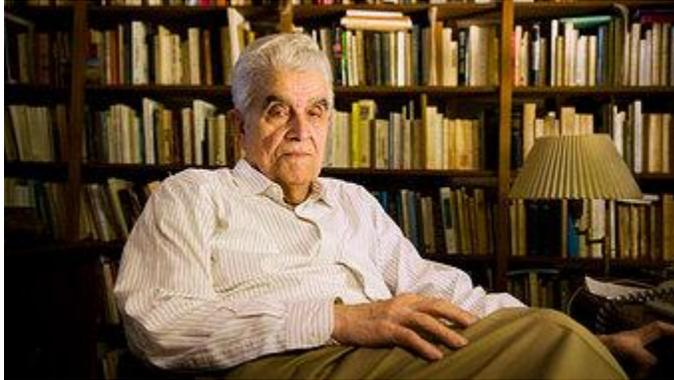


**The 'Darwin of the Human Sciences': Rene Girard, a Theological Retrospective - Scott Cowdell** *ABC Religion and Ethics* 5 Nov 2015 (Retrieved on May 18, 2016)

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Girard knew that we cannot escape mimeticism, but we can follow worthy models into non-rivalrous living, finding an ecclesial experience of unity without the need for enemies. *Credit: Linda Cicero / Stanford News Service*

News came in overnight from his home in Stanford, California, that the French-American thinker Rene Girard, 91, had died peacefully in his sleep.

Martha Girard reported that their three children and the grandchildren had been with him the evening before.

Born at Avignon in 1923, Girard made a life and a distinguished academic career in America - though not without generating much controversy. Here was one of those big theories that we thought we had seen the last of, made doubly problematic for many by the central place given to Jesus Christ, his passion and his Gospels.

Girard's extensive *oeuvre* has generated a wide range of responses across many disciplines, not least within Christian theology.

In 2005, on his election to *L'academie francaise*, Girard was acclaimed by Michael Serres as the "Charles Darwin of the human sciences." The post-modern intelligentsia - deeply wedded to the dogma of culture's irreducible plurality - remains sceptical, also despising any attempted rehabilitation for the Queen of the Sciences.

Girard, with a dash of Gallic insouciance, referred to his critics' small intellectual ambitions as "the comprehensive unionization of failure" - and of course his theory gives a good account of such academic rivalry, as well as the individualist's refusal of personal conversion that acceptance of his theory demands.

Unsatisfied with uncovering the origin of culture and explicating the emergence of secular modernity, however, Girard came eventually to predict the apocalyptic acceleration of history towards a tragic denouement.

### **Borrowed desire: Beyond the romantic lie**

The first of three planks in Girard's theory has to do with human desire. Beginning in the 1950s with the modern European novel, Girard discovered what Shakespeare called "borrowed desire" or "desire by another's eye." Today's romantically-minded individual claims originality and autonomy, but Shakespeare knew better, as did his Renaissance contemporary Cervantes.

Girard preferred the ancient word *mimesis* over simple imitation, because it is *the desire of the other* that we emulate. So, for example, the young lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* all fall in and out of love according to the desires of others, with Puck's love juice a literary device for mimetic desire, while Don Quixote lives in the desire of his chivalric model Amadis of Gaul.

Unfocussed desire finds an object thanks to a model, who in circumstances of close proximity can become a rival - for the girl, the job or the accolade. Girard realised that all great modern literature shares this insight, explicating Flaubert, Stendhal, Proust and Dostoyevsky - even giving honourable mention to the writers of *Seinfeld!*

Girard strengthened his intellectual credentials with his own encompassing account of Freudian psychology, expelling phantoms such as the unconscious and the Oedipus complex. From the father as only the first of many rivals, to the coquettish narcissist whose desire for herself awakens men's desire while in turn depending on it, to the psychology of sado-masochism, gambling and other obsessions desiring the being of models against whom one can never measure up, Girard simplified Freud. He also developed something Freud glimpsed but did not know what to do with, making it the second plank of his theory. I am referring to the founding murder.

Girard concluded from reading Euripides and the *Bacchae* that rivalry's escalation into violence finds a standard outlet in antiquity. He devoted the 1960s to studying classical literature and mythology, also to sociology and anthropology, testing this hypothesis. The result in 1972 was his best known work, [\*Violence and the Sacred\*](#), revealing the single victim mechanism at the origin of human culture and religion.

A pre-modern crowd was a dangerous thing, with envy becoming mimetically contagious until the original object of desire is forgotten, with an undifferentiated mass of rivalrous doubles rushing towards violence. Girard postulated that on the path towards humanity's evolutionary emergence, *mimesis* appeared as a valuable innovation, but so quickly did it lead to rivalry and violence that no community could take root.

Until something happened, which Girard had come to believe was coded into the founding myths and rituals of all ancient cultures: the sudden zeroing-in of crowd violence on a *scapegoat*. Differentiation and calm returns as one is separated from the undifferentiated throng. This slain victim becomes the first symbol, from which Girard sourced the binary oppositions underpinning all languages and cultures.

The stability of human life together issuing from this founding murder is an unexpected miracle, and it is protected in three ways. First, *prohibitions* contain rivalry, hence the elaborate gift-giving customs and incest taboos of ancient peoples. Second, *rituals* replay the primal crisis safely and reassert the order emerging from it, perhaps by animal sacrifice. Third, *myths* encode the founding murder in tales of man-beasts, for instance, with errant gods returning to the sky or disappearing into lakes, while the sacrificial origins of institutions like kingship are revealed in the mock sacrifice contained in many initiation rituals.

With these stabilizing elements in place, the essentially positive nature of mimetic desire helps generate human languages, cultures and religions. On the basis of this simplicity yet comprehensiveness, Girard can claim that his account of human culture is scientific.

Following the guiding insight, if not all the specific detail, of Durkheim's sociology, Girard recognised that pre-modern civilizations form cultural-social-religious wholes, demonstrating what he labelled "deviated transcendence" or the "false sacred." The religious awe and wonder attaching to these human totalities, which Rudolf Otto identified as a unique and irreducible experience, was explained more straightforwardly by Girard in terms of the scapegoat's dual nature.

Girard noted that scapegoats are always guilty in antiquity, when for instance Oedipus was condemned for incest and parricide - extreme accusations so characteristic of a lynch mob. Yet victims are regularly rehabilitated because the pacifying and unifying impact of their scapegoating is so extraordinary, hence the birth of gods and heroes. Shakespeare's wife of Julius Caesar knew that "great Rome will suck reviving blood" from the slaying of its founder.

This peace won ultimately through violence is necessary for the survival of pre-modern societies, which lack a rule of law and the accompanying threat of force sufficient for restraining violent escalation. The breakdown of this comprehensive order sets humanity on the path to modernity, and that breakdown - according to the third and most controversial plank of *le systeme Girard* - begins with the Bible.

### **"The One whom the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"**

Guided by their mimetic desire into rivalry with God, our figurative first parents Adam and Eve set humanity on the path leading to Cain's primal murder of Abel prior to founding the first city. Scripture thus exposes humanity's fall away from the innocence of animal life.

The tenth commandment warns against coveting and rivalry, which undergird the escalation named by earlier commandments towards murder through theft, adultery and slander. An Egyptian version of the Joseph saga blames Joseph for his troubles, in consistent mythical fashion, while Genesis insists on his innocence, with the repentant brothers who scapegoated Joseph refusing to scapegoat another brother in the case of Benjamin.

The sacrifice of Abraham's son Isaac is averted, and while the Israelites are ordered to massacre the Canaanites, they are immediately told not to intermarry with them, so that even in such texts of terror there is evidence of violence being averted.

Two thirds of the Psalms centre on the innocent victim's lament, claiming God's help against an encircling lynch mob. And Job the innocent scapegoat by and large resists the false sacred represented by his wife, his three friends, and even by that awesome voice of a harsh *status quo* who speaks from the whirlwind, clinging instead to the real sacred, to Israel's faithful God, in his stubborn retort, "I know that my redeemer lives."

Isaiah's servant songs register the levelling, undifferentiating effects of mimetic crises, with every valley lifted up and every hill made low, and the rough places plain, and the suffering servant is sacrificed.

The Gospels complete this revelation, with the innocent one sacrificed to the angry, boundary-preserving false sacred of temple and empire. Jesus's death need not be understood as appeasing an offended heavenly Father but, rather, in terms of a loving God beginning to liberate our world when the time was right. The resurrection of the forgiving victim begins a new creation beyond the violent sacred, offering human life new foundations.

Satan, the advocate for the prosecution - the Bible's shorthand for this whole process of violent escalation and appeasement - is put on notice by the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, our "advocate for the defence." Previously, violent mimetic crises were resolved by a collective murder, which the Gospels call "Satan driving out Satan."

Now a new instability enters the picture, because targeting an innocent victim no longer works so well. Myths and rituals begin to give up their innocent dead, while incidents of violent escalation become harder to repress. Hence the world becomes a more straightforwardly violent place. Girard understood Jesus's warning about bringing not peace but a sword, as the new creation began to undo the old creation by letting its inherent violence get the better of it.

The Roman Empire was the first to collapse, its violent fatalism overcome by a hopeful Church made invincible by the resurrection. But then, with notable exceptions such as the Desert Fathers and Benedictine monasticism, Christianity settled into a compromise with the old false sacred in the Holy Roman Empire. Sufficient sacrifice and violent exclusion were retained to keep a relatively stable peace through the Middle Ages.

Bloodthirsty atonement theology, rampant anti-Semitism and the Crusades are all examples of this resurgent false sacred, which helped manage the social panics of medieval Europe. All of which finds its clearest literary exemplar in Dostoyevsky's figure of the Grand Inquisitor, from *The Brothers Karamazov*, who leaves no doubt about which version of the sacred it is that demands Jesus's death. But eventually the myths lose their power to convince, from the anti-Semitic persecutory writing of Guillaume de Machaut to the witch trials marking the last gasp of the pre-modern order.

The distinctively Western form of modernity dawns with the breakdown of a sacred hierarchy from the late Middle Ages. And all this is God's work, through the Bible's impact in general and the Gospels' impact in particular.

**Secular modernity has biblical roots**

Widespread violence from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries in Europe demonstrated for Girard the disappearance of sacred orders fit to restrain it. The rivalry absent from separate orders in the medieval hierarchy was now rife. Girard pointed out that Sancho Panza was not prey to mimetic rivalry with his master, Don Quixote - but with modernity, as Tocqueville discovered in America, individual desire escalated as newfound equality strove for differentiation and hence individualism, while the capacity to release collective tensions through scapegoating diminished.

Two modern institutions for restraining violence arose. One was the *nation-state*, with Thomas Hobbes's "Leviathan" representing the Sovereign's powerful rule of law, with established religion as a watered-down version of the old false sacred - though even Hobbes had to allow private opinion in religious matters, hence failing to fully recover an older, fuller violent consensus. Thus secularization, with its reification and privatization of religion, is a fruit of the Gospel, unpicking old false sacred totalities.

The second modern institution is the *market*, serving both as an engine of mimetic escalation - awakening our desire by means of the desires of others through advertising - and as a means of keeping that escalation safe. The proliferation of desirable goods brought to Europe by the colonial sea trade and, later, made more widely available by mass production, fuelled an explosion of desire awakened through the market, while providing sufficient goods to prevent rivalry escalating into violence.

Today's market manages a sense of scarcity by isolating people as autonomous economic units unlikely to make common cause, preoccupying them with the necessary business of earning and the pacifying distractions of fantasy, also proliferating standardized models of desire with niche marketing and manufacturing to create and then satisfy a variegated range of desires wide enough to minimise rivalry, all channelling potentially violent mimetic competition into economic growth.

Hence, the first genuinely world religion - the *global market* - recalls the sacred orders of pre-modernity. Victims remain, too - particularly the third world poor whose suffering underwrites Western greed, along with economic victims and asylum seekers closer to home. The environment emerges as a further Girardian victim. Yet widespread protest now greets all this, because no modern society can be entirely unified by punishing a universally despised "other," as was possible under the old false sacred.

Western Christianity nowadays is too-often withdrawn and docile before both masters, serving the official quasi-sacred agenda of our national myths, as we put our faith in militaristic nationalism for keeping anxieties in check, or else reducing religion to one more commodity in the market.

Secularization ensures the sidelining of potentially contrary religious impulses so that a more modest false sacred can be established around the nation-state and the market, containing violence in some degree of continuity with pre-modern sacred forms. Hence, the measure of sacred awe still attaching to politics and economics. This is a kind of "false sacred-lite," if you like - the best that can be had in a world where Jesus's living legacy continues to expose and undermine all such attempts.

And here, by the way, we find our clearest answer to the criticism often levelled at Girard, that his distinctive social scientific account of Judaeo-Christian uniqueness represents an imperialistic ideology incompatible with his programme, and with modern tolerance more generally. As for modern tolerance, Girard curled his Gallic lip and pointed to victimizing excesses hidden in the respectable folds of today's political correctness. He took the imperialistic challenge more seriously, insisting that Jesus reveals and overcomes the false sacred charade not to bolster the claims of an institutional Church that has regularly failed to get the point, but for the sake of the world God loves.

There is discussion in Girardian circles about how much awareness of mimeticism and the victim mechanism may be present in other religious traditions, with Buddhism's developed critique of illusion of particular note. Girard's account does not represent religious one-upmanship and he would not have wanted it read as such. Nevertheless, he did return to the abandoned Catholicism of his childhood with the zeal of a convert, having found the diagnosis and cure for humanity's ills primarily in the Gospels.

### **Modern warfare and biblical apocalypse**

Despite the real but limited success of modern Western institutions in restraining violence without a fully-fledged false sacred, Girard came to doubt whether this can be sustained internationally. Hence, the increasingly apocalyptic tenor of his thinking about modernity.

The crisis of violent mimetic escalation is essentially one of undifferentiation, held at bay by market commodification and the controlling force of nation states. Girard acknowledged the limited role that such forces have always had in God's plan - St. Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2: 6-7 calls them the *katechon* - though they must eventually give way as Christ allows the old creation to collapse so a new one can come to birth. But now, for Girard, this collapse is showing itself.

He ascribed the first recognition of this to the early nineteenth-century Prussian Carl von Clausewitz, in the first chapter of the General's military classic, *On War*. Clausewitz sensed that with Napoleon, a new spirit of total war had appeared in Europe. The duel of violent doubles at the root of mimetic crises in prehistory and antiquity, according to Girard, re-emerged in such modern warfare.

Girard's last book was titled *Achever Clausewitz* ("Completing Clausewitz"), translated as [\*Battling to the End\*](#), in which he unpacked this insight from which Clausewitz anxiously withdrew, having first stated it, burying it under the remainder of a book devoted to war as a rational expedient - as "the continuation of politics by other means." Instead, Girard traced the tit-for-tat escalation of violent doubles, from Napoleonism to the reaction of Pan-Germanism, from Bolshevism to Nazism, and from Nazism to Stalinism. Gone was the older, more gentlemanly code of war; dawning was an era of utter loathing for the enemy, of whole populations mobilised, of partisan movements and terrorism.

Girard would have none of the Huntington thesis, that today we suffer from a "clash of civilizations." It is proximity rather than differentiation which ignites, with brothers far more likely to fight than strangers. In today's global marketplace everyone is increasingly like

everyone else, with the inequalities tolerably managed within particular nations now flaring up internationally.

Girard could have predicted the outcome of 2009's Copenhagen Climate Summit, for instance, having claimed that China is not really different from America at all, but just wants more cars than America has. Hence China's stubborn non-compliance on reduced carbon emissions helped ensure its continued rapid economic growth.

As for the war on terror, Girard was struck by the sleeper cells of terrorists living indistinguishably within Western societies, and how Atta and his fellow 9/11 perpetrators spent their last nights before the attacks in bars. What is going on, he asked? Certainly not a simple clash of civilizations. Girard believed that populations around the world - whose desires are awakened by Western affluence and who are then systematically excluded from it - gravitate nowadays to Islamic jihad in the same way that oppressed masses once found a rallying point in Communism.

Girard looked again to the Bible for understanding, finding an early prediction of Christianity's failure to change such ways of the world in the Book of Revelation. The apocalypse is not an angry God winding up history but, rather, the final chapter of human self-destruction, since Christ has deprived history of false sacred protection, and because we have refused to accept God's counter-offer of repentance and faith. Girard thus concluded the five-decade development and elaboration of his uniquely comprehensive theory declaring that he had seen the meaning of history, and that it is terrifying.

### **Hope for the future?**

Yet even in Clausewitz's historically accelerating Germany, a counter-vision was being worked out by the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, whose withdrawal from the world in silence and sadness imitated Christ's disavowal of worldly power and ambition. Girard meditated on Hölderlin's couplet, "*But where danger threatens / That which saves from it also grows.*"

Imitating God's total absence from the feverish to-and-fro of mimetic history, also from the violent sacred's eternal return which Nietzsche later preached, and only thus being able to overcome the inward oscillations of his bipolar disorder, Hölderlin followed the way of monastics, saints and Christ himself.

Girard knew that we cannot escape mimeticism, but we can follow worthy models of desire into non-rivalrous living, away from violent escalation and violent resolution, finding an ecclesial experience of unity without the need for enemies. By following Christ's alternative to the false sacred in modest lives modelled on his desire, on that of his blessed mother and all the saints, perhaps our good mimetic influence on others in turn will help keep non-violent solidarity alive in the world, and hence contribute to averting Girard's feared apocalyptic end to history.

As for René Girard himself, he was an observant Catholic layman for 55 years and he knew that God's Kingdom was not of this world. He looked forward to union with God, and there in faith and hope we leave him, where all the victims of history are vindicated and every tear is wiped away.

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