Cruciform anthropology: an introduction to the thought of René Girard

The author shows how 'Girard's work on anthropology, literature and psychology ends up at the foot of the cross'.

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What difference does it make to human society that Jesus was crucified? This is, I think, the fundamental question that René Girard addresses in what he has called 'the anthropology of the cross'. Girard's work on anthropology, literature and psychology ends up at the foot of the cross. The cross is, for Girard, the defining moment of human society and religion. It is the cross that enables us to see them for what they are; it is the vantage point from which we obtain the most clarity. Girard's thesis is startlingly simple. Jesus' death on the cross shows the violence at the heart of human society of which religion is the most important institution. In revealing this violence the cross renders it impotent. All human society requires a willingness to accept the falsehood that those killed in its name are guilty. The declaration of Jesus' innocence stands against this. Like all simple theses, of course, it is capable of a great deal of explanation and development, and it is in this development that we find the power and significance of Girard's work. Before attempting such an explanation, however, we should turn to some background.

René Girard was born on Christmas Day 1923 in Avignon. Educated in Paris, he graduated in 1947 as an historian. After a move to the United States for doctoral study, Girard found himself teaching literature and it was here that he began the process of study that would lead to the development of the thesis for which he is known. Whilst working on his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*,[1] Girard underwent what he describes as a conversion experience and this has been a powerful influence on his ideas. From literature, Girard turned his attention to social anthropology, particularly anthropological accounts of sacrifice. This resulted in another book, *Violence and the Sacred*.[2]

It was, however, with his third book, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World,*[3] that Girard's hypothesis came to a full articulation. This book, with its emphasis on the Biblical origin of his insights, made Girard famous in his native France. Girard recently retired as Professor at Stanford University in California, and is currently working on a book about Christianity and mythology. His work has found interest and persuaded readers in both Europe and the United States. This has led to the founding of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R) which publishes an annual journal, *Contagion,* and a Bulletin. COV&R meets annually to reflect upon the implications of Girard's work for the contemporary world.

Three moments

Girard himself has identified three 'moments of discovery' in the work that led to his developed ideas and we shall treat each in turn. The first Girardian 'discovery' is that human beings imitate one another. This he saw in the great works of European literature:
Cervantes, Stendhal, Proust and, above all, Dostoyevsky and Shakespeare. Mimesis, imitation, is the distinguishing mark of what it means to be human. It is through mimesis that we learn.

Perhaps the best example of this is language acquisition. Children learn language by imitating the sounds that they hear the adults around them make. Mimesis is the basis for Girard's anthropology. Here Girard is close to Aristotle, whom he cites with approval: 'Man

differs from the other animals in his greater aptitude for imitation'[4] This anthropology also involves an account of human desire. For Girard, desires are also learnt through imitation. This leads to what he terms 'triangular desire' in which desire involves three participants: the desiring subject, the desired object and the model from whom desire is learnt. Things are not intrinsically desirable, but only insofar as they are desired by others. I learn what is desirable by watching what you desire.

There is a danger of conflict in this model of desire, for some things cannot be possessed by more than one person. As the subject and the model desire the same object, the model becomes an obstacle to the acquisition of the object by the subject. The rivalry thus engendered leads to the rivals becoming 'doubles'. The model will come to regard the disciple as another model, so the desire will be reflected back and intensified. Due to this intensification, the rivalry results in a violent conflict between subject and model/rival in which one of the parties may be killed. The relation to the Hegelian master/slave dialectic is clear. Clearer still is the relation to the Freudian Oedipus complex.

When this model of mimesis is applied to a group of humans (it is yet too early to talk of 'society') the resultant subject/model conflicts will lead to uncontrolled killing and the annihilation of the group, unless it is somehow prevented. Here Girard identifies the 'victimage mechanism' which serves to divert the violence of the group. This is the second of Girard's 'discoveries'.

This mechanism functions by the arbitrary selection of a victim upon whom is blamed the contagion of violence. This victim is killed or expelled from the group. The group is thus enabled to unite in killing or expelling the victim. Here Girard locates the formation of society. In restoring unity to the group, and hence founding the community, the victim becomes sacred, a god.

The process of this mechanism is what we commonly term scapegoating. Girard distinguishes this from the rite in Leviticus 16, instead using the word in what he terms the 'psychosocial' sense, of the unjust and arbitrary singling out of a person or group who may be victimised. Girard suggests that we can see this occurring in many, at times mundane, contexts. We can see it in children ganging up on others in the playground, and on reflection we can perhaps see that our adult inter-personal relationships often involve scapegoating. To see this in contemporary politics requires rather less reflection.

The victimage mechanism must, however, be unconscious; the community must not realise that it is arbitrarily scapegoating a victim. Although the victim is chosen arbitrarily, there may be a 'mark of the victim', some form of difference that enables the victim to be seen by his persecutors as deserving of victimisation. This can be a physical deformity, racial grouping or any number of different things.

It is not a sufficient reason from an outsider's perspective, but it enables an insider to believe in the justice of the scapegoating.

> In strange surroundings, the situation of the one-eyed man may be worse than that of the blind... His one good eye seems more uncanny than the two bad ones of the blind.[5]

The main thing is that scapegoating must be seen as logical by the persecutors. If the community were to realise the arbitrary nature of the choice of scapegoat, the victim would not be able to 'cure' the community's violence. Nevertheless, from an outsider's point of view, this is *not* reason enough for the victimisation that occurs. The non-conscious nature of the victimage mechanism is vitally important.

In order that the violence, once diverted, should not break out again, two things are necessary: ritual, specifically sacrifice, and myth. Ritual re-enacts the founding murder upon

which society is based, enabling the participants to transfer their violence to another victim. Myth is the story told by the persecutors concerning the events that led to the creation of their community, that is, the founding murder. Thus religion:

humanises violence; it protects man from his own violence by taking it out of his hands, transforming it into a transcendent and ever-present danger to be kept in check by the appropriate rites appropriately observed and by a modest and prudent demeanour… religion protects man as long as its ultimate foundations are not revealed.[6]

By locating the origin of religion in the origin of society, Girard's theory provides an enormously powerful tool for the criticism of religion.

A crucial distinction

By 'religion' in the passage I have just cited, Girard does not mean Christianity or the prophetic strand within Judaism. He distinguishes this tradition from other religious traditions because it tells the story of cultural origins from the victim's perspective. This reaches its climax in the Gospels, and is the third moment of discovery' in Girard's hypothesis. Paradoxically this also accounts for the similarities between Christianity and 'primitive' mythology that have been observed since the last century. The Bible is composed of the same anthropological 'data' as mythology (other cults); it must be, in order that we can understand it. It is the interpretation that the Biblical text makes of this data that distinguishes the Judaeo-Christian scriptures from other texts (in this way Girard avoids the evolutionary reductionism of many nineteenth century anthropologists). The story of the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus and the story of Cain and Abel both include a fratricide. What distinguishes the Biblical story is its emphasis on the innocence of Abel and God's judgement on Cain. The Roman myth seems to applaud Romulus' act.

According to Girard, it was Nietzsche who first identified this distinction between Judaeo-Christianity and other religions. 'Dionysus versus the "Crucified": there you have the antithesis. It is not a difference in regard to their martyrdom, it is a difference in regard to the meaning of it.'[7] Thus, for Girard, the Bible is not myth but 'anti-myth' (my term) which exposes the myth on which all culture is based. It is the influence of the Bible that enables us to see the victimage mechanism.

I propose that if today we are capable of breaking down and analysing cultural mechanisms, it is because of the indirect and unperceived but formidably constraining influence of the JudaeoChristian scriptures.

I have no illusions about the originality or novelty of the propositions we have been advancing... Everything is already revealed. This is the claim of the Gospels at the moment of the Passion.[8]

The Gospels serve to undermine the action of the victimage mechanism because of the revelation contained within them. Once the mechanism is revealed it is rendered impotent, or so Girard claims, because they are no longer unconscious and so have not the power to unite all against one victim.

Christian history, with its own persecutions of those both outside and inside the Church, would seem to falsify such a bold claim. Girard counters this by pointing to a 'sacrificial reading' of the Gospel, which has held an important place ever since. A crude version of such a reading interprets Jesus' death as a sacrifice demanded by a violent deity to appease his wrath. By a 'sacrificial reading', Girard means a reading of the Passion narratives especially,

which tries to re-engender the sacrificial element which they refuse. Christian anti-semitism is perhaps one of the more significant results of such a reading. It is this 'sacrificial reading' that makes Girard's study necessary. Initially, Girard regarded all use of the language of 'sacrifice' as a means to speak of the death of Christ as mistaken. Even the Epistle to the Hebrews, itself part of the New Testament, was treated with suspicion by Girard as the beginnings of a 'sacrificial Christianity'. However, largely under the influence of Raymund Schwager, a Swiss Jesuit, Girard has come to see that 'sacrifice' may indeed be a very important way of describing Jesus' death.

Sources

Behind Girard, we can detect the influence of many great thinkers. Two in particular are worthy of note. The first of these is Émile Durkheim, whose work in the sociology of religion is one of Girard's major sources. Durkheim sees religion as the reification of society, originating in a moment of 'collective effervescence' in which the primitive clan is united into a single entity. Although not happy to share either Durkheim's reductionism or his starting point in totemic religion, Girard shares with Durkheim a sense of the close relationship of society and religion. He also gives content to Durkheim's 'collective effervescence'. For Girard, this is the founding murder which brings unity to the group as they scapegoat the innocent victim. Behind Girard also, I think we can detect the more subtle and less acknowledged influence of another great thinker, St Augustine.[9] Augustine's insistence that Christ's sacrifice should be taken as *the* sacrifice, definitive of true sacrifice, is very close to the position that Girard has now reached. Even when he held that Christ's death could not be described as a sacrifice, he could write that 'if you absolutely must have the word "sacrifice", then you must do without it in the case of all forms of sacrifice except the Passion'.[10]

It is this Augustinian emphasis that leads me to suggest that Girard's work is focused at the end, on the cross. We recall that at the moment of Jesus' death, the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom (Mk 15:38). This unveiling of the murderous nature of the temple sacrifices exposes the operation of the system and renders its future operation impossible. As Girard notes:

> The veil of the Temple conceals the mystery of sacrifice – it makes material and concrete the mis-recognition at the basis of the sacrificial system. For the veil to be rent, therefore, is tantamount to saying that by his death Jesus has triumphed over this misrecognition.[11]

But we should go further than this. The veil conceals the dwelling place of God, the Holy of Holies. Its rending reveals God. But God is not to be found in the Temple at the heart of the sacrificial system. Instead the death of Jesus and the tearing of the Temple veil reveals God dying on the cross, a scapegoat for human violence and sin. So what difference does Jesus' death make to human society? It is at once the deconstruction of a society founded upon violence and the revelation of the God who, in his son, calls us to a new society founded upon the rejection of this violence.'[12]

Notes

1. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and other in Literary Structure.* Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965 (1961).

2. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred.* Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977 (1972), henceforth VS.

3. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World.* Research undertaken in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. Trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. London: Athlone, 1987 (1978), henceforth THSFW.

4. Aristotle, *Poetics* 4.

5. THSFW p.104.

6. VS pp.134-5**.**

7. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power.* Aphorism *1052.*

8. THSFW p.138.

9. Others have detected such an influence. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford, 1990), Fergus Kerr, 'Rescuing Girard's Argument?' *Modern Theology* 8 (1992) 385-99, and Avital Wohlman, 'René Girard et St Augustin: Antropologie et Théologie' *Recherches Augustiniennes* 20 (1985) *257-303.*

10. THSFW p.453.

11. THSFWp.234.

12. I should like to thank Jacky Humphreys for her comments on a draft of this article.

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A video (VHS or NTSC) of René Girard's lecture and cassettes of his other Oxford talks are available from Inigo Enterprises, Links View, Traps Lane, New Maiden, Surrey KT3 4RY

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