

## **BEYOND THE VIOLENT GOD?: A PRIMER ON GIRARD<sup>1</sup>**

**Jonathan P. Case**

*Many people object to monotheistic religions on the basis that they have enshrined violence in their core narratives. This is felt to be a particular difficulty for Christianity especially when the death of Jesus is understood as a penal substitution for sin. Renee Girard's theory of "mimetic rivalry" provides an alternative way of reading the death and resurrection of Jesus. The cross becomes a necessity not because God's wrath must be placated by Christ's suffering but because it unmasks the myth of sacred violence and reveals the human desire and propensity towards killing as a form of scapegoating. The resurrection signals a new way of dealing with rivalry, a Spirit greater than the power of violence. A number of criticisms of Girard are noted but a positive appropriation of some of his key insights is recommended.*

---

### **Violence, Society and Religion**

Many of my students would recognise a recurring event on the popular television show, *South Park*. Kenny McCormick, the little boy whose voice is always muffled as he attempts to talk through his parka, gets killed in every episode. Sometimes his death seems relevant to the plot, other times it seems wholly *irrelevant* to what's going on. But it always happens. *South Park* is an extremely offensive satire, and I'm not encouraging anyone to watch it, but the creators of the show have perhaps unwittingly put their finger on one of the most perplexing questions confronting human beings: is violence inherent in the basic fabric or make-up of human society? No matter what happens in a *South Park* episode, one of the show's constants remains: little defenceless Kenny will be killed.

The previous century was unparalleled in barbarity. In George Steiner's characterisation, "for the whole of Europe and Russia," the twentieth century "became a time out of hell." And lest we think that the second world war happened oh-so-long ago, thirty years or so after Auschwitz the Khmer Rouge alone buried alive an estimated hundred thousand beings. In sum, Steiner reminds us, "Historians

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered as the Chamberlain Lecture in Mission at Houghton College, New York.

estimate at more than seventy million the number of men, women and children done to death by warfare, starvation, deportation, political murder and disease between 1914 and the 'ethnic cleansing' in the Balkans."<sup>2</sup>

Surveying the carnage and ideologies of the last century, many people today worry that a causal connection exists between religion and violence, that "true believers" of all persuasions are potential goose-stepping fanatics or balaclava-wearing terrorists. This attitude typifies not only academics; it's a popular attitude. In an interview a few years ago, musician and songwriter Michael Franti was discussing his spiritual evolution, and he made the comment that, even though he was raised Lutheran, he no longer wanted to claim that tradition. Franti voiced the sentiment of many people today when he said: "I'm not a big fan of organised religion. Too much violence. We don't need missionaries, because God is omnipresent, and people will come to God based on the context of where they live."<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, evidence abounds to support this connection between religion and violence. In the popular imagination, monotheistic religious traditions come in for the heaviest criticism. Of course recently Islam has taken it hardest on the chin, and its case is not helped by the more militant expressions we read about almost every day. When a few years ago the Melbourne newspaper *The Herald Sun* ran a story on the Australian wife of a suspected terrorist, she was quoted as saying: "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter...I may get into trouble saying that...but...I agree with it. For Muslims, the jihad is compulsory. It is...the struggle for God."<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the protests launched by the majority of peaceful Muslims in the West, the grassroots imagination tends to latch onto these kinds of highly publicised expressions.

And while you might think that the shadow of the *Shoah* has stretched long enough to warn anyone off accusing the Jews of practising a faith intrinsically violent, the sad fact is that the barrage of reports from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict only help to confirm in the minds of many the suspicion that religion keeps *both* sides

---

<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Mark LeVine, "Enrage, Enlighten, Inspire" [interview with Michael Franti], at <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/2000/08/Enrage-Enlighten-Inspire.aspx> Accessed 30 November 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Ben English, "Terror Suspect's Wife Backs Jihad," *Herald Sun* Thursday Feb 5, 2004, p5.

locked in an endless struggle. You may remember several years ago what a field day the media had with Baruch Goldstein's murder of twenty-nine Muslims at prayer at the tomb of Abraham. Rabbi Arthur Waskow of *The Shalom Center* in Philadelphia sums the matter up this way: "Mention 'the Jews' and 'non-violence' in our generation, and many will look you at you askance. Mental images of the Israeli army, the Maccabees, an 'angry God' will flood the eye."<sup>5</sup>

Christianity doesn't come off any better in this regard, and perhaps worse. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, the history of missionary activity often linked with political or commercial interest, as well as deplorable attitudes and practices towards women and people of colour (slavery, etc) all are brought forward by our critics as evidence that Christianity irremediably inclines itself towards violence.

### **The Trouble with Monotheisms?**

Some have argued that part of the problem must be traced to the concept of monotheism itself. Regina Schwartz, for example, in her book *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* says that one of the problems with monotheism can be seen in that, "the demand of allegiance to one principle, or one god, is accompanied by aggression to those who have other allegiances." Unfortunately, says Schwartz, the injunction "thou shalt have no other gods before me" turns into intolerance for other people who may have other gods, principles or beliefs."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, she argues that this legacy of monotheism from the Hebrew Bible in particular has so deeply imprinted western culture that it has actually fed the violent nationalisms of our day.

Regardless of any observations you might make about monotheism in particular, the conclusion we've drawn in the West about violence and religion in general is that for public safety's sake religion ought to be kept out of the public square and relegated to the realm of personal convictions or values. So you read about, for

---

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Wasko, "Judaism, Violence and Non Violence," *Fellowship* May/June 2003, at [http://www.forusa.org/fellowship/may-june\\_03/waskow.html](http://www.forusa.org/fellowship/may-june_03/waskow.html) Accessed 30 November 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Regina M. Schwartz at <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/741990.html> Accessed 30 November 2008.

example, the French government's attempts to prohibit Muslim women from wearing the hijab in public and the public display of large religious symbols.<sup>7</sup>

When people attempt to defend one of the monotheistic faiths I mentioned above, usually such attempts try to separate what you might call the "official" beliefs of a religion (what's "on the books") from erroneous interpretations and the actual behaviour of believers. So Muslims will point to the passage in the *Qur'an* that says when one person murders another, it's as though that person murders all of humanity. Or Jews and Christians point to passages in their Scriptures that enjoin us to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Such attempts to salvage religion by appealing to ethical ideals fall increasingly on deaf ears. It's not the existence of ethical ideals that anyone questions, but whether the character of God said to be revealed in each of these religions does not finally trump the putative morality each one champions, and whether the character of God ineluctably orients the "true believer" to violence as part and parcel of the faith. The concept of monotheism *per se* does not present the problem so much as the character of the one *theos* claimed.

Consider some foundational events in each of the faiths I've mentioned: In Judaism, many would cite the slaughter of the Egyptian infant boys on the first Passover and the violent (some would say genocidal) conquest of "the Promised land." And many believers would not hesitate to defend, theologically, such events. In a web forum discussion I follow, when this issue was tossed around, one of the participants offered this:

As for the conquest of Canaan, does this justify genocide under certain circumstances? Absolutely, as long as those circumstances are "God commands it"...that flows naturally from my belief in God as the

---

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, in the present cultural climate in the West interest in Eastern religions escapes this kind of criticism and is even encouraged. Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism are all thought to be more passive, tranquil, concerned with finding one's center, and above all non-dogmatic – hence more desirable in fast-paced and multi-cultural societies in which people want a "faith" that is essentially therapeutic and at the same time tolerant. You have your spiritual bliss – I have mine. I recently was watching a television show about holiday destinations in southeast Asia, and the narrator mentioned that in a certain Asian country the tourist looking for peace of mind should try meditating at such and such temple (and there was our indefatigable TV tour guide, sitting in lotus position in a temple). I doubt you would ever see such "tourist religion" promoted where someone with no particular religious affiliation would be encouraged to join the faithful as they worshipped in a synagogue, church or mosque.

ultimate authority in all things. The Bible tells us that the genocide was not a result of the Israelite's need for land, but rather a punishment for the conquered nations' unbelief.<sup>8</sup>

Our contemporary critics fear these sorts of comments. "True believers" confess that their God commanded genocide in the past; what if God does so again? Consider Islam for a moment. Critics have asked: Isn't violence found at the origins of this faith, when you consider the foundational battles on the Arabian Peninsula that led to Muhammad's triumph and the formation of the earliest Muslim community, battles which, according to the *Qur'an*, God himself urged the Prophet and the faithful to fight?<sup>9</sup> Doesn't *Shia* Islam especially have violence at its beginning, in the murder of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet in 680? "No wonder Muslims are so violent," we say, "look at the origins of their faith." Both Jews and Christians, as well as our secular critics, like to draw attention to those signal events.

### **The Cross of Jesus and the Violence of God**

But we have a serious challenge of our own in this area, and that problem has to do, of course, with the death of Jesus and the meanings that Christians have attached to it in our attempt to articulate a doctrine of the atonement. In other words, *a killing, a murder* occupies the heart of our faith, a murder that God is said to have required for God's own sake, in order for God's own honour to be satisfied and for God's justice to be expressed.

According to the most popular rendering of the atonement, our sins have violated the divine moral requirement for humanity - we have broken God's law - which attracts divine wrath. God cannot simply forgive (that would be mercy without justice). Righteous judgment - the death penalty! - must be carried out if God is to be true to God's own righteous nature. Yet in the depths of divine mercy God has provided a way out of this, our dilemma, by setting forth a substitute who can take upon himself our deserved punishment, our deserved death. But who can take upon himself the sin of the whole world, of all of humanity? Only the innocent and obedient son of God himself, the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

---

<sup>8</sup> Discussion at <http://www.evangelicaloutpost.com/archives/000277.html>

<sup>9</sup> *Surah* 8: 65

The Levitical law prefigures this perfect sacrifice in its command to sacrifice animals, for, as we are told, “without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins.” Yet Yahweh in the Old Testament apparently “can’t get no satisfaction;” these sacrifices are insufficient to cover the debt we owe. They are only the shadow of what is to come, according to the author of Hebrews, put in place until the perfect sacrifice.

This is more or less the understanding of the atonement I grew up with, and I suspect it functions as the default understanding of most evangelicals. The “penal substitution theory” in this form owes much to the nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge, although its roots go back to the satisfaction theory of the atonement developed by Anselm of Canterbury. In recent years this theory has been the target of much criticism, by believers and nonbelievers alike, and I think we should at least listen to some of these criticisms, if for no other reason than we might then be pressed to articulate in a clearer fashion the saving significance of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Before I go further, I want to remind you that a theological *theory*, a theory of the atonement, doesn’t *save* anyone. In fact for the first thousand years or so in the church the *Christus Victor* model (Christ the triumphant victor over the power of the devil and death) would have provided the dominant paradigm for understanding the saving significance of Jesus’ death. So please remember: I am not questioning that Jesus’ death saves, only a popular theory of *how* his death is said to save. And in connection to this disclaimer, remember that none of the great ecumenical creeds of the church hitches its wagon to a particular theory of the atonement.

Let me unpack a bit more of this criticism of Christianity and its supposed intrinsic violence. Several years ago in the popular comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, eight-year old Calvin was pretending that he was God, but, we were told, the trouble is that he’s no kind and loving god, rather: *he’s one of the old gods; he demands sacrifice!* With the traditional penal substitution theory of the atonement, it sounds to some people like Christians are saying that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is one more species of the “old gods” who were always thirsty, and there’s nothing that slakes the thirst of a grumpy god like a good old-fashioned draught of human blood.

The blood of bulls and goats was not enough; this god had to get the biggest payout possible to cover the debt we owed him, which he got with the blood of Jesus. Our critics will tell us: “You can talk all

you want about the mercy and love of God, but what you're really telling us is that your "God" needed to have a killing in order to be loving. Like a thousand other garden-variety gods since the dawn of time, your God needs a murder in order to forgive." As one of the characters in R. F. Laird's masterpiece, *The Boomer Bible*, puts it: Yahweh is the kind of God that gives gods in general a bad name; he is "the most capriciously wrathful and destructive god in the whole history of life on earth."<sup>10</sup>

Some feminist theologians have also chimed in with the criticism, claiming that implications are worse than we imagine. God's sacrifice of his own innocent son constitutes "divine child abuse." The offended and angry father who cannot suppress his wrath must "vent", must find a target: so poor Jesus. If this orients our understanding of divine fatherhood, then, we are told, we should not be surprised if some people draw tragic and predictably violent conclusions for their own children.

Thus the ethical objection: "In a world so riddled with religious violence, so chock full of religious fanatics and suicide bombers who don't hesitate to kill in the name of God, why should we want to have anything to do with Christianity, which seems to have violence ordered by the very loving God it proclaims, so he, like the gods of old, can be placated! Isn't *that* God exactly the kind of deity we have outgrown and can do without? Wouldn't a God that demands blood necessarily orient his followers towards, if not outright violence, then at least a life of suffering and sacrifice carried out in his name? Who needs that kind of God?" At a *ReImagining* Conference a few years back Delores Williams of Union Theological Seminary no doubt summed up the contemporary attitude of many when she was heard to remark: "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."<sup>11</sup>

Like most theologians, contemporary biblical scholars and theologians in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition have been quick to distance themselves from any reading of the atonement suggesting that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ might be related to one of the "old gods." God does not need to be placated or reconciled; *we* need to be reconciled;<sup>12</sup> God's wrath is not

---

<sup>10</sup> R.F.Laird, *The Boomer Bible* (NY: Workman, 1991); *Boulevardiers* 13: 3; 15: 11.

<sup>11</sup> Williams' words have been cited in many publications. Cf. "The WCC Solidarity with Women Minneapolis Conference," BRF Witness 29 no. 3 May/June 1994 <http://www.brfwitness.org/Articles/1994v29n3.htm> Accessed 30 November 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., e.g., treatments in H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988) and J Kenneth Grider, *A*

retributive,<sup>13</sup> and so on. But the fundamental question, “Does God require the sacrifice, the murder, of an innocent in order to be forgiving?” goes begging.

While teaching in the Russian Federation a few years ago, a student came up to me after a lecture on the atonement. He mentioned a leading contemporary Wesleyan systematic theologian whom he had read, and said to me point blank: “This man just doesn’t understand the problems associated with traditional renderings of atonement, does he? When we Russians hear the word ‘sacrifice’ you don’t realise what that word means to us. The Soviet government demanded that we sacrifice nearly everything to their ideology. Is God like that?”

If you try explaining to someone like this that human sin, not divine blood-lust, made the death of Jesus necessary in view of divine righteousness, then this simply pushes the question back one step further. Because now it appears you’re saying that God wouldn’t ordinarily desire the sacrifice of the innocent, but the contingency of human sin violating divine righteousness requires it. If that divine righteousness is not a standard external to God, but is an expression of God’s own character in response to human sin, then, yes, God still does require a killing in order to be forgiving. God “doesn’t have it in him” otherwise.

So is violence inscribed not only at the heart of human society but in God’s own heart as well? The *South Park* boys accuse Kenny’s killers “You killed Kenny!” Would we be similarly justified in saying: “God killed Jesus!”? God *had to* kill Jesus? Because God had to punish *somebody*?” Stephen Travis (St John’s College, Nottingham) tells the story of a woman at a theology conference, who’d been trying to piece together what she had been learning about Jesus’ death, coming up to him and asking quizzically, “So Jesus came to save us from God?”<sup>14</sup>

I wonder if we are not helped by going back to Delores Williams’ comments and asking: Who *does* need “folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff?” Who *does* need the violence?

---

*Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen H. Travis, “The Doctrine of the Atonement: Popular Evangelicalism and the Bible,” at

<http://catalystresources.org/issues/221travis.html> Accessed 30 November 2008.



## René Girard: Mimesis and Scapegoating

In grappling with this question, many theologians have been drawn to the seminal work of René Girard, professor emeritus of literature at Stanford University. Girard has made famous his theory of “mimetic rivalry” and the “scapegoating mechanism,” and a host of theologians and biblical scholars in recent years have turned to his theories for the light they shed on the question of the violence of God in the Scriptures, especially as it pertains to rendering the meaning of Jesus’ death. In general, Girard’s theory has been used to explain the religious character of the violent origins at the basis or founding of various cultures: how do you account for myths of sacred murder or sacrifice at the beginnings of a people’s cultural history?

### A. Basic elements in Girard’s theory

Girard claims that, far from being apparent, the real origin of this sacred violence must be uncovered, and further, sought anthropologically. Its starting point lies in understanding desire, and the fact that human desire is inflamed by the desire of another. We come to imitate the desire we see in others: this sums up the root of Girard’s theory of *mimesis*, or *mimetic* desire. We learn to *mime* the desire of others.

We see it in the ancient story of our origins: “You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of the fruit your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.” And the light comes on: when the woman suddenly saw that the fruit was good for food and desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some, ate it and gave it to her husband. Putting the matter in this light should not be surprising to Christians; there is a long tradition in the history of Christian thought that holds the essence of sin to be “concupiscence” or disordered desire: desiring for ourselves what God does *not* desire for us. (I suppose the origins for advertising, of how to inflame other’s desire, also lie in Genesis 3.)

The phenomenon can be observed in the everyday experience of any parent: watch children in a nursery all desiring a toy that one child prizes. Even if you put an identical toy into the nursery, the particular toy favoured by that one child will often remain the toy desired by others. If you want to sharpen the romantic attraction you hope that “special someone” for you, let them see you with

someone else and the needle of their “desire meter” will “redline” over you.

Marketing experts count on this phenomenon of mimetic desire: get the word out on the most viewed website, the CD that everyone wants, and so on. These experts hope that everyone else’s desire will inflame yours. When one person casts the “acquisitive gesture,” as Girard puts it, others are sure to follow. If the stakes are high enough, if enough wealth or sex or power is involved, a deadly game of competition and rivalry ensues.

Harry is the cocaine-sniffing, egotistical Messiah for our age in Laird’s *Boomer Bible*. He comes preaching the great trinity of Desire, Certainty and Blame. Harry says that the first great beacon of the way, *Desire*, means that you should “act in accordance with your desires and do not trouble yourself with thoughts about whether you deserve it or not or who might be hurt by you having it or any chain of events that might be set in motion by your desire. None of these matter at all...”<sup>15</sup>

The second great beacon, *Certainty*, means that in all matters and circumstances you choose the way of certainty, because people who are certain have “no need to think and are not troubled by conscience or the responsibility to weigh things further or look for concealed relationships.”<sup>16</sup> Hear the word of Harry. Certainty keeps your desires unwavering in their competition with others: when you are certain of what you want, never back down for anyone.

Girard says that as the tension and rivalry between people inflamed with out-of-control desires escalates and eventually reaches a boiling point, society threatens to devour itself and collapse into chaos. But then, inevitably, a person or minority group of persons are singled out as the cause of the trouble and breakdown. And people who were previously cutthroat competitors and deadly rivals suddenly find themselves united, *friends*, as they cast blame - what Girard calls the “accusative gesture” - on a single victim, whom all agree must be expelled or liquidated for the greater good of society.

After the scapegoat is expelled or killed, relative order and peacefulness returns to the community until the next round of mimetic rivalry reaches a boiling point and the scapegoating mechanism kicks in again. The scapegoating system self-perpetuates and self-regulates.

---

<sup>15</sup> Laird, *Boomer Bible*, cf. Willie 32: 1-8

<sup>16</sup> Laird, *Boomer Bible*, cf. Willie 33: 1-4

Given our recent history, we probably think most naturally of the Jews under National Socialism in Germany, or more recent ethnic cleansing in the Balkans or genocidal madness in Africa. But Girard emphasises that the madness, what he calls the “contagion,” of mimetic rivalry and the scapegoating mechanism has been the constant and enduring feature of human society. Robert Hamerton-Kelly comments that the first social moment of our species was “the fellowship of the lynch mob.”<sup>17</sup>

The corporation teeters on the brink: sack the CEO. The team bows out of the cup competition: axe the manager. The church struggles to grow: off with the pastor’s head. The denomination staggers through a rough patch: it’s time for a bloodletting, so we’ll target all those liberals or lousy college or seminary faculties that aren’t training our ministers properly. The family comes apart at the seams: it must be the influence of that ratty no-good son or daughter. We can’t get what we want, and it *must* be someone else’s fault, so they must pay for it!

Again the voice of the messiah from *The Boomer Bible*: The third great beacon of the way is *Blame*. Harry says, “When you’re unhappy or dissatisfied for any reason, find someone else to blame, because people who have someone to blame have no reason to question themselves. So be fearless about pointing the finger at others, and be sure to choose the targets for your blame in accordance with your desires.”<sup>18</sup>

For a time, remarkably, the scapegoat mechanism works: Calmness and order are restored. And cultures since the dawn of time have said: “Surely this miracle of peace can mean only one thing. The gods must have wanted so-and-so to be sacrificed. So-and-so must have been under a divine curse, they really had it coming; they could not have been innocent and therefore we were justified in expelling and killing them. The gods wanted them killed.” And so, Girard says, the real origins for human violence, the frenzy of our own collective twisted desire, have been given a religious justification or mythological overlay. The real origins remain hidden from us, and human beings remain trapped within this spiral of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating. We are both bound

---

<sup>17</sup> Robert Hamerton-Kelly, “Violence and Religion,” [http://www.hamerton-kelly.com/talks/violence\\_religion\\_jan03.htm](http://www.hamerton-kelly.com/talks/violence_religion_jan03.htm) Accessed 30 November 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Laird, op. cit., cf. Willie 34: 1-8

to the forces and consequences of our own rampant desire and blind to our situation. We are held captive to a power over us.

In Girardian terms, the power of the *devil* can be found precisely in what the Bible says about him. The “*satan*” means “the *accuser*,” revealed in the power of accusation and the contagion, in the power of blaming and liquidating whomever is thought to be the cause of the community’s trouble, while the actual cause should be traced to our own competing desires. Satan acts as the motivating force of the “contagion,” the madness of desire that spreads throughout human relationships and community. Then, at just the crucial moment, “Satan casts out Satan.” In other words, right before the community explodes, the victim is expelled or eliminated and the contagion dissipates for the time being, but the real cause of the violence remains hidden, and the process starts all over again.<sup>19</sup>

So when Jesus asks, “How can Satan cast out Satan?,” Girard says he’s not being obscure or rhetorical. Jesus is provoking us to reflect on how the accuser manages to capitalise on our desire, bring forth the destructive consequence, and at the same time cast himself out without being detected, so the cycle of desire, rivalry and violence is repeated over and over again, while we’re kept trapped and in the dark. The overlay of the religious rhetoric of sacred violence, of God needing and desiring the killing, puts the crowning touch on the camouflage.

The violence itself unleashed in this scapegoat mechanism seems to generate a charismatic quality of its own. Bernd Weisbrod observes that whatever murderous ideologies certain leaders or parties have held, the killing itself carried out provides a kind of charismatic proof as to the sacred calling of the movement.<sup>20</sup> Killing and even mutilating the body of one’s enemy is the ultimate demarcation of “us” versus “them.” Michael Ley notes that for many contemporary totalitarian movements aspiring to bring about a Gnostic-apocalyptic vision of the final restoration of a holy cosmic order, present social redemption can be achieved only through the

---

<sup>19</sup> René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001). See especially James G. Williams’ foreword, xii.

<sup>20</sup> Bernd Weisbrod, “Fundamentalist Violence: Political Violence and Political Religion in Modern Conflict,” at <http://www.afsp.msh-paris.fr/archives/2001/violencetxt/weisbrod.pdf> Accessed 30 November 2008.

annihilation of all political opponents. The killing of people thus becomes “a sacred ritual in the process of salvation.”<sup>21</sup>

The Bible’s unique function, Girard claims, lies in its ability to debunk mythologies ancient and modern insofar as it reveals the cycle of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating by recounting stories from the perspective of what he calls “the intelligence of the victim.” So, for example, the story of Joseph reveals an innocent victim scapegoated once his brothers’ rivalry reaches a fever pitch, and innocently imprisoned after the incident in Potiphar’s house. This is in contrast to, for example, Oedipus, who suffers the wholly understandable consequences of being under a divine curse. To those critics of Christianity who consider the biblical stories just another collection of ancient myths exalting sacred violence, Girard says that, if we read carefully, we will discern a profoundly “anti-mythological inspiration.”<sup>22</sup>

The Psalms and the book of Job, Girard says, are perhaps some of the oldest texts in the world in which we hear the voice of the victim, and an appeal to the “God of the victim.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, Girard argues that western civilization owes the very notion of humanitarian concern for the “victim” to the biblical stories and the perspective they enjoin upon us.

## B. Girardian analysis and the story of Jesus

The application of this theory to interpreting the death of Jesus can be easily sketched out. Jesus dies as a result of a bubbling cauldron of human mimetic rivalry. Jesus came announcing the coming kingdom of God, calling for repentance, pronouncing the forgiveness of sins, welcoming the outcasts and marginalised, healing, casting out demons, raising the dead, and we would not have it.

Such ideas and activities are dangerous. They fuel zealot expectation, they provoke Roman anxiety over ideas of kingship, allegiance and social order, and they threaten a certain set of religious ideals and authorities that benefit from them: “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and then the Romans will come and take away our place and our nation.” And from Caiphas, the cold voice of *realpolitik*: “You know nothing at

---

<sup>21</sup> Michael Ley, “Holy Violence in the Modern Age,” [http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/events/innsbruck2003\\_Ley\\_Paper.doc](http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/events/innsbruck2003_Ley_Paper.doc) Accessed 30 November 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 117ff.

all!" In other words: Don't you know how the real world works? In the world of guns and trumpets, "better that one man should die than have the whole nation perish." (John 11.48-50).

When Jesus is arrested, he says to those who have come for him: "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Everyday I was with you in the Temple courts..." (Lk 22.53) In other words: "you know what I've been on about!" But to the accusers, the scapegoat must be made out to be evil and dangerous. And Luke writes that on the day when Pilate and Herod saw that it would be to their mutual advantage to get rid of this troublemaker, what happened? "They became friends" (23.12), whereas before they had been enemies. The accusative gesture unites previous rivals. On this account, note that *we* become the vessels of God's wrath as the deadly fruit of our disordered desire is borne. In other words, God does not hurl down invisible quantities of wrath on his suffering Son because he just *has* to punish somebody for what we've done and balance the scales of justice in the heavens.

What actually happens in a straightforward reading of the Gospel story? *Human beings* kill Jesus. As the Apostle Paul says, God's wrath is revealed precisely as *we* are delivered over, as we are "given up" or abandoned, to the full consequences of *our* sin (or, in Girardian terms, as our murderous desire is allowed to run its lethal course). And Jesus dies as a result of that. Gerhard Forde puts it this way: "God rejects and judges [our sin] by refusing to have anything to do with it."<sup>24</sup> In other words, Jesus does not call for vengeance, for legions of the angelic cavalry to arrive in the nick of time at Calvary. And he does not suffer for the sins of the world in some abstract, metaphysical sense. He literally bears our sin physically, in his body: the lash, the thorns, the nails, the spear.

Astonishingly, the gospel narratives reveal this man to be the Christ of God, and declare his innocence. In Matthew's account, the centurion and the guard exclaim, right at the moment of Jesus' death: "surely this was a son of the gods" (Mt 28.54). In Luke's account, the centurion praises God, saying, "surely this was a righteous man" (Lk 23. 47). And the Gospel reveals that the stone the builders rejected, as all the previous envoys of the vineyard owner had been killed, was indeed the stone that was destined to become head of the corner.

---

<sup>24</sup> Gerhard Forde, "The Work of Christ," in Braaten and Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics* Volume 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 91. The present analysis is deeply indebted to Forde.

Now proof of the providential and gracious character of this event lies in the fact that it reveals to us what we could never have found out about our condition. To use Pascal's words: the real truth of our condition lies farthest from our ken; it must be revealed. The story of Jesus' crucifixion told in the Gospel blows the lid off the myth of sacred violence and reveals the real reason for it: our desire for it, our propensity towards killing.

And it remains our plight, not merely that of a group of people back in the first century. Girard says, "Because of the simple fact that we live in a world whose structure is based on mimetic processes and victim mechanisms, from which we all profit without knowing it, we are *all* accessories to the Crucifixion [and] persecutors of Christ."<sup>25</sup> In the words of Luther: we all carry around in our pockets the nails used to crucify Jesus.

To respond to Delores Williams' comment: Who needs "folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff"? *We do! We* have needed it since the dawn of time! And the Gospel reveals that to us! Jesus made a public spectacle of the powers and their strategy that binds us in a cycle of violence and death (Col. 2.15). His death on the cross, as recounted in the Gospel, reveals the contagion and scapegoat mechanism that holds us in bondage and prevents us from recognising our plight.

Theologians of the ancient church such as Origen spoke of God duping Satan, or fooling him in the death of Jesus on the cross and triumphing over him in the resurrection. As I mentioned earlier, this is called the *Christus Victor* theory of the atonement ("Christ the Victor"). No doubt more people will remember C.S. Lewis' depiction of atonement when Aslan fools and triumphs over the evil Queen, in *Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis was simply repackaging the *Christ the Victor* theme for a twentieth century audience: Aslan counters the deep magic by recourse to an even deeper magic, an even more ancient law. The Queen takes the bait, is hooked, and then is "done for."

You could say that Girard explains a bit of how that "magic" works so the Queen's reign is overturned. By nailing Christ to the cross, the powers believed they were doing what they ordinarily did in unleashing the scapegoat mechanism, and avoiding being seen. They never suspected that in the end they would be contributing to their own annihilation.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 191.

<sup>26</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 142.

To put it another way, Girard says...

in triggering the victim mechanism against Jesus, Satan believed that he was protecting his kingdom –not realising that he was doing the very opposite. He did exactly what God had foreseen. Only Satan could have set in motion the process of his own destruction without suspecting anything was wrong.<sup>27</sup>

By depriving the scapegoat mechanism of the darkness that conceals it so it can continue to control us, the light of the cross deprives Satan of his principal power, the power to dispel his own contagion. “Once the cross completely illuminates this dark Sun,” Girard says, “Satan is no longer able to limit his capacity for destruction. Satan will destroy his kingdom, and he will destroy himself.”<sup>28</sup>

Some have criticised Girard’s reading of the cross, accusing him of saying, in effect, that once we have our problem revealed to us (viz., our sinful desire, our propensity for violence and so on), then it no longer retains any power over us.<sup>29</sup> As though realising the problem amounts to having the solution! Girard himself rejects this criticism explicitly. “We should not conclude,” he says, “that to identify the truth is enough to liberate us from the lie in which we are all imprisoned.”<sup>30</sup>

Identifying the truth is not enough. We need the power of the resurrection. Girard says we make a mistake if we see the resurrection simply as a miracle that God performs, as a transgression of what we think of as “natural laws.” In fact such a reading is really a trivialising of the resurrection. The resurrection is nothing less than “the spectacular sign of the entrance into the world of *a power far superior* to violent contagion.”<sup>31</sup> This power of the resurrection is none other than the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God that possesses us and does not let us go.

Of the various names belonging to the Holy Spirit in John’s Gospel, *Paraclete* means “lawyer or defender for the accused.” The birth of Christianity, Girard says, must be seen as the “victory of the Paraclete over his opposite, Satan” (“the accuser”). What does that

---

<sup>27</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 151.

<sup>28</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 142.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., William Placher, “Christ Takes Our Place: Rethinking Atonement,” *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 5-20.

<sup>30</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 151.

<sup>31</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 189.



victory look like in the life of a believer? Consider the change in Peter from his realisation that he too has participated in the betrayal of Jesus to his speaking to the Jerusalem crowd some days after the resurrection. Or consider Saul of Tarsus, the violent man seeking to destroy the church of God, before and after his Damascus Road experience, when Jesus told him: you are actually persecuting me. The Spirit of the resurrected Jesus, Girard says, “empowers Peter and Paul, as well as all believers after them, to understand that all imprisonment in sacred violence is done *to Christ*. Humankind is never the victim of God; God is always the victim of humankind.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Criticisms of Girard**

By way of a summary analysis, it seems to me that Girard's rendering of the death of Jesus has much to commend it, especially as we think about some of the legitimate questions that have been raised in our time about the relationship between religion and violence. By saying this, however, I do not mean to imply that Girard's theory should not be thoroughly scrutinised, or that it escapes serious criticisms.

Girard is frequently criticized, for example, for supposedly superimposing his anthropological theory of mimesis and scapegoating over the biblical text in such a manner that the text merely becomes an hermeneutical occasion to display his theory. Girard explicitly rejects this accusation and says, to the contrary, that we could never see the mimetic cycle and scapegoating mechanism except for the Bible and the stories it narrates. Only in its light has it been possible for people to discern how human cultures attempt to cover and legitimate violence with layers of mythology.

Another frequent criticism charges Girard with recommending an understanding of sacrifice and scapegoating that, although seeming to fit well with the interpersonal human drama recounted in the Gospel accounts, is at odds with the understanding of sacrifice in Pauline literature and other parts of the New Testament. Paul and, for example, the writer of Hebrews (so the critique goes) appear to hold to a fairly conventional understanding of sacrifice in which the death of Jesus propitiates God, while Girard appears to promise a hermeneutical key to understanding the death of Jesus that enables us to interpret the sacrifice of Jesus clearly across the grain

---

<sup>32</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 191.

or against the direction of these texts. Girard has given us, in other words, a critique of sacred violence that some of the biblical writers themselves erroneously share. So his theories of mimesis and scapegoating function as a kind of gnosis that enable us to grasp the deeper meaning of what is really going on in the death of Jesus, even though some of the biblical writers appear to be unaware of it. Their texts need to be liberated via Girardian analysis.

A corollary of the above critique is that Girard operates with a one-sided or reductive view of sacrifice, while sacrifice functions in many different ways in the Bible. He admittedly calls his theory an anthropological theory. Is it possible, then, to offer a specifically *theological* theory of sacrifice?<sup>33</sup> Or is such an understanding doomed from the start on account of any necessary connection between the sacred and violence?

While these criticisms are potent, Girard's theory still deserves serious consideration on account of the following reasons: To begin, Girard's rendering places the problem where it belongs. The problem the doctrine of atonement addresses is not the fact that God has a problem: he's angry at human sin and has to find some way to "vent" and balance the metaphysical scales of justice somewhere in the heavens. Again, God does not have to be reconciled or placated. We have the problem; we need to be reconciled. And this interpretation of Jesus' death at least attempts to spell out clearly how we are reconciled. Far from relying on a secret pact of satisfaction needed between Father and Son, this rendering specifies the dynamics of disordered desire that at once makes us rivals of God and functions as the fuel of rivalry and propensity for violence that issues finally in the scapegoating of the innocent.

Secondly, Girard challenges an inadequate and misleading image of God that sometimes emerges when an angry Father of the Old Testament squares off against the loving son of Mary mild in the New Testament. *The Boomer Bible* says that the traditional rendering of the Father-Son connection is pretty much a "good guy – bad guy shtick, with Christ playing the good guy, talking about mercy and redemption... and God [the Father] playing the heavy, with his great big list of mortal sins and inexpiable guilts and everlasting damnation."<sup>34</sup> Girard helps us say, "No, God is not one

---

<sup>33</sup> For such an attempt, see Eberhard Jüngel, "The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ as Sacrament and Example", in *Theological Essays II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 163-190.

<sup>34</sup> Laird, *Boomer Bible*, "Boulevardiers," 15: 2-4.

of Calvin's 'old gods' before the cross, a kind of bloodthirsty Mr Hyde who suddenly changes into a Dr Jekyll of light and love after Jesus placates his anger." The crucifixion, as Robert Jenson puts it, is what it cost the Father *to be* the loving and merciful Father.<sup>35</sup>

Thirdly, this interpretation throws into sharp relief the gravity and hypocrisy of *un-forgiveness* among the people of God. What's one of the most common criticisms you hear directed at the church by non-believers? "You people blather on and on about love and forgiveness but when push comes to shove, when it comes to getting your own way, you're all just as bloody-minded as anyone else." If Girard is right then participating in longstanding feuds, vicious rivalries and even scapegoating within the body of Christ perpetuates the very contagion Christ came to end. If anything, an understanding of his death in relation to mimetic rivalry and scapegoating should be an impetus to the church to speak against sacred violence wherever it occurs and to promote reconciliation. The risen Christ says "peace be with you" precisely to those who betrayed him and fled. This work of reconciliation may not be a popular position. I'm reminded of Jesus' words to his disciples: the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are doing a *divine service*; in other words, they will believe that God requires and is pleased with your murder.

Finally, this interpretation insists that resurrection has an essential place in understanding atonement. Many theologians have pointed out that, on the penal substitution and satisfaction model, Christ's resurrection seems to have a rather tenuous connection. Divine punishment needs to be rendered, the satisfaction of divine justice must be met, and that all hinges on the obedience of Christ even to death on the cross. But the function of the resurrection remains unclear. In this alternative model I've been describing, a form of the *Christus Victor* model, no reconciliation exists apart from resurrection. In light of that event the powers are exposed on the cross, and the Paraclete, the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus, calls us to a new community.

How then, should we respond to those who say: "Why would we want to have anything to do with this so-called God of love you proclaim? Doesn't the death of Jesus enshrine violence right at the heart of the Christian faith?" If we follow Girard's take on the Gospel, we can say: "Of course! But the Gospel reveals the problem

---

<sup>35</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 191.

—the perverted desire, the rivalry, the scapegoating— to be ours, not God's. We should not, like the boys on *South Park*, look at the murder of the innocent Jesus and exclaim to God: "You killed Jesus!" Rather, the finger of blame should point where it belongs; we should confess, "We killed Jesus!" The good news is that the curse, the contagion, has been exposed and broken for us on his cross, and through God's Holy Spirit we are reconciled, called and empowered to live as a new people.