is equivalent to a contingency that is established by nothing.

For early Girard too the world of the disciple takes on a nihilistic character. But if Sartrean nihilism is equivalent to a stoic observation that every existential world has no root in any reality (because *no reality is given beyond it*), the nihilism of the world founded by mimetic desire lies instead in its *uprooting of itself from objective reality*. If for the disciple every being is a “relic” of the model, this becomes a “fake sun” which projects upon reality, concealing it, a “fallacious brilliance”¹⁰. For early Girard, it is the novelistic truth contained in certain works of literature which above all reveals this. Don Quixote, because he considers himself the foremost disciple of Amadis de Gaula, the prince of the errant knights, mistakes windmills for giants, and a barber’s basin for Mambrino’s magical helmet (and Girard notes, in this respect, that the difference between Don Quixote and contemporary man dominated by media models is not so great). Madame Bovary, a mimetically obsessed by literary romantic heroines, mistakes Rodolphe and Leon (despite their human mediocrity, which Flaubert well highlights) for enchanting lovers. And for the Proust of the *Recherche*, in the “peace of Combray” (a microcosm held tightly in the cult of bourgeois values embodied by Aunt Leonie as a model-idol) the “fallacious brilliance” radiated upon things by that “fake sun” has as its “primary symbol” the magic lantern that brightens domestic evenings; “whose images take on the shape of the objects on which they are projected, and are returned in the same way to us by the wall of the room, the lamp shades, and the doorknobs”, thus blurring the lines, the concrete contours of the objects. This phantasmagoria of colors and reflections, apparently harmless on the surface of things, is a metaphor for the “abyss” that already “at the level of perception” is dug between Combray and the outside world. A fallacious order “is superimposed on reality and becomes indistinguishable from it”, a fact that translates into an “implacable censorship” of the concreteness of reality¹¹.

In the development of Girardian thought this nihilistic outcome of mimetic desire is reasserted in the “scapegoat mechanism”, as a crucial junction of the “cycle of mimetic violence”¹². Regarding violence, in contrast with a line of thought that goes from Heraclitus to Hegel and Marx,

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 26.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 197.

¹² Id., *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, cit., pp. 41 and ss.

whereby violence arises from differences that conflict with each other, Girard establishes an essential link of mutual implication between violence and undifferentiation: just as violence produces undifferentiation, undifferentiation produces violence. For early Girard, conflict emerges when the mimetic desire develops from an initial “external mediation” (in which its own *mimesis* is recognized by the subject who “openly venerates the model by declaring himself to be its disciple”) to an “internal mediation” where such *mimesis* is misunderstood. The model is perceived only as an “obstacle” to one’s own desire which one claims to be spontaneous and preceding that of the other. This causes the model to become an imitator of the disciple too, intensifying his desire or his will to maintain possession of the desired object, triggering thus a conflict marked by a “double mediation”¹³.

Later, Girard will speak of a “mimesis of appropriation” which is typical of the initial phase of a conflict. As it unravels, and despite its being detonated by reciprocal *mimesis*, the conflict is geared from the disputed possession of a coveted object, upon which the conflict firstly was polarized, towards a direct conflict with the model. A “mimesis of rivalry” thus takes over. Henceforth the object (or even the antithetical motivations at the root of the conflict) loses its relevance: the real stake becomes only that of embodying in oneself a “triumphant violence” against the other. When one of the two contenders, dominating the other, embodies it momentarily, what the other yearns for is only to recreate it, mimetically, in himself, and if he succeeds, this conversely elicits identical *mimesis* of the other within the first contender. The paradox of this is that the more each of the rivals yearns to affirm their own difference, as violent supremacy over the other, the more they become undifferentiated “doubles” by virtue of a mutual “negative imitation”: “the more desire aspires to difference, the more it generates sameness”¹⁴.

Furthermore, within a sociologically undifferentiated context (such as the current globalized world) any rise in the claim of one’s own identity through difference is immediately interpreted by others as a desire for supremacy, which therefore excites in them a mimetic desire to counter-differentiate, unleashing conflictual dynamics; struggles determined more and more not by actual differences, but by the search of a “triumphant violence” which finds its pretexts in such differences. This is why “current conflicts are rooted in undifferentiation much more than in differences”. Therefore, in today’s globalized world, the violence that

¹³ Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, cit., pp. 18, 19-20, 104-105.

¹⁴ Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, cit., pp. 15-19; Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 224; Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, p. 105; Id., *Système du délire* (1972), in Id., *Critiques dans un souterrain*, cit., p. 216.

explodes must not be interpreted as alleged wars of religion, conflicts of civilizations, secessions intended to safeguard specific ethnic, religious, and cultural roots. "Today's conflicts of allegiances" must not be understood as their "strengthening", because, on the contrary, conflicts "can worsen precisely because of their weakening". "The weakening of allegiances in our world" translates into "a strengthening of rivalries"; and this is because "violence is fed not by strength, but by the weakness of allegiances"¹⁵.

For Girard, the scapegoat mechanism is equivalent to the intrinsic logic of an event which in the mists of time, within various areas of the planet, was decisive for the process of hominization and for the rise of human cultures. Before this, an undifferentiated "essential violence" spread among the hominids (Girard speaks of "a magma of undifferentiated crowds, in the abyss of the foundation of every human world")¹⁶. If man could survive the self-destructiveness of this permanent conflict, it was because (in a similar way, in Darwinian terms, to the emergence of an organ or an ethological behavior that determined the survival of an animal species) a "game of violence" (*jeu de la violence*) arose that led to a transition from the "all against all" of an undifferentiated "violent reciprocity" to the "violent unanimity" of an "all against one", by virtue of which the violence subsided at the expense of a single victim. This mostly occurred in conjunction with natural disasters (epidemics, earthquakes, floods, famines) which made the violent chaos, of which the victim was accused, even more paroxysmal. The victim was subsequently made sacred because he was held responsible for both the aforementioned violent chaos and the peace that followed it. He became a supernatural being, at the same time *tremendum et fascinans*: terrifying in his mysterious visitation to the human world, beneficial in his equally mysterious withdrawal from it¹⁷. This religious transcendence was the original matrix of all subsequent transcendences (socio-political, juridical, philosophical) which provided unity and cohesion to every human culture. The scapegoat mechanism is thus based on a "misunderstanding" (*méconnaissance*)¹⁸ essential to its functioning. In fact, in attributing the responsibility of rampant violence to the victim alone, the fact that, in this kind of conflict, the responsibility is indivisible within the group, is put out of sight. Likewise, the sacralization of the victim fails to recognize that the resulting peace comes solely from the violent unanimity that has been welded against it.

¹⁵ Id., *In principio era il capro*, in "Il Sole 24 ore", 5 maggio 1995, p.8.

¹⁶ Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 49; Id., *Achever Clausewitz*, CarnetsNord, Paris 2007, p. 301.

¹⁷ Cfr. Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 145, 109-134.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 58.

In outlining the aforementioned cycle of mimetic violence upon which human cultures are founded, Girard originally reinterprets a central theme in contemporary French philosophy (from Lévi-Strauss to Derrida and G. Deleuze): that of “difference” (*différence*). Within the chaos of violent undifferentiation, the “all against one” of the “scapegoat mechanism” determines a primal “*differential caesura*” (*écart différentiel*): that between victim and victimizers, which Girard calls also “original difference”: a “decisive” difference in the constitution of every differential human order (which also implies a primal perception, in the hominid, of the “fundamental difference” between the “bad violence” of “violent reciprocity” and the “good violence” of “violent unanimity”). This “original difference”, reasserted and reinforced by the transcendence of the sacred victim compared to the ordinary human, was the archetypal matrix of those “systems of differences” which originally structured human cultures¹⁹.

In primitive and archaic societies, this structuring differentiation corresponds to their hierarchical stratification, that is to that *degree* that Ulysses in the Shakespearean *Troilus and Cressida* exalts because without it, he says, “*each thing meets in mere oppugnancy*”. Each social level maintains a mimetic relationship of “external mediation” with the higher one, a guarantee of peace and stability. But this stratification also implies an exclusiveness of the higher levels compared to the lower ones, which is equivalent to a crystallized violence which is the signature of the foundation of every social degree on the violence of the ancestral scapegoat mechanism²⁰.

But in the rise of human cultures, the “original difference” generated not only their *social structure*, but also *symbolic thought*, namely the *pensée sauvage* explored by Lévi-Strauss. Girard welcomes the Lévi-Straussian conception of the primitive symbolic, according to which every cultural *parole* (matrimonial and economic exchanges, cooking, magic, myths, religion) is based on an unconscious *langue*: consisting of semiological codes, as structures that are characterized essentially by their syntactic permutability. For Girard, Lévi-Strauss’s notion that every code within the *langue* is structured as a “system of differences” which is a system of “binary oppositions” (e.g. cooked/raw, salty/sweet, fresh/putrid) holds true. But for him what is relevant is that, just as in the *social* mechanism a stabilizing *degree* is equivalent to a difference that implies a *no* that

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 77, 375; Id., *La route antique des hommes pervers*, Grasset/Fasquelle, Paris 1985, p. 122; Id., *Le sacrifice*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris 2003, p. 21.

²⁰ Cfr. Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 80; Id., *Origine della cultura e fine della storia*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 203, p. 62 (this Italian edition of the book is cited in cut sentences within the subsequent French edition).

excludes those subordinated to it, likewise, in the system of binary oppositions of symbolic thought, the oppositional difference between the single elements is equivalent to a reciprocal expulsive *no* which determines them as such. According to Lévi-Strauss, it is futile to seek an origin of the symbolic. What he calls *langue*, equivalent to an unconscious *cogitatum* without *cogito*, in spite of generating all of human cultures, is in turn not generated by any reality. Indeed, every cultural reality emerges only as a semantic “precipitate” of the syntactic permutations of *langue*. Instead, for Girard, the oppositional *no* that structures the codes of *langue* is an eloquent trace of its original rootedness in an archetypal expulsive *no*, that of victim violence, which established “original difference”, the bloody matrix of every subsequent logical differentiation.

Lévi-Strauss, unlike Lévy-Bruhl for whom the “primitive mentality” has a radical specificity, places a substantial continuity between the primitive symbolic and the thought of civilized man (the “thought of engineers”, as he calls it), defining that as a “thought not of savages, but of the savage state”. Girard agrees with this, but in the sense that the “mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion” that already structure the symbolic thought are “the mechanisms of all orders of thought”²¹.

This holds also true of Western *logos*: in whose *legein*, since its origins, transpires a differentiating *krinein*, which, in its apparent mere logic, is actually a hidden signature of primal exclusionary violence.

Girard speaks of four “stereotypes” found in every victimization, which he summarizes in four words: *crisis*, *crime*, *criteria*, *criticism*. The “crisis” is the violent reciprocity from which the scapegoat mechanism springs. The “crime” is what is blamed on the victim. The “criteria” refers to specific “signs of victim selection” (e.g. deformity, physical or mental impairment, social marginalization, belonging to ethnic and religious minorities). Finally, the “criticism” is the differentiating victimizing violence that puts an end to the violent undifferentiation of the initial “crisis”. Girard notes that these “stereotypes”, in their lexical expression, are “indissociable, and most languages, notably, do not dissociate them”, as it happens in Greek and Latin and therefore in French and Italian, where the terms that express these events “all go back to the same root, to the same Greek verb *krino* which means not only to judge, to distinguish, to differentiate, but also to accuse and condemn a victim”. “This”, concludes Girard, “suggests a still hidden relationship between collective persecutions and the *cultural* as a whole”. Moreover, every differentiation is “decided”. In this regard, Girard, recalling the etymological connection of the verb *to decide* with the Latin *caedes* (“killing”), highlights the

²¹ Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 347.

violent expulsion that is hidden in every decision. In fact, the first meaning of the Latin verb *decido* is “to cut off”, “truncate”, in the sense of sacrificing something. Furthermore, the differentiating decision always translates into an assertion which, in its apparent merely apophantic function, also conceals the expulsive *krinein*. In this, Girard agrees with Derrida for whom the presumed mere ascertainment of the present indicative of the third person is actually always performative, or linked to an act of decision marked by a violence that expels²².

If the misunderstanding inherent to the original and foundational cycle of mimetic violence generates fictitious differences (victim/victimizers, sacred/human), this uprooting from reality recurs in the oppositional differentiability that already structures the primitive symbolic and then contaminates all of human thought.

Girard defines the original victim as a “transcendental signifier” that generates any subsequent meaning. But he immediately specifies that it is not “true” (for it is born from an exclusionary violence), but that it is “only what men need as a transcendental signifier”²³. The symbolic, inasmuch as it arises from the scapegoat mechanism’s misunderstanding, is vitiated by an “original sin”, because of which it “establishes displacements (*décalages*) where perfect symmetry reigned, establishes fictitious differences within the identical”. The symbolic is therefore born as a “mythical” realm with “no relationship to reality”, which “plays false” (*joue à faux*), producing “a superabundance of differences”, “a formidable mass of the *arbitrary*” to be reconnected to the “founding *arbitration*” of the scapegoat mechanism. So, because of this, “men are incapable of recognizing the arbitrary nature of the significations produced by this misunderstood mechanism” and they “can no longer read anything directly in the ‘great book of nature’, whose lines are now completely confused”²⁴.

Thus, as early Girard traced the structure of an existential world to a structuring center, the model, as a “fake sun” which projects a nihilistic “fallacious brilliance” onto reality, similarly (here in contrast to Derrida for whom “the structures are always decentralized”) he brings the structure of symbolic thought back to a “center of meaning”, an ancestral “focal center”: the scapegoat. The result of this, also in this case, is that the symbolic, arising from the scapegoat mechanism’s misunderstanding, is born uprooted from reality²⁵.

²² Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., pp. 35-36, 169. See also in this regard: P. Antonello, *Oltre il pensiero critico? Serres, Girard, Latour*, in “Riga”, 35, 2014, pp. 426-438.

²³ Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, cit., pp. 111-112.

²⁴ Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 342, 346-348, 335.

²⁵ Id., *Les origines de la culture*, Desclées du Brouwer, Paris 2004, pp. 155, 156, 158.

Two questions arise from this. Firstly: are the differences that human thought poses really all, constitutively, even if covertly, oppositional, and therefore daughters of primeval violence? *Do non-oppositional differences that can be analyzed by a ratio capable of freeing itself from its bloody origins exist?* And second: if the human *legein* is placed in continuity with a *symbolic* realm that “plays false”, how can we explain the material survival of man, possible only if he accesses the effective order of nature? In particular, how can the dizzying scientific/technological development within Western civilization be explained?

The first question could be answered as follows: understood as a *category* (in a Kantian sense) of thought and language, it is very doubtful that any *thought and spoken* difference is not understood, albeit covertly, as an oppositional *no*. It is no coincidence that structuralist linguistics highlights a constitutive oppositional differentiability inherent in language already at the phonological level. N. Trubeckoj writes: “the concept of differentiation presupposes the concept of contrast, opposition”; a thing can be distinguished, differentiated from another thing only in so far as they “*are pitted against each other*”²⁶. This also recalls the Spinozian *omnis determinatio est negatio*. Furthermore: the existence of *real* differences between the things that we interpret as oppositional differences is certainly admissible. But does our categorizing them within a thought structured by the ancestral transcendental signifier manage to draw on their *real, objective* nature? Is it not that this remains for us “noumenal” (in a sense, again, Kantian)? In our *thinking and naming* these differences, are we allowed to escape (to paraphrase Wittgenstein) from the “bars” of the “cage” of a “language” constitutively marked by its bloody origins?

As for the survival and cultural development of man, Girard notes that in symbolic thought, regardless of its admitting a “formidable mass” of what is empirically “false” and “arbitrary”, embryonic acquisitions about the effective natural order emerged (protected by the symbolic as the “cocoon” protects the “larva”). “A seed of truth lay hidden under the avalanche of the arbitrary”. The arbitrariness of the symbolic, while preventing direct access to nature, did not totally cancel it. This developed indirectly, in dowsing forms, similar to a sort of *bricolage*, marked by randomness that nevertheless allowed the chance emergence of congruences between the syntax of the symbolic and natural objectivity: such as “favorable conjunctures” (*bons hasards*) to a slow evolution, here, of technological kind. The scapegoat mechanism itself, misunderstood in its logic, but experienced as an expulsive catharsis, became a sort of exploratory “metaphor” of nature: in some cases it was effective, insofar

²⁶ N. Trubeckoj, *Grundzüge der Phonologie*, in “Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague”, 7, 1939, p. 41.

as there are (Girard recognizes) phenomena that can be interpreted in terms of evacuation, purgation. Nonetheless, the exploration of nature guided by this metaphor and therefore mediated by a culture that mainly plays “against nature”, is unable to separate “the arbitrary from the non-arbitrary”, “the useful from the useless” “the fruitful from the insignificant”. Furthermore, the more the metaphor is generalized, the more it proves incapable of “closely grasping” the phenomena in their singularity, “whose essence” remains “out of reach”²⁷.

In this slow and bumpy evolutionary process of human cultures, ritual played an essential role in orienting the symbolic in congruity with the natural order. Ritual basically consists in the reproduction of the scapegoat mechanism: after an initial stage, where the disappearance of prohibitions recreates violent ancestral undifferentiation, the polarization of the entire community against a sacrificial victim follows, which restores and strengthens an always-fragile and precarious social order, protecting the community from a relapse into unstoppable violence. In this way, rites contained “somewhat orderly disorder and somewhat disordered order”, allowing for mixtures of things that prohibitions forbade, a situation that indirectly supported empirical practices of exploration and manipulation. Furthermore, given that ritual reproduction ignored the logic of what it reproduced, the evolution of ritual determined a differentiating selection in the reproduction of the “origin”, accentuating certain phases of the original rite over others until the latter disappeared. Nevertheless, it was precisely this tortuous, polymorphic, and variegated evolution of ritual, antithetical to the paralyzing rigidity of prohibitions, that transformed it into an empirical “machine of exploration and knowledge”. In the “ritual space”, the “manipulation of objects and signs acquires an exploratory value”. Ritual was like a “bricklayer” who built the various “institutions” functional to cultural development with the “bricks” of a dowsing reproduction of the “origin”. E.g. the domestication of animals derived from ritual in that the sacrificial victim, no longer a man, but a wild beast, had to coexist for a certain time within society as a substitute for the ancestral victim, who was internal to the primordial group²⁸.

But on the threshold of the Christian era, this “creative power”²⁹ of ritual had been withering away. It was the Cross of Christ that marked, for Girard, an epochal event in the history of man: an event with significant repercussions also at a cognitive, scientific, and technological level, which

²⁷ R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 348, 342, 330, 433-434; Id., *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*, Desclée du Brouwer, Paris 2001, p. 136.

²⁸ Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., p. 81; Id., *Origine della cultura e fine della storia*, cit., pp. 93-94; Id., *Les origines de la culture*, cit., p. 221.

²⁹ Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., p. 81.

helped to free man from mythical-ritual forms of thought that originate from founding violence. If already with his words Christ had denounced the misunderstood violence of the scapegoat mechanism, on the Cross he made his own innocence as a scapegoat evident, a fact later testified by the Gospels. This deconstructive force of the Cross regarding the scapegoat mechanisms generated a progressive “concerning for scapegoats” in the West (for instance, the shelters for the poor and the sick already founded in Medieval times) that has no parallel in any other civilization. Albeit in an unconscious and underground way, it also affected the Western *ratio*, which in its development took on an increasingly critical and demystifying imprint, progressively eroding ways of thinking and socio-political structures based on victimizing differences. The same progressive secularization of Western culture conceals for Girard a remote Christian ancestry because true Christianity “deprives men of the religious”, being “equivalent to its true demystification”: since every religious cult is hardly free from a sacred that maintains unmistakable traits of the primitive and archaic sacred (including certain historical forms of Christianity when they obscure the Christocentric character of the Christian faith). Therefore “it is human religion as a whole that the Gospels destroy, as well as the cultures that derive from it”. Up to the point that “God’s death is a Christian phenomenon; in its modern meaning, atheism is a Christian invention”³⁰. Already early Girard displayed his intolerance towards the “unbearable chatter”, the “nauseating and nihilistic nonsense” of alleged “Christian values” (that very often appear not as the object of true faith, but merely brandished against others in a struggle for supremacy³¹). And claiming a primal prophetic dimension of the Christian faith, he affirms that it

is by no means a regression, a fearful retreat into “traditional values”, in the face of the audacity of the subversive criticism operated by the “masters of suspicion” of the modern universe: to be able to return to the Christian text, on the contrary, this criticism must be radicalized.³²

The same seventeenth-century scientific revolution in the West was supported by an erosion of the scapegoat mechanism’s misunderstanding:

men did not stop hunting witches because they invented science, but they invented science because they stopped hunting witches. The scientific spirit is a by-product of the action exercised in depth by the Gospel text in the West.³³

³⁰ Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 249-261; Id., *Achever Clausewitz*, cit., pp. 334, 19; Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., p. 153; Id., *Origine della cultura e fine della storia*, cit., p. 205.

³¹ Id., *Dostoïevski, du double à l’unité* (1963), in *Critiques dans un souterrain*, cit., p. 131.

³² Id., *La route antique des hommes pervers*, cit., p. 188.

³³ Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., p. 300.

Therefore the Western *ratio*, in its deconstruction of the idols generated by violence, has a very peculiar status within human history.

And yet, precisely in its essentially *critical* existence, how can it escape the violence that is hidden in that *krinein* that contaminates every human *logos*? Isn't there a "violent revelation of violence" here?

For Girard "in human language" there is no "privileged place" of access to the truth, because "the Word that affirms itself as absolutely true", that of Christ, "speaks only from the position of the scapegoat".

Christ did not write anything but identifies himself with his word. It is the Word, the true *Logos*. He dies for the reasons that cause him to speak, he speaks for the reasons that cause him to die [...] Writing and speech are conditioned by our violent and sacrificial origins and are therefore marked by a fundamental insufficiency. Only Christ's death is perfect. All the writings that revive it are imperfect in principle compared to it. This lack of any transmission and communication justifies the multiplication of writings, the existence not of one, but of four different canonical Gospels, whose drafters insist moreover continuously upon their own inability to comprehend. Christianity is not a "religion of the book" the way Islam and Judaism are³⁴.

Yet the "true *Logos*" that Christ incarnates under a theological profile is also translated into his earthly *speech*, the truth of which is testified by the Gospels *writing*. But this speech and this writing, how can they escape that *krinein*, in its hidden violence, which characterizes all human expression? Girard responds to this through an original exegesis of the parabolic language of Christ and of the relevant link between that and the Gospel's demonology³⁵.

In the Gospels the parables are not so much distinguished by their narrative register, as by the fact that in them Christ "adopts the language of his universe". The essence of the parable "is Jesus' voluntary

³⁴ Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., pp. 169, 170-172.

³⁵ However, it should be noted that what is summarized below is only a line of thought (which culminates in the affirmation of a "demonic" inherent to the symbolic for its violent origins, Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., p. 281), alongside which Girard develops another hardly compatible with that. As when, for example, he writes that language has the capacity to "transgress one's own differential interdictions" (Id., *Présentation in Critiques dans un souterrain*, cit., p. 14), and as when he says that "the Gospels must not be reduced to parables", "in them there is also a large amount of direct teaching" in those pages ("theoretical", he calls them to distinguish them from the "narrative" ones where the editorial contribution of the evangelists prevails) in which the words of Christ are directly reported (Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., p. 171; Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., p. 241). See in this regard: S. Morigi, *Un essere "vuoto di essere", "morale e risolutamente manicheo". Il demoniaco e la demonologia evangelica come "sapere paradossale" in René Girard*, in Bubbio P.D., Morigi S. (a cura di), *Male e Redenzione. Sofferenza e trascendenza in René Girard*, Camilliane, Torino 2008, pp. 205-246.

confinement” in the language of expulsion and violence (“which, moreover, is often the language of the Gospels themselves”), “for the benefit of people who cannot understand anything else as they are locked up there themselves”. He does this precisely to break the walls of their prison, because the parable “taken literally strengthens the walls” of this “prison”. But the “parabolic” language is not just the parable. It is nothing other than human language: “there is no speech” of man “that is not a parable” in the aforementioned sense, and therefore also the redaction of the Gospels, as human, in certain aspects, while bearing witness to the truth of the Cross, can do it only in a “parabolic” mode. For this Girard calls the “incomparable knowledge” inscribed in the Gospels also a “paradoxical knowledge”, of which Gospel demonology is particularly emblematic³⁶.

The scapegoat mechanism can also be defined as a *demonization* of the victim. Even Gospel demonology, *in its very attribution to the devil of being such, demonizes him*, which is equivalent to recreating in itself the “being against” of the scapegoat mechanism. But the devil is demonized here because as the “accuser”, “father of lies”, “murderer from the beginning”: attributes that make him *a constitutively victimizing, and therefore demonizing, being*. So here *the exorcism is turned against the archetypal exorcist, here the devil could paradoxically be defined as the being who hurls himself against the devil*. By demonizing the devil, the Gospels thus reveal and denounce the essence of all victimization.

Gospel demonology could therefore be equated with a language in which a meta-language that deconstructs it is simultaneously inscribed. It could also be compared to tautegoric symbolism, in the Schellingian sense, that is characterized by an inextricability of meaning in respect to the symbol, where, unlike allegory, meaning can only transpire through a certain symbol that expresses it. However, this is a peculiar tautegory because here, to the inextricability between symbol and meaning, an antithetical, conflictual relationship is also added. Here, in fact, meaning is intended to erode its symbol, which is the only medium through which, nevertheless, it can reveal itself and erode the latter. In fact, Girard writes that even in the most archaic Gospel texts “the belief in demons that still seems to flourish tends incessantly to cancel itself”, but “in a process of annulment that escapes us because it is expressed in the contradictory language of expelled expulsion and of the outcasted demon”. Gospel demonology is revealing precisely because it “unhinges itself”: through an incessant friction between what it immediately ex-

³⁶ Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., pp. 274, 284.

presses and what it deeply reveals. A friction that, if it were to totally erode the symbol which contradicts its deep meaning, would cancel, at the same time, the possibility of revealing that meaning through that symbol, rather than bringing about its full revelation³⁷.

But if the Gospels can demystify violence only through a parabolic or demonological language, which remains tributary to it, this, all the more so, would apply to Girard's mimetic theory. In his advanced thought he shows himself to be fully aware of it: if it is true that "what marks our various form of discourse (even those that appear the most playful and benevolent, or those that like to think of themselves as hardly significant at all) is their radically polemic character"³⁸. So in all our speech an expulsive violence is hidden in the concealed presumption of our demystifying difference towards others. Therefore, even in the "being against" of the mimetic theory that demystifies violence and its idols, the "being against" of violence itself can only be repeated: that "no that many modern philosophers assimilate to freedom and life" and which instead "is the herald of slavery and death"³⁹.

The outcome of this, for the Christian faith, certainly cannot be a paralyzing aphasia, because, *in statu viae*, its deconstructive *logos* of the scapegoat mechanism is historically indispensable. Even if it only takes on a *purgatorial* value, so to speak. It could also be compared to the Wittgensteinian ladder of the *Tractatus* to be thrown away behind you after climbing it. The later Girard will write: "for a long time I tried to think of Christianity as a perspective from above and I had to give it up. I am now convinced that it is within the mimetism itself that we are forced to think"⁴⁰.

When Michel Serres spoke of the need to go beyond all critical *logos*, dominated by *polemos*, Girard replied: "I do not agree with Serres. If one does not discriminate, one cannot distinguish, and in order to think one must know how to distinguish" differences; "we are forced to inhabit this limit. The end of criticism is inherent to a totally redeemed world"⁴¹.

Waiting for this *eschaton*, the deepest figure of present Christian authenticity remains the *silent, agapic* kiss of Christ to the Dostoyevskian Grand Inquisitor.

Girard highlights a paradoxical similarity between violence and Christian *agape* in the fact that both are undifferentiating: one propagates the

³⁷ Ivi, pp. 284, 281.

³⁸ Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, cit., p. 462.

³⁹ Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, cit., p. 233.

⁴⁰ Id., *Achever Clausewitz*, cit., p. 153.

⁴¹ Id., *Origine della cultura e fine della storia*, cit., p. 117.

undifferentiating reciprocity of violent doubles, the other propitiates agapic doubles⁴². Nonetheless, agapic undifferentiation, as a reciprocal opening to the other that illuminates in me and in the other the *irreducible singularity of a human face*, is the only human act that brings out *ontologically true differences* in comparison with the fictitious *differences* generated by violence: “forms of diversity that today we struggle to imagine”, “diversity in unity”, “diversity of which we cannot even get an idea from our old world”, and that the *eschaton* of the Resurrection will manifest in their full splendor⁴³.

Here the connection between *differences/undifferentiation* seems to outline a sort of chiasmus: for which, *as untrue differences generate an objective undifferentiation, an objective undifferentiation generates true differences*. In reality, the chiasmus is only apparent. If it were effective, the term “undifferentiation” on which it is based would have the same semantic value. Instead, here the apparent lexical continuity of the chiasmus centered on this term hides within itself a radical semantic break, in which the *lie* yields to the *truth* and the darkness of *polemos* is overwhelmed by the light of *agape*.

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⁴² Cfr. Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, cit., p. 239.

⁴³ Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., pp. 91, 92.

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