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René Girard and Mimetic Theory

Paul Gifford

René Girard is not a theologian; he is best described as fundamental anthropologist and culture theorist. His versatile system of hermeneutical and heuristic thinking is known to its author as 'the Mimetic Theory'.

Girardian 'mimesis' denotes, in a myriad of particular forms, a structure of *reciprocal imitation*, actual or potential ('I hold out my hand, you hold out yours'; 'do unto others as you would have them do to you'; 'Thy Kingdom come […]/ On earth as it is in Heaven').

Human mimesis, only recently understood in its neurological basis, is increasingly recognized as enabling what social scientists call 'group intelligence'. Its structures and processes have deep and ancient roots in pre-human nature, something of interest to the evolutionary sciences; while the New Testament gives mimetic processes pride of place in exploring the nature of discipleship and in understanding spiritual transformation and growth. It also recognizes an ultimate form of loving mimesis operating in the heart of the trinitarian God.

From his own private conversion and return to Catholic faith in 1959, the most fundamental vocation of his theory, in Girard's own eyes, was the elucidation of the deepest and darkest places of the collective religious psyche. His 'triple audacity' consists in applying the perspectives and tools of Mimetic Theory to elucidating three of the most central of human enigmas: the origins of religion; the beginnings of culture; and the process of hominization itself. He sees humanity as 'born out of the religious dimension of things'; *containing* (in both senses: 'limiting', but also 'retaining within itself') its own temptation to self-destructive violence through the self-organizing mechanism of emissary victimage ('scapegoating'), a mechanism subsequently ritualized as 'sacrifice'.

Mimetic theory offers a logic or 'grammar' of sacred violence from which 'primitive' (archaic-sacral, first-form) religion is seen to emerge; and which, unknown to its actors, still conditions the most diverse and far-flung phenomena of culture and society; even – perhaps especially – in modern, radically secularized times.

Mimetic theory as practised by René Girard comes to assume theology as its native complement: both in elucidating the singularity and world-changing significance of Judaeo-Christian revelation as recorded in the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian gospels; and in renewing the great theological drama of *salvation*, which it shows transcending and transforming Darwinian survival. This is most strikingly the case in the Passion of Christ,

in which is *re-enacted transformatively* the archetypical proto-drama of Girardian ‘founding murder’.

Keywords: Culture, Anthropology, Sacred violence, Founding murder, Origins of religion, Scriptural revelation, Myth, Apocalypse, Darwin and theology, Atonement theory, Mimetism

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1 An anthropologist among theologians

1.1 Context of recognition

Girard came to the notice of theologians after his major work of synthesis *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (published in French in 1978; translated into English in 1987). Their attention was caught, in sharp admiration and indignant objection, by the title quotation borrowed from Psalm 78, via Matthew's gospel (13:35). This appeared to herald an ambitious – but contestable – attempt to extend to the Hebrew Bible, and thence to the New Testament, the bold and striking theory of the origins of culture and religion first explored in Girard's 1972 book, *Violence and the Sacred*.

Breaking away from his training as an archivist and medieval historian in wartime Paris, Girard had developed the first statement of his Mimetic Theory after studying a handful of major novelists of European literary tradition (Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, Dostoyevsky). These literary masters, better than any theory, illustrated hitherto unrecognized and distinctly dynamic patterns of interwoven desire, imitation and rivalry; but also, more secretly, the dynamics of 'novelistic' (or more generally, of artistic) representation. Further transgressing the boundaries of disciplinary specialism, Girard pursued these insights into the domain of Greek tragedy, and thence into the field of prehistoric ritual practice and world mythologies. Finally, he pushed deep into the domains of ethnology and fundamental anthropology. All these transdisciplinary forays were intensively and rigorously researched, albeit in autodidactic mode, without prior disciplinary training.

Who could have conceived this audaciously trans-disciplinary enterprise? Who was René Girard? In 1966, Girard co-organized at Johns Hopkins University an international symposium under the title 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man' (Goldmann, Paul de Man, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan all attended – see EC: 31–32). His own developing theory, it transpired, was already diverging markedly from the invited luminaries of 'French Theory' – with their self-referentiality, their linguistics-inspired formalism, their enclosure of all things cultural within the knowing Mind – the emergence of which Girard sought to decipher generatively, in its real and actual belonging to nature and culture, world and time. 'Mimetic desire is a realist theory which shows why human beings are incapable of realism' (VMR: 207).

Largely unknown also was the 'conversion' which triggered his return to the Catholic faith and an obedience lost in adolescence. Few of Girard's first readers knew of this event, which was contemporary with the first formulation of his mimetic theory. In his first published work of 1961, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, exegesis of the 'positive' form of mimetic desire is already referred, discreetly, to the *Imitatio Christi* (the imitation of Christ). Girard declares his conversion to have been a particular outworking in himself of the same

process whereby the ‘Romantic lie’ of autonomous desire, deemed capable of organizing its own world, is repudiated retroactively and repents, opening up the desiring authorial subject to a higher wisdom, indeed to divine grace, mediated through the creative ascesis of fictional auto-representation (see GR: 283–288). ‘It is not because I am Christian that I think as I do; it is because of my research that I became a Christian [...] Conversion is a form of intelligence, of understanding’ (EC: 44–45; see also WTB: 129–132).

1.2 Early reception

Despite the mutually supportive compatibility he always intuited – but grasped and proclaimed only progressively, as his thought developed – between Mimetic Theory and Christian faith, Girard always insists that his theory is a scientific construct, independently valid; ‘mine is a search for the anthropology of the Cross, which turns out to rehabilitate orthodox theology’ (GR: 288).

Inevitably, ambiguities were generated by this paradox in process. They compounded the challenges of reception already adumbrated: cultural unfamiliarity, transgression of disciplinary frontiers, a seemingly towering – but perhaps imperialistic – intellectual ambition. For many English-speaking theologians, the list of preliminary ‘problems with Girard’ was based on atavistic mistrust of overarching theories; but also due to significant elements of unease in coping with the style and human-sciences-rootedness of post-structuralist thinking generally. These problems were exacerbated in *Things Hidden* by the effects of tardy, and sometimes inaccurate or clumsy, translation. Such preliminary challenges could be disqualifying. Girard’s first readers were often stunned, intimidated, even scandalized, by a theory that offers – seemingly, with incredible self-confidence – to clarify decisively, at a stroke, no less than three immemorially standing enigmas of human origins: the origin of natural religion; the constitution of culturally ordered societies; and the major mystery of hominization itself.

His earlier work, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), also suggested to many that Girard was committed to ‘using’ the scriptures of Revelation in support of a reductionist general theory of religion, seeking to ‘fit in’ Judaeo-Christian singularity (this was in fact the reverse of his actual intention and practice).

John Milbank thus saw Girard’s account of ritual, particularly of ‘sacrifice’, as recapitulating the subversive emergence of the discipline itself of social science-based anthropology. Situated exclusively in this line of descent, Girard represents for Milbank a latter-day avatar of Julius Wellhausen, William Robertson Smith, Auguste Comte, Sir James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert; hence, a long prefigured threat to the singularity and the *raison d’etre* of Christian theology itself. The champion of ‘radical orthodoxy’ brings to bear on Girard a pre-rehearsed and systematic suspicion. Sometimes Milbank’s rapid-fire critique is fed by exuberant erudition invoking the descriptive ethnology

of sacrifice (this approach tends to obscure the novelty of the Girardian procedure as a quasi-algebraic 'resolution' of the data, tending towards an underlying *logic of genesis*). Sometimes, echoing earlier anti-Girardian reviews and essays of the 1970s and 1980s, his critique is more strategic, and turns around perceptions of 'premature universalism', 'negativity' and 'gnosticism' (many biblical scholars and anthropologists have, following Milbank, contested at least some of Girard's empirical illustrations and rejected the universalizing scope of his theory). Milbank argues that 'there is a temptation to be resisted, namely sacrificially to concede to science a right to explain, in order to receive back from science "a demonstration of Christicity"' (1996: 51). In energetically resisting temptation, this early theological response barely registers Girard's thoroughly game-changing hermeneutical perspective at all; it includes only one solitary aside of appreciative tenor, acknowledging 'much [...] in [Girardian] Christology that is profound and correct' (1996: 51).

Sarah Coakley, from the outset of her inaugural lecture (2009) for the Norris Hulse Chair at Cambridge, also denounces Girard as a fashionable French Freudian who has seemingly never encountered the doctrine of man made 'in the image of God'. This leads him, she feels, to indulge in 'ontological negativity', misrepresenting human desire, and, mesmerized by pagan violence and its darker subtexts, to misconstrue entirely the Christian notion of 'sacrifice'. In her Gifford lectures of 2012, she sees Girard additionally as a counter-model of how Darwin should be accommodated by Christian theology (Coakley 2012; see discussion by King 2016). Coakley's spirited double critique resonates with forms of suspicion which undoubtedly fed widespread ongoing resistance to Girard among English-speaking theologians. Understanding such objections without sharing them, a leading theologian allied to Girard names these succinctly: 'monism of violence, the reduction of the religious dimension to an unveiling, lack of a theology of creation, the goodness of creation. Etc' (Schwager, RG-RS: 160).

A second script of reception was however being written as early as 1980 (see Balthasar 1980). The influential Swiss Jesuit, Hans Urs von Balthasar, surveyor of 'true' and 'false' gnosis in modern thought, discerned, in his own terms of 'theo-drama', the immense relevance of mimetic theory. 'Girard is surely the most dramatic project to be undertaken today in the field of soteriology and in theology generally' (Balthasar 1994: 299). 'Girard's valid insight' ['die Wahrheit Girards'], he wrote to his biographer in 1981, could be integrated into his own project for a theology of the Cross (cit. Kaplan 2016: 3). Balthasar too, however, has a serious reservation regarding Girard, arguing that the Christian anthropologist, in this work of first synthesis, 'fails to offer an account of the Passion that properly discerns the place of divine initiative' (Balthasar 1994: 313).

Rowan Williams gave Girard's singular hidden things their most attentive welcome (Williams 2007). He reads with precision: rivalry is the obverse of cooperative imitation;

ritual realizes the paradoxical function of transforming into social collaboration the conflictual disintegration of the community; sacrifice effects a double transference, first reviling, then sacralizing, the sacrificial victim. It points to a 'founding murder' as the origin of social unity and ultimately, of centralized social power; while myth engages a dreamlike elision, obscuring and reworking the memory of the real-life event. The relevance of this diagnosis of human psycho-social functioning is seen as obvious in a time of expanded global imitations and nuclear rivalry; cogent again for understanding and renegotiating the violence that is recognized in the foundational story of Christianity; and is recurrently resurgent also in the history of the church.

Williams deftly negotiates the problematic interface of anthropology and theology; 'nothing in his account seems to prohibit an analysis of Christian ritual—the mass in particular, of course—as itself a demystifying mystery, an anti-sacrificial sacrifice' (Williams 2007: 179). Yet Girard is oddly silent, suggests Williams, about the history of eucharistic doctrine, 'which could provide some far-reaching confirmations of his thesis' (2007: 179; see Sacrifice and the Eucharist). 'These are *questions of theology*, in one sense I should say that they require a consideration of *resurrection* such as Girard does not offer' (2007: 179; original emphasis). The time of hospitable, non-rivalrous engagement, consciously playing out at the interface of anthropology and theology, had arrived.

1.3 Crisis and clarification

In the turbulent aftermath of *Things Hidden*, Girard was preparing to answer an invitation from the French Catholic bishops to discuss his 'anti-sacrificial' reading of the New Testament and of Christian emergence, in particular his perceived denigration of the epistle to the Hebrews. 'Then there were voices going in the other direction' (Gifford 2020: 137); the bishops thought better of it and stood down the meeting. Girard has since acknowledged a direct responsibility of his own in this near-rebuke by the magisterium of his church (BE: 35). He admits being bedazzled by his own searchlight, recognized in retrospect as sheltering certain modernist and anti-Christian preventions. The word sacrifice – he will later point out – is used to designate archaic rituals and altruistic self-giving, two diametrically opposed things (see also WTB: 3–4; Adams 1993: 28–29).

The main voice speaking *for* him was that of Fr. Raymund Schwager SJ, Professor of Dogmatic and Ecumenical Theology at Innsbruck University (on the 'Innsbruck Connection', see Kirwan 2009: 33–36). Schwager's own parallel work on 'divine' violence and collective scapegoating in the Bible quickly made him Girard's declared chief theological interlocutor; it linked him also to Schwager's fellow Jesuit, Balthasar. The latter's biographer tells us that Girard studied very carefully the Swiss theologian's reactions in *Theodrama IV*. He offers a subtle and perceptive account of their gently transformative imprint (see Mongrain 2012: 94–100). A retrospective self-examination of

2001 by Girard himself gives us the inside track on the same process of crisis and change, thereby offering a luminous statement of his distilled core thinking (see ‘Mimetic Theory and Theology’ OSC: 33–45).

The publication of the Schwager-Girard correspondence (1974–1991) has recently confirmed the central role of this friendship of ‘intellectual and spiritual communion’ (RG-RS: 78) in retuning the delicate paradox of faith-led science, and so easing the reception of Mimetic Theory into the Christian mainstream (RG-RS; see also Serres 2009: 15–29).

His mid-career interaction with theologians, encountered personally and in the works of theology he now read and studied, elicited from Girard a series of reviews and revisions, deepening, refining, and extending his first synthesis. These are spelled out, in somewhat dispersed order, in the second phase of his writings centred on the Judaeo-Christian scriptures: *The Scapegoat*; *Job, Victim of his People*; *Evolution and Conversion*; *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*; his short work on sacrifice in the Hindu Vedanta scriptures (*Le Sacrifice*); his major application of Mimetic Theory to Shakespeare (*Shakespeare. A Theatre of Envy*); and his final book on warfare, apocalypse and the modern world, *Battling to the End*.

The mature Girard is best identified from a major interview of 1992 with Rachel Adams (see: Adams 1993). Before the American Academy of Religion, Girard makes an assured, vigorous and elegant response to all early criticisms of any substance. He defends his project as a working hypothesis that, increasingly, *works* (cf. EC: 56–68). As he became a celebrated public intellectual (in the US and in Continental Europe), his developing thought was, indeed, expressed mainly in collaborative dialogues: interviews, symposia, articles, contributions, and co-authored works. This ‘dialogism’ (already clear in TH) stood in stark contrast to the domineering monologues often associated with ‘French Theory’. Mimetic Theory required collaborative and diversified development; its enormous potential could not be left in the hands of any one sovereign path finder.

Fullest personal recognition came with his election in 2005 to the thirty-seventh Chair of the *Académie française*, previously (at one remove) held by Cardinal Jean Daniélou (one of the key figures of Vatican II). In his reception speech, leading French philosopher Michel Serres described Girard as author of ‘the most fruitful hypothesis of the century’ (TP: 92); as true prophet of a tragic era of human violence; as champion of the holy against the sacred; and as ‘a new Darwin of culture’ (TP: 88; and see Serres 2009: 13). This latter salute is preferentially remembered by Girardians in a later formulation, of unknown origin, but commonly attributed to Serres, as ‘the Darwin of the human sciences’. Girard is thereby envisioned as author of a post-Darwinian theory capable in principle of embracing all the human sciences, in much the same way as Darwin’s theory today conceptually frames all the life-sciences. The new Darwin himself fought distinctly shy of

such prophecies of his mega-eminence; a reticence which, though it does not necessarily invalidate the prophecy, does refer it to the larger verdict of history.

2 Elements of Mimetic Theory

2.1 Mimesis: meanings and dimensions

Introductions in English to the Mimetic Theory (and to mimetic theory in general) are not difficult to find. Most helpful to theologians are primers by Kirwan (2004), Fleming (2004), Palaver (2013), and Gifford (2020). Additionally, the *Girard Reader* (GR 1996) is invaluable. More advanced students should consult the *Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion* (PH 2017). All students of his work will wish to follow the ongoing critical series devoted to Girard's Mimetic Theory, and to mimetic theory generally, undertaken in the US by Michigan State University Press; and, more recently in the UK, by Bloomsbury Press; both offering precious assistance in navigating the maze of multidisciplinary applications.

Mimesis (Greek: imitation) is largely depreciated in Western tradition for its frequent identification (since Aristotle) with mimicry or parody. 'Imitation' then connotes derived behaviour, second-hand or second-rate invention (cf. 'mere imitation'). Girard's deliberate recourse to the unfamiliar Greek word highlights a far-reaching rediscovery. The concept is renewed by the disclosure of its relational context; hence its potential for reciprocity ('I hold out my hand, you hold out yours'). 'Mimesis', in this newly generalizing and foundational sense, is what makes personal relations work and societies cohere; it describes a deep-laid propensity for conscious and, especially, *pre-conscious* attunement. It is the reality that founds and enables everything that social scientists (and animal behaviourists) call 'group intelligence'.

In this first, elementary, sense, imitation informs everything we do. We communicate messages and meanings ('Do you *copy* that, Red Leader'?). We learn by *reproducing* or *replicating* interiorized models of syntax, norms of behaviour, laws of nature, moral and spiritual patterns. We *follow* models of desire proposed by advertising or by the fashion industry. We invest according to *market trends* ('New York sneezes and London catches cold').

Girardian mimesis engages philosophers and theologians because it runs like a signature pattern through animal nature, before blossoming within the mind-made field of human culture and society. The octopus enacts it, assuming the camouflage of shapes and colours which make it indistinguishable from the sea floor to which it subsides; likewise the mysteriously gyrating harmony of great flights of birds at sunset; or the flickering togetherness of shoals of fish, manœuvring instinctively to confuse predators.

It is now known that mimesis is hardwired into humans biologically by the development of ‘mirror neurons’ in the frontal cortex (see Garrels 2011; PH: 431–438). Studies in infant psychology have shown how this faculty is entirely central to human development (Meltzoff 1988: 319–331). The internet reproduces many of the ‘viral’ and ‘copycat’ features associated with mimesis in humans; it *reproduces*, that is – and it *turbocharges* technologically – the innate human (psycho-social) ‘internet’ of reciprocal other-awareness and connectivity. The human potential itself for ‘mimeticism’ is replicated in machines endowed with something approaching intelligent desire (see Cowdell 2021).

An ambitious two-volume study, *Perspectives on Imitation* (2005), by empirical scientists, Hurley and Chater, validates all these founding intuitions (but barely referencing or quoting Girard). It traces the extension of the concept of imitation ‘from neuro-science to social science’. In a foreseeable future, an equally voluminous study may come to track the progress of mimesis ‘from social science to theology’. Human spiritual development engages mimesis even more centrally and positively. Humans are said to be ‘made in the image of God’; discipleship for Christians (which admits related forms in other faiths) is an ‘imitation’ of Christ; and becoming like God means entering the reciprocal exchange of mutually regenerative Love, primordially and ultimately illustrated in the life of the Trinity. This still-to-be-written study will undoubtedly reference Girard; and will, in doing so, come to terms with the unsuspected potential and the inevitable ambiguities at the heart of all human thinking.

To borrow an expression from the French poet Paul Claudel, mimetic theory embraces in principle and by vocation, ‘the immense octave of Creation’ (1966: 142).

2.2 ‘Mimeticism’: the dynamics of rivalrous desire

Girard’s initial and best-known development of the idea is however more specifically human, and more apparently negative. It begins with *mimetic desire*. Always-already embedded in some social desire-field, human beings cannot but interiorize (‘imitate’) and reproduce (‘copy’) the desires of fellow humans. This makes the latter our *models* in desire; which in turn creates empathetic, collaborative, and morally positive virtualities (*‘good’ mimesis*). This potential tends to prevail where the model is ‘external’ to our personal or social space. But, equally and with increasing likelihood as my [or ‘our’] sphere of existence and yours [or ‘theirs’] overlap and interpenetrate, another, more negative, mode of mimesis emerges and predominates. My *model* in desire is also now the *obstacle* to the realization or fulfilment of that same desire: two hands reach out, in the same space, for the same desired objects or goods (you are for me, and soon reciprocally so, a *model-obstacle*).

This is *‘bad’ mimesis*. It reprises and complexifies the Augustinian idea of ‘concupiscence’; Girard here sees mimesis as locked into a negative and self-sacralizing *dynamic of rivalry*,

something which the biblical myth of temptation and fall acknowledges, albeit obliquely (see section 4.2). For these conflictually knotted figures of desire, Girard uses the terms; *'acquisitive'*, *'appropriative'*, or *'conflictual'* mimesis (often, but not always, designated generically by the term *mimeticism*); and – obedient to the implicit suggestions of Genesis – he speaks of this type as giving rise to *'false'* or *'deviated' transcendence*. In its final section, *Things Hidden* follows an entire psychopathology of 'mad stuff' that results when our deepest (metaphysical) desire becomes an ontological sickness.

Girard will ultimately refer the occasions of offence or provocation thus set up to the gospel notion of the *'stumbling block'* (Greek: *skandalon*, *skandalizein*). Thus Peter, rebuking Jesus for his self-sacrificial vision of Messiahship, provokes in turn the rebuke: 'Get thee behind me, Satan' (Mark 8:33). The disciple has discovered his model as obstacle; in turn, this rivalry of desire and design is denounced as *the ultimate stumbling block* by his Master (see EC: 215–216, 223–224; PH: 485–492).

Mimetic rivalry leads to conflict; which in turn generates *violence*. Girard shows how conflicting desires, if and as the scandal of the model-obstacle is assumed in reciprocity, tend to intensify and draw in others; there is an incremental dynamism, a charge of contagious fascination, which is seen to play out in the process of *sacralization* (i.e. the collective pyscho-social generation of 'the sacred'). We recognize in this form of reciprocity the 'tit-for-tat' of mimetic retaliation; hence also the point and pertinence of the law of retribution *only at par* (*lex talionis*); and the novelty of the Beatitudes, set to undo just this dynamism of mutual contagion, provocation, and negative sacralization ('demonizing', as we still say, the adversary). Failing which, violence will be let loose in all its mythico-sacral potency, in a self-organizing *crescendo towards paroxysm* (*'runaway dynamic'*).

The limited stake represented by the object of desire yields in this process to something more infinitist and metaphyiscally gaping. Humans exact revenge, destroy and kill, as animals do not: beyond need, with the *self-sacralizing infinitism of desire*, now *covered* (i.e. both vindicated and concealed) by the shining justification of *sacred cause*. The secret spring of this turbocharged dynamic of human antagonism is said by Girard to be pure and ultimate self-assertion: *'metaphysical desire'* (to be disentangled from the 'ontological negativity' initially mis-ascribed by some theologians to Girard himself). The anthropologist of mimesis refers always to the psycho-social origins of the human world: within these parameters, he tends to treat the violent virtualities of human desire as analogous to *dark matter* in the physical cosmos; or else, when *transposed into theological perspective and language*, as an anthropological metonymy for 'original sin' (see PH: 185–191).

2.3 Related concepts: the sacred, the scapegoat, sacrifice, misrecognition, myth, apocalypse

The notion of mimetic desire relates to other key concepts. These are best studied in their deployment; but the most hard-working, complex and encompassing concepts among them are listed here to facilitate earlier recognition and ready understanding. They include: the '*mimetic crisis*'; the '*scapegoat*' ('emissary victim'); the '*victimage mechanism*' (so-called to express a pre-conscious, pre-representational automatism); the '*founding murder*'; and the '*double transference*' (linked to the '*double bind*' – see section 6.4).

The 'sacred' is the *mysterium tremendum* ('awesome mystery') generated by the singular psycho-social alchemy of collective scapegoat murder, with its sense of transcendence, vectored by a collective unanimity; its bonding-and-binding effects; and its potent reversal of extreme peril into a mysterious collective quasi-salvation. It provides the elementary basis of first-form religion (termed 'archaic-sacral', 'primitive', or 'natural'): *vox populi, vox dei* ('the voice of the people is the voice of the god') (see Gifford 2020: 1–20; PH: 257–266; Palaver 2020).

'*Sacrifice*', in its original and primitive form, is the ritual repetition of scapegoat murder, and the cult of its potent but undeciphered psycho-social alchemy. Hence the pattern of *eternal recurrence* imprinted deep into ancient mythologies of origin. That pattern supposes the self-comforting *misrecognition* (French: *méconnaissance*) by the community of its own action and role in the events narrated.

'*Myth*', in Girard, is the collective identity story rewritten in dreamlike (edited, censored, rearranged) remembrance. It is, semi-transparently, a disguised and involuntary confession of mimetic violence.

'*Apocalypse*', anthropologically examined, is both the perilous fascination of terminal paroxysm; and the dream of deliverance sought against it, in an ultimately unveiled awakening. In the Gospels, this anthropocentric sense encounters the distinctly different idea of a self-communication and auto-unveiling of God (see PH: 363–369, 383–388, 403–410).

These conceptual glimpses suggest in merest outline the possibility of a 'grand narrative' linking up Girard's 'three audacities'. While seeking to consolidate and develop his theory, Girard nevertheless always mistrusted undue or premature systematicity. He is no Hegelian system-builder (see Dumouchel 2017: 463–464). Rather, he excels as a uniquely wide-ranging polymath specializing in the very French genre of the *explication de texte* (textual commentary, unfolding meaning and elucidating the meaning-making process as a function of artistic form).

The major axis of Girard's own mimetic theorizing (as distinct from that of his immensely diverse following) is established by the defining reciprocity between his notion of founding murder and his anthropology of the Cross.

3 ‘Founding murder’: the generative logic of religion and culture

The Girardian scenario of origins is a structuralist ‘resolution’ of evidence derived from world mythologies and religions. Girard is re-reading, in sharply critical hermeneutical debate with Nietzsche and Freud, the primary scientific evidence established by the anthropology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With *Things Hidden*, the Darwinian dimension of his analysis moves to the fore (see PH: 11–19).

3.1 Decipherment

Girard reflects that through all great works of religious anthropology between 1850 and the First World War there runs a popular cliché regarding the many religions of mankind: all of them are ‘more or less alike’ (GR: 248–249). Nietzsche destabilizes this banal, positivistic insight. Dionysus versus the Crucified is ‘a wager that cannot be sustained without some form of the sacred, and it has to be that violent sacred which Nietzsche calls Dionysus’ (GR: 254). Cross questioned, Nietzsche is seen to let slip the secret of his own sacral counter-construct; and to do so precisely in the ultimate and iconic declaration of modern atheism:

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? (*The Gay Science*, aphorism 125; cited in GR: 257; see also GR: 243–261; EC: 220–221; PH: 158–168)

Freud too, just a few years after the publication of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, thought he had discovered that all the religious rituals of mankind are rooted in the collective murder of some real victim whom men call God. The expression itself, ‘founding murder’, is taken over by Girard from Freud, who provided in *Totem and Taboo* the first sketch of a scientific myth of human beginnings. This hypothesized scenario, representing the murder of the imagined father of Darwin’s ‘primitive horde’, is presented as *the* founding event (i.e. the *single and unique* occurrence) at the origin of the supposed earliest proto-community.

Freud’s psychology, though co-resonant with something real, remains cognitively impotent. Girard retains from it only the paradoxical ambiguity of sacrifice: an act of violence that is transgressive and criminal, but also purifying and legitimate. Freud allowed him to see sacrifice as a commemoration; and put him on the track of a single solution bringing together the origin of the gods and the origin of human societies.

3.2 The Girardian scenario

Reworking Freud's 'originary scene', Girard discovers that founding murder is the *art of 'violence contained'*; contained, that is, by a selective, exemplary and therapeutic *dose of violence* (in much the same way as, in medicine, antidotes are derived, pharmacologically speaking, from poisons). At the threshold of 'hominization' (i.e. the point of evolution where the species *homo sapiens* becomes fully formed biologically and established in that form), a characteristic scenario must regularly have been played out, no doubt in a myriad variations, developing over tens of thousands (even perhaps hundreds of thousands) of years (the latest scientific timelines indicate c. 70,000–30,000 BCE as the period of the decisive emergence of language, ritual and culture; while homo sapiens is usually seen to be biologically constituted from c. 200,000 BCE). The community undergoes a paroxysm of violence (the 'mimetic crisis'); this is defused *in extremis* by a self-organizing mechanism (the 'victimage mechanism') which inaugurated, historically speaking, and still (residually, secretly) undergirds all social life, and everything we call 'culture'. It constitutes, in natural process, the emergence of culturally active, self-fashioning humanity.

Where the adversaries within a conflicted social group or community originally wanted diverse things – to appropriate the same woman, to seize food or territory or power, to exact retributive justice, etc. – they end up polarized, quite irrationally, upon a single adversary, arbitrarily designated to the common fury by some rage-modelling leader. The collective blood-rage is, at this point, deflected outwards and discharged against a single, arbitrarily chosen – and consequently quite 'innocent' – victim. The crisis is, seemingly, *resolved* by a scapegoat murder. The scapegoat acts *de facto* as a sort of lightning conductor and/or as a disjunctor switch, breaking the circuit and preventing the perilous electricity of rivalrous desire from consuming the human house. Killing the victim also sets up the first equation of collective identity-bonding: a very disturbing equation, albeit strangely familiar to us from the long echoes of resonance it finds in all periods and places of human history. *All are one, against and by virtue of, the rejected, demonized, scapegoated, adversarial Other.*

Then something quite remarkable happens. Girard asks us to imagine the victim lying inert before the hushed group of hominids or primitive men. They appear simultaneously and contradictorily as (1) the *guilty origin of the crisis* – they must have been guilty or we would not have killed them, nor would we have peace through their death; and (2) as the *beneficent provider* of the miracle of renewed peace and social harmony.

This moment of conflicting persuasions and surpassing awe is the beginning of a *process of sacralization* (see section 2.3); the dead victim will come to be seen as the potent bearer of a power of life and death, and then as the power capable of reversing the current of life-energies from negative to positive: such terrible Wrath, such amazing Beneficence! Here is a *new type of collective attention*, centred on the Victim, henceforth become the

generative focus of a new process of ‘transcendental’ signification; that is, of properly human meaning-making (TH: 99–104).

The first perception will suggest in retrospect, as the Event continues to be deciphered collectively, that the sacrificial victim must surely have willed their own death; the second, once the corpse has been disposed of, will come to suggest that this exceptional and departed Visitor must indeed have been a divinity in disguise.

The collective or crowd-generated ‘sacred’, in other words, issues from *our own* violence misrepresented, misinterpreted, mythically hypostasized (TH: 42–43). ‘Myth’ itself, considered in its generating point of origin, is an unconsciously falsified account of the victimary process, tending to conceal the real guilt of the sacrificers; while in fact transferring blame, implicitly and illegitimately, to the victim; and then convincing the community that this episode of crisis was a blessing in disguise, hence also a legitimate sacred action brought about by the god himself (TH: 148).

There is, in short, a ‘double transference’ processing any and all violence experienced in common: a blame-transfer followed by a self-administered dose of ritual-symbolic therapy, thanks to which the Victim becomes the *attributed divine Origin of all the prohibitions and rituals instituted to prevent a recurrence of the same social crisis*.

3.3 Sacrifice: founding ritual, ritual foundation

> The word ‘sacrifice’ – *sacri-fice* – literally means making sacred, producing the sacred. What sacrifices the victim is the blow delivered by the sacrificer, the violence that kills this victim, annihilating it and placing it above everything else by making it in some sense immortal. (TH: 226)

The original spontaneous murder is already implicitly a sacrifice: the victim is, obscurely but in fact, done to death *that the community may not perish*. But it is not yet a sacrifice in the classic sense consecrated by organized religions: an act of commemorative communion, assembling men around the victim-god. It is not yet a concerted and foundational act of ritual murder (see Sacrifice and the Old Testament).

The modern sciences of field-anthropology and ethnology have discovered (with ever-increasing undeniability) that human blood sacrifice features prominently in the prehistory and early civilizational history of many diverse cultures and peoples: from the Aztecs and the Mayans to the Celts, from the Phoenicians to the tribes and religious communities of Africa, India, and China (see e.g. PH: 61–68). It is also widely acknowledged that ‘sacrifice’ – in a thousand arborescent varieties and developing forms – was the most original and constitutive practice of all the world’s religions (the objection that Girard does not deal with *all extant forms of sacrifice* is certainly correct; but it is rarely, save perhaps in respect of the phylum ‘offerings’ [see Smart 1980: 176], as weighty as objectors assume. Girard

claims to be giving us not a *descriptive phenomenology* – still less an *exhaustive typology* of sacrifice – but a *logic of genesis*. As a disciple of Darwin, he is ever-conscious that 'cultural' forms develop with much the same exuberant diversity as 'natural' life forms; yet this diversity, though not exhaustively catalogued by Darwin, is not seen to invalidate the generative logic of 'natural selection').

The appropriate question then is: what, *generatively speaking*, and *in principle*, is 'sacrifice' and how is it foundational?

It is, says Girard, at the heart of the common life, a re-enactment or replay of the originally spontaneous and unreflecting primal murder. The ritual slaughter of a *surrogate* victim consecrates this memory *totemically*; it repeats the salvational spell and makes it binding, at the lowest possible economic cost to the community. This single victim will *stand in* for the community, will become its *emissary and mediator*: calling down the god(s), taking the 'hit', and procuring a renewed divine blessing on the community. Thus, it replicates as exactly as possible the original scapegoat murder, driven by the *arrière-pensée* ('undeclared or unconscious intention') of recreating its cathartic, reconciling, identity-bonding outcome.

The victim is chosen, often from a purpose-specific reserve (as in the known case of the Aztecs), from among the socially marginalised, the weak or the vulnerable, e.g. children, the sick, the handicapped, prisoners of war). This rite is triggered by the incipient signs of returning mimetic crisis; these are actually laid out – prepared and, indeed, *solicited* – by the institution of 'carnaval', which significantly frames the sacrifice. The sacrificial climax of the festival exorcises and resolves (TH: 23–30) once more this staged renascence of violent contagion and conflict within the social group; but this time *ritually* – which is to say, *repeatably*.

The rite's collective, strongly participatory, and essentially theatrical character, comes over time to be ceremonially regulated and aesthetically enhanced, delivering a no doubt spellbinding potency of emotional charge. We have a good idea of this from the much later homologies of theme and structure it finds in Greek tragedy (see PH: 151–158). Such inventions enact the same underlying logic of the *violent control of violence by symbolic and ritual means*; as, in rationalized forms and contexts, they still do today.

3.4 'The invisibility of the founding murder'

That functional logic remains 'underlying' because the true nature of the forces in play is hidden from the operating subjects. Girard speaks powerfully, here in dialogue with the alternative 'formalist' theory of myth which he finds and rejects in Lévi-Strauss, of 'the invisibility of the founding murder' (TH: 105–120; see also PH: 85–93).

Violence is, visibly, contained, but at an invisible cost. The act of founding murder ritually re-enacted cuts short the overt ascendency of violence within the community; yet, at the same time, the ritual secretly interiorizes violence itself within the group. Its example, its practice, its auto-justifications are diffused throughout the whole sphere of the group's systems, works and ways; the more effectively so, since that founding act is articulated and officialized in the form of a tribal mythology which covers up 'our' own violent role in the victimary-sacrificial process; to say nothing of the violence generating the mimetic crisis itself.

Sacred violence thus becomes 'naturalized'. As humans we are in it and of it before we know anything about it. 'We' will not, of our own seeing, notice as such any victims 'we' make. This is what all sacred causes – 'holy' crusades, pogroms, authoritarian repressions, self-sacralizing terrorist campaigns, or, more simply, the practice of slavery throughout history – unendingly suggest. Humankind is secretly *confined and defined* by the violence which we humans have, sacrificially, *contained*.

3.5 The genesis of culture and social order

At that price, the victimary mechanism becomes an ever more fruitfully generative principle, building up culturally and institutionally the communities organized around it. Archaic-sacral religious cults developing from the victimage mechanism allow us, indeed, to decipher the 'software' programming of the psychic space we collectively inhabit – to reconstruct, that is, the generative logic at work in the world-changing emergence and advent of human 'culture' (see EC: 64–74).

The cryptic automatism of the victimary ritual provides the opportunity, the focus, and the trigger required for the further development of the principal vectors of culture: symbolicity and language, first of all (see section 6.3); then the earliest prohibitions; leading over time, to the *moral codes, laws, and institutions* which enabled societies to function by controlling their objects of desire, and therefore also the risk of conflictual mimesis; then the development of more complex *sacrificial rites and structures*, guaranteeing a binding cohesion internally, but also enabling social hierarchy and extending political control; operative also externally, in managing collective Other-relations, both for the avoidance of risk, for the keeping of the peace and the acquisition of commercial advantage (see PH: 53–59). Some inventions, like prohibitions (interdicts, taboos) develop a first logic present in the victimage mechanism, the need to limit, prevent and avoid violent conflict (i.e. 'bad mimesis'). Others, like ritual sacrifice, stem from the second, equally potent, logic present within it: that of developing a transfiguring benefit or blessing of peace, unity, and collaboration (i.e. 'good mimesis').

Finally, expressing both logics, are the *mythical stories* which are bonding in an identitarian sense. These are often stories of real historical foundation, albeit falsified in dreamlike

unknowing, so as to edit out the truth of what is in fact a foundational act of *murder*. Thus, the myth of Romulus and his brother Remus is the story of the fratricide which founded Rome, albeit rewritten to edit out all blame attached to the Founder of the City (TH: 146). Similar foundation stories are strikingly prevalent throughout world's religious mythologies. Girard shows, with an impressive range of examples taken from different cultures and parts of the world, that these mythical identity narratives are unfailingly told in a way which *edits out*, or *covers up*, with a sort of artless artfulness, 'our' own participation in 'founding murder' (TH: 104–125; S: 525–599). He also shows how the disguised process of editing out can become readable again if we refer to the 'persecution narrative', a form of writing intermediate between myth and history, as practised in medieval anti-Semitic writings (S: 1–11). The intermediate case then opens up the more overwritten and 'buried' cases of scapegoating decipherable in Aztec and Greek mythology.

Our species thus survives *the crisis of its own becoming human* thanks to an organizing principle of symbolico-ritual sacrifice; while, at the same time, protecting its own self-image and safeguarding its energies of self-belief, enterprise, dominance (and other forms of Darwinian advantage) with liberal administrations of self-deceiving whitewash (*méconnaissance* or 'misrecognition').

3.6 Completing Darwin: genesis 'from below'

This Girardian model of violent human origins readily inspires the sort of immediate recoil associated with tabloid headlines conveying dramatically bad news ('"Founding Murder!"– Grisly discovery of missing person *H. Sapiens*'). Yet on more mature inspection, it represents a modelling hypothesis which we might have anticipated if Darwin's theory of the 'descent of man' is broadly correct. As an early and deeply admiring reader of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (Gifford 2020: 123–130), Girard himself came progressively to assume Darwin's theory as a prelude to his own notion of founding murder, which he sees as both *confirming* and *completing* Darwin.

Darwin already presents pre-human nature as a self-organizing, super-sacrifical system. Yet he leaves *homo sapiens* out of the picture, except in the notorious fact of his animal 'descent'. Girard integrates humankind as such into Darwin's big picture. He grafts on to it a model addressing the novelty of man and explaining how, with *homo sapiens*, a new type of self-organization comes into play which fundamentally changes the evolutionary deal or game.

What Girard also explains is how mimetically turbocharged humans 'made it', in the first place, across a performance threshold at which their very superiority, exercised in internecine violence, threatened to wipe out their own species. In animal societies, violence is adequately contained by auto-regulating mechanisms such as dominance structures and trial fights. With the enlarged human brain came *the crescendo towards a*

paroxysm of mimetically self-renewing rivalries. The time of the hominid/human hunter-gatherers is known to have been more violent in terms of numbers of intra-specific killings per head of population than any period in history (see Pinker 2011: 47–56); Girard, more fundamentally than Pinker, explains why.

He then shows by what mechanisms – and what magic – these perils could be disarmed, and those violent energies re-channelled into new possibilities of cultural invention and self-management; and he discerns the generative logic by which the principal elements of organized archaic-sacral culture came into being, thus providing the ongoing matrix within which human specificity could develop in self-fashioning mode. Girard's account of founding murder discerns with some brilliance all these strategically important connections. In doing so, it goes a good way towards relieving the general ignorance which Girard diagnoses in natural scientists and philosophers about the process of hominization itself. As he asserted, 'we have absolutely no idea what early cultural practices consist of, how they interlock with "natural" processes, and how they act on the latter to create more and more humanized forms' (TH: 88).

It is clear enough that the categories ethologists are concerned with are also very much those involved in Girardian founding murder: rival fights, mobbing, redirected activity, victimary and transferred aggression, appeasement ceremonies, triumph rites, etc. Discussing the role of 'functional change' in evolution, Austrian naturalist Konrad Lorenz even describes behaviour patterns which, if we did not know their animal context, might very innocently be read as describing Girardian founding murder in humans. Lorenz describes, for instance,

> the ingenious feat of transforming, by the comparatively simple means of redirection and ritualization, a behaviour pattern which, not only in its prototype, but in its present form, is partly motivated by aggression into a means of appeasement and further into a love ceremony which forms a strong tie between those who participate in it. This means neither more nor less than transforming the mutually repelling effect of aggression into its opposite. (Lorenz 2002: 168; cf. TH: 98; see section 6.3)

Yet Girard shows additionally that *archaic-sacral religion* turns out to have been the transformative and *providential* (see WTB: 97; EC: 216–217) new matrix of human cultural and societal invention, the real primary school teacher ('institutrice') of our prehistoric ancestors, and the fundamental crucible of developing human specificity. Natural first-form religion is seen as the aboriginally *containing force*, but also as the operative *magic spell* that checks, converts and re-channels the destructive energies of the competitive struggle for life as observed by Darwin.

This paradox, though it may threaten many long-held assumptions about ourselves, may well take us some way towards a healthy and cogent resolution of the *enigma* – and, even,

‘in the fulness of time’, the *mystery* – of hominization (see also PH: 11–20; Antonello and Gifford 2015b; OSC: 85–91).

4 Girard and the Hebrew scriptures: survival opened up to salvation

The latter half of Girard’s published output, from *Things Hidden*, is principally devoted to re-introducing the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels into the intellectual mainstream.

4.1 Girardian biblicism

Secularized post-Enlightenment culture assumes that ‘religion’ is *either* supernatural and God-given *or* man-made and self-referentially mythical. In contrast, Girard follows a ‘third way’ pioneered by French-Jewish philosopher Henri Bergson (*The Two Sources of Religion and Morality*, 1932, see 1977). An adequate understanding of ‘religion’ will invoke *both* hypotheses and their interaction. Despite some late Muslim dialogues and a single excursion into sacrifice in the Hindu Vedanta scriptures (Girard 2003; see also EC: 43–44), Girard’s steadfast focus is on the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospels. In this one very particular developmental line (or *phylum*) of religious experience, thought and practice, he discovers a prodigious engagement with the very violent logic of archaic sacrality: in fact, a rewriting of that primordial ‘programming’ of group intelligence operating to highly ambiguous effect in emergent, culturally developing humankind. His leading thread is a fascination for the emergence of novelty, textually discerned and deciphered. ‘Revelation’ can then be recognized differentially, as a recasting of the common ‘syntax’ or ‘grammar’ of the archaic sacred; while showing how the Darwinian logic of *survival*, together with the archaic sacralities it has never ceased to generate, became ongoingly transformed and transformative – a genuine work of *salvation*.

4.2 Genesis ‘from above’

The account of Creation and Fall in Genesis offers a *locus classicus* for observing the inaugural emergence of this novelty (the fullest Girardian reading is ‘La Creation et la Chute’; Oughourlian 2007: 75–130).

The Bible’s Edenic prologue is built around the very formula of the Girardian ‘mimetic triangle’: the structural figure which describes the dynamic interrelations between two subjects whose hands reach out in rivalry for the same Object. This schema is present in the biblical story; but for the first time in the history of human thinking, the triangle is powerfully relativized. Some 200,000 years after *homo sapiens* first appeared on Earth, there is now a prior Subject: the Creator God. Within the prior order of creation, it is *human mimetic rivalry with God* that is being staged, and which is being presented now as *the fact*

and the fault of mimetically suggestible, blame-shifting, mis-sacralizing humankind (see RG-RS: 177).

Adam, challenged by the Lord God, diverts the blame for their common rivalry-and-disobedience onto Eve, who in turn deflects blame onto the Serpent. Where will the buck stop? (The English word *buck* denotes a token in games of chance; it is connected, etymologically, to the French expression for 'scapegoat' – *le bouc émissaire* [cf. VS: 312–315]). These successive suggestions of deflected blame point back to the human propensity for moral obliquity and evasiveness; 'injured innocence' is here recognized as part of the human 'default setting'.

Eve has interiorized ('copied') the desire of the seducing Serpent. In doing so, the mother of humanity enters into mimetic rivalry with God. 'Deviated transcendence is the caricature of vertical transcendance' (DDN: 78). If human desire has a true Object, then the deviant variety, born of ambiguously-sighted first acquaintance, exclusion, prohibition, and religious rivalry is a mimetic fantasm and a form of scandalizing model-obstacle behaviour – in biblical language: 'idolatry'. More exactly: emergent humanity enters into rivalry with the archaic representation the Serpent has of God – namely, as Power-Holder and Sacralizer of the human moral and social order, the repressive Kill-Joy of human inventiveness, aspiration and autonomy.

The initiating serpent is intimate to ourselves; and is represented, very plausibly, as denizen of the archaic shadow-zone or shudder-zone within us. This unknown 'Other' within is perhaps the mythic projection of our own, older (i.e. evolutionary and animal) otherness. If so, we understand the serpent's further promotion into a theological symbol: 'the serpent, in whom Christian tradition has recognized the Evil One, the Devil, the Prince of this world, is the mimetic principle inasmuch as it perverts human relations and creates rivalry' (Oughourlian 1982: 40; see section 5.6). That voice speaks out of the self-sacralizing and henceforth *transgressive* logic of the archaic sacred.

'Ye shall be as gods'. The plural 'gods', and the cautionary adverb of *quasi*-similitude may connote the environing context of Canaanite polytheism; that rival sacrality of orgies and child sacrifice, of blood lust, and of the erotic thrill of manipulating the power of life and death.

The story of the Fall warns humankind of its propensity to spoil and destroy, from *within our freedom*, the good Creator's good work in creation. A mimetic analysis suggests that it does so a touch obsessively, by way of a *reactive insistence* stiffened by a pre-encountered *scandal*, even to the point of shifting all the blame for the world's 'evil', uncompromisingly onto human shoulders. In the process, it *projects heavenwards a residually wrathful and punitive image of God* (RG-RS: 181–182; Adams 1993: 20; see

also the reversal of exclusionary perspective manifest in John 1:11 where the inside track story is not *God expelling humans*, but *humans expelling God*).

Notwithstanding this subplot, the Genesis narrative steps, momentously, *outside* the world of the archaic sacred. It recognizes and refers to it; it represents and critiques it. The disciplines of theology and mimetically-based evolutionary anthropology, despite their distinct starting points and perspectives of interpretation, in fact offer dialogically interrelated and mutually supportive accounts.

4.3 Mythology and scripture

The beginnings of the Jewish Bible (the Christian Old Testament) confront us with a horizon of ancient, pre-Christian religious-cultural practice entirely recognizable from surrounding mythologies. Echoes of disorder run through all the major stories of Genesis and Exodus: temptation and fall; the tower of Babel; Sodom and Gomorrah; the ten plagues of Egypt. Noah's flood itself, which has distinct parallels in Babylonian (the epic of Gilgamesh) and even in Greek myth (the story of Deucalion), is perhaps, in part, a metaphor for mimetic crisis (plague and flood often have this undeclared exchange-value in world mythologies). As echo-located by many scattered traces, the generative matrix of the archaic sacred is an entirely recognizable *context of emergence*.

Far from letting such things threaten his theory, Girard goes out of his way to *underline them*: these shared beginnings serve, precisely, to measure an original and far more remarkable pattern of textual and historical emergence, which asserts itself increasingly as the scriptural story unfolds.

Cain, though he founds a culture (the Canaanite culture), is not presented as justified in killing his brother – unlike Romulus, founder of Rome. His 'spurned' sacrifice is human resentment born of sibling rivalry. God cares and questions: where is his murdered brother, whose blood 'cries out from the ground'? It cries, not for vengeance, but for a deferral or displacement of retaliation, thereby acknowledging explicitly something that archaic-sacral ritual asserts implicitly. A *limit must be* set to the corrupting contagion of violence; such is the 'mark of Cain'. Here is a prohibition on violent human reprisal pointing towards the development of the Law itself, with its more radical commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' (TH: 144–149; cf. PH: 53–60).

Subversive rewriting also fashions the Bible's equivalent of the Oedipus story. If he had been presented in the *mythological* framework of the *archaic sacred*, Joseph would have been depicted as a hubristic and patricidal power-plotter, justly punished by his righteous brothers (his dreams in fact suggest how the alternative version would have started; and the possibility of a fully 'sacrificial' account is further hinted at in the biblical story by Joseph's bloodied coat, presented to the father to explain his 'disappearance'). Moreover,

the scapegoating pattern is not only made visible, but it is *visibly reprised* (i.e. thematized) in the story by Joseph's own treatment of Benjamin. The scapegoat victim is vindicated as such; a non-violent restoration of the common bond is secured (EC: 200–203; SFL: 106–115).

The tangled threads of the archaic sacred are here being partially unravelled; responsibility for violence is being tentatively laid at the right address; archaic sacrifices cannot any more serve as a universal mythico-symbolic expedient for patching up potentially violent religious, political and socio-economic crises (TH: 144–154).

4.4 Sacrifice reviewed, renewed

Girard suggests that ritual is the place where tradition and innovation meet. The *Akedah*, the 'binding' of Isaac by Abraham (Gen 22), is the fountainhead of this process. This narrative of the sacred call of religious duty 'announces the renunciation of human sacrifice and the passage towards animal sacrifice' (WTB: 46; EC: 202–203).

A call that is *sacred* binds both victim and sacrificer to do the tribal god's received or supposed will. Yet there is an emerging Hebraic novelty: Abraham is the agent of the divine purpose, through whom passes God's Promise of blessing for all of humankind. In order to transmit that blessing he must have a descendancy – that long-delayed and much expected son, the very one who is apparently demanded as sacrificial victim. Sacred violence is being presented in its most sharply problematic profile.

Can God really desire or countenance the sacrificial killing of the bearer of the divine Promise? The central paradox is resolved, albeit *incompletely*. God, it turns out, provides the 'proper' scapegoat victim for sacrifice, the ram caught by its horns in the thicket. Abraham's faith was being 'tried' and 'tested'. Abraham, more than Isaac, is *unbound* (the English word 'scapegoat' derives from the phrase, '*escape* goat'). 'The extraordinary thing about the biblical text is that it begins by presenting an Abraham who is still following the system of human sacrifice shows the obedience first; it shows that from that obedience, truthful change is possible' (WTB: 46; and see Palaver 2017: 103–109).

The episode of Leviticus 16, where the scapegoat makes his first nominal appearance, advances this argument. When, on the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the scapegoat Azazel is symbolically charged with bearing away the sins of the whole people, he illustrates the logic of archaic sacrifice exactly; while introducing this perfecting amendment – that the *other goat* then offered to Yahweh becomes a pure offering, freed from the taint borne off by the scapegoat.

Primitive sacrificial practice has again been revised, *reinterpreted* (as it is again, more fundamentally, in the inward sacrifice *of praise*). It can then be religiously *displaced*, and in part *replaced*; 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Hos 6:6). In the famous 'judgment' of Solomon

(1 Kgs 3:16–28), a favourite passage of Girard's, the notion of sacrifice even declares a secret dimension of *loving self-sacrifice* (TH: 237–243; OSC: 42–45; EC: 214–216).

Yet Girard reminds us that Leviticus 16 does not yet *understand* 'scapegoating' as it would come to be understood in the European sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, i.e. it does not yet see in emissary victimization an *illegitimate and self-serving manipulation*. The ancient Hebrew ritual is still *embedded in* – at some level, still *complicit with* and *committed to* – the practice of blame-transfer (i.e. it is, residually, still a transactional and quasi-magical solution applied to the problem of human guilt and its standing before God; see also PH: 48–50). Then, 'the three great pillars of primitive religion – myth, sacrifice and prohibitions – are subverted by the thought of the Prophets' (TH: 155; and see Baillie 1997: 167–184). They also show, in a more ultimate sense, how the Hebrew scriptures wrestle with the interlinked horizontal and vertical dimensions of sacred violence.

4.5 *Figurae Christi*

Girard follows medieval Catholic exegesis in recognising in the Hebrew scriptures a series of precursor figures anticipating the Christ (known as the *figurae Christi*) (EC: 207–211). All, like Abraham, Joseph (section 4.4) and Jonah (GR: 24–25, 197), are variations on the theme of victimhood, The 'cursing' Psalms, then the Book of Job, give voice to the Victim. The latter text stages, in dialogue with the victim himself, the entire ambivalence of the archaic sacred. Ultimately, it wrests the deity out of the process of persecution to envision him instead as the God of the oppressed and the downtrodden. The Victim, for the first time, can say: 'I know that my redeemer liveth' (Job 19:25). God, is glimpsed here, paradigmatically, and for the first time, as likely to prefer a man who *speaks the truth* to one who blames the sufferer for his sufferings in order to *safeguard his own moral reputation*.

Girard discerns, beneath the fabulating and still mythic data of the storyline, that Job is the 'Victim *of his people*'. In other words, the God with whom Job wrestles is not just that of a peculiar Hebrew tradition of retributive justice (articulated by the so-called 'friends of Job'); he is, in part still, the sacralized *projection* of the 'God' of the *archaic sacred* (or 'primitive religion'), i.e. a monstrous Double, required, engendered, and consecrated by man's ancient, devious, and universal game of exorcizing violently his own violent shadow. This fearsome deity, born of the social psyche, constitutes, in evolutionary terms, the *inherited default setting* of man 'the sacralising animal' (JVP).

Isaiah's mysterious Suffering Servant (Isa 52; 53) represents the pure embodiment of the victim-figure as saviour: rejected scapegoat of all, discharging the community of all its sins, and all its violence; strikingly recapitulative in his complete innocence, his otherness in relation to all the ills offloaded onto him. He thus *thematizes* (for the first time: explicitly

and comprehensively) the covert operation of blame-transfer and the vicarious suffering associated with founding murder.

In all these texts, the ferment of subversive novelty, challenging, reworking and replacing elements of the archaic sacred, is in principle clear. Yet not even in the conception of the Suffering Servant – described, in this text's single apparent lapse into archaism, as the expiatory victim *of God* (see TH: 157) – can the process be said to have been carried through to its logical term. The sacrificial Temple survives; and with it the legal prohibitions, the mythical stories, and the theocratic state.

Above all, a monstrous Double survives, the God of the archaic sacrificial system, the wrathful, retributive, and often bloodthirsty Jehovah of Hebrew tribal imagining; and, given the subsistently generative action in us all of the 'founding murder', *our own abiding temptation also*. 'In the Old Testament we never arrive at a conception of the deity that is entirely foreign to violence […] Yahweh is still the God to whom vengeance belongs. The notion of divine retribution is still alive' (TH: 157–158; see also Schwager 1988: 45–52).

5 The Gospels: founding murder identified, transformed, transcended

From Herod's massacre of the innocents (Matt 2:16–18) to the Lament over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44), the horizons of sacred violence familiar to Israel reappear in the Gospels. The encounters of Jesus with actual cases of violence, individual and collective, call forth some of Girard's most insightful commentaries: the Gerasene demoniac (Matt 8:28–34; Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39; see S: 165–183); the death by beheading of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29; see S: 125–148); the near-stoning of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2–11; see GR: 249; SFL: 54–61); the parable of the corrupt vineyard tenants (Matt 21:33–41; Luke 20:9–18). All display, as do the Beatitudes, the theme of sacred violence, by which the Kingdom proclamation is linked in a single weave to the Passion.

5.1 Founding murder identified

The 'key' to understanding both Kingdom *blessedness* and the *necessity of the Cross* lies, in Girard's very original submission, in the clear and explicit intelligence shown by Jesus of the dark phenomenon of 'founding murder' (TH: 158–167).

In Matthew, Jesus charges the religious authorities with erecting whitewashed memorial tombs to the prophets whom their ancestors have expelled and murdered:

> Fill up the measure of your ancestors […] so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, […] whom

> you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation. (Matt 23:27–36)

Jesus here foresees his own death, and he places it in direct line of descent from the murders committed by the leaders of theocratic Israel against all the righteous, starting, significantly, from Cain's victim, Abel. The latter is not a canonical prophet of Israel. Abel is being cited here, as in Genesis, as victim of a more universal killing, committed before ever Israel was gathered; he is a representative figure of *humankind's foundational murder*.

In Luke, the universal dimension of the drama of concealed sacral violence is highlighted by the charge that the experts in the Law have 'taken away the key to knowledge' (Luke 11:52): they have removed, that is, the crucial element of understanding which makes for true recognition of the relationship between God and man. John's parallel text (John 8:43–44) 'goes further than the others in disentangling the founding mechanisms; it excises all the definitions and specifications that might bring about a mythic interpretation […] Satan denotes the founding mechanism itself – the principle of all human community' (TH: 162; see section 4.7). The charge being made by Jesus against the Jewish religious leaders is they are blocking the coming of God's Kingdom; and they are doing so – not because they are Jews (on 'Anti-Semitism in the Gospels', see GR: 211–221) – but because they see, judge and react in the logic of the archaic sacred. Opening up the oldest grave of human 'misrecognition' seals Jesus' fate. This is, exactly speaking, intolerable. Jesus must be done away with; albeit under legitimizing headings of transferred blame – 'irreligion', 'blasphemy', 'danger to national security'.

5.2 The Passion: founding murder re-enacted

Girard is then able to show how every aspect of the Passion itself represents a deliberate, exemplary – almost *pedagogic* – replay of the scenario of 'founding murder'. High Priest Caiaphas gives the exact, recapitulative formula of the victimary mechanism in action: 'it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed' (John 11:50). He of course fears the clouds of apocalypse gathering once more above Israel (cf. Luke 13:1); this is precisely the pattern declared, so Jesus has told the chief priests and elders, throughout Israel's history. Tragic irony: killing *one more prophet*, this one the Messiah of God, *will not save the nation* from the apocalypse of destruction which already, very perceptibly, looms. The parable of the corrupt vineyard tenants (Matt 21:33–43; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19) becomes luminously clear when read as a warning of this eventuality (see GR: 195, 212–213, 216–217).

The death warrant is signed by the Procurator of the occupying power; albeit with a significant complication. Within the due process of Roman law, Pilate finds it expedient to reactivate a more primitive reality. In the endgame played out in what Christians have

come to call ‘Holy Week’, Jesus is condemned to death by popular acclamation. The aspect of collective lynching is, in the last resort, decisive; its persuasion so potent that it reverses the acclamation of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In an ultimate test of potency, its runaway dynamic overtakes and takes over, in their denial and flight, the pledged, practised, and forewarned loyalty of the disciples of Jesus. What is founding in humanity is here declared to be something to which all humans, in times of supreme crisis, regress.

The originary scene of mimetic rage and deflected responsibility is played out between Pilate and crowd. Which *scapegoat* is it to be? The choice is between the *malodorous goat* Barrabas (Barrabas of the blood-stained sword, of the sacralized national cause, nobly covering a practice of greed, robbery, and murder; truly, a figure of violent archaic sacrality); and Jesus, innocent *Lamb of God*. A single emissary Victim is designated by rage-modelling leaders planted within the crowd; a fever of bloodlust sweeps over all. They need to be safe in the storm, they need to be innocent – to deflect guilt, avoid pain and catastrophe; *at the Trouble-Maker’s expense*.

The contagion of victimary rage is evidenced again in the derision and cursing of bystanders. Even the cursing thief on his cross is a mimetic echo of the ‘all-against one’. The same can be said of the mock obeisance of the soldiers, and the subsequent scourging (TH: 167–170). Death *by crucifixion* is the signature act of founding murder, something required by the sacral bond itself. It represents an institutionalised politico-legal development of the very first bonding-and-binding rite: archaic blood-sacrifice. And to what effect? Order is secured. Political enemies Herod and Pilate are reconciled against the scapegoat. No general violence ensues. The looming cataclysm is seemingly averted. Up to a point, the *archaic blood sacrifice* thus reprised can even be said, in classic foundational manner, to *work*.

5.3 ‘Replay’ signifies transformative reversal

The scenario played out in the Gospels does not, however, simply *repeat one more time* the founding murder (this reading, not uncommonly made by Girard’s early critics, is a spectacular *misreading*). The new, reworked figure of sense is ‘abyssally different’ (TH: 217) from the original. The same scenario is *turned upside down* and run *backwards* in order that it be recognized, disarmed, undone, and defeated. What exactly does the inverting and the converting? For Girard, it is the *ungainsayable innocence or goodness of this Victim*. This is what causes the default mechanism of unanimous condemnation, hence also, in consequence, the entire machine of archaic-sacral mystification and cover-up to malfunction.

At the apex point of the mimetic crisis there is *not*, apart from fleetingly, a flawless *unanimity*. Pilate, in his rational and equitable moment, has already seen through the

charges laid against his victim (Matt 27:23–24; Mark 15:14; Luke 23:4; John 19:6b). His wife intervenes urgently, but vainly, attempting to protect this Innocent from capital execution (Matt 27:19; see S: 106–107). In Luke, the penitent thief answers the cursing thief: 'this man has done nothing wrong' (Luke 23:41); and in Mark, the executing centurion's verdict is that this was a just man, in the image of God (Mark 15:39). Then, the inverse or antithetical sense of this victimary scenario is consecrated – not *post factum* by public opinion – but in advance, *by the Victim himself*, steadfast in purpose, assured of his vindication by God and by history. The Last Supper deliberately reprises the Jewish Passover meal; but also, behind that very deliberate allusion and the continuity it establishes with Jewish tradition, way back upstream in time, it re-enacts and rewrites the festive meal that originally precedes the archaic sacrifice itself; and, even before that, it rewrites the Dionysian *diasparagmos* ('tearing asunder').

Girard thus sees the Cross as a *victory for the Victim*, who declares himself, paradoxically, the actively directing Subject, even of this death, which is designed to harrow and disintegrate the human subject in a grim pedagogy of warning. Jesus consents *to enter into the scenario of founding murder, as Victim; and on behalf of all victims*. To display that process at work in his people and in humankind as such; and to reveal to all humans its nothingness in relation the ultimate reality of the Love divine. In other words, this strange project aims to rework *the deepest and darkest springs of perverted proto-sacrality and of sacralized violence in the human heart, and to change its very mainspring of Desire*. Thus, to 'convert' those in whom this darkness operates (which is to say: *all* human beings) to the reality of the Kingdom-that-comes.

Here is an antipodal pedagogy, a strange counter-therapy of Love. The post-Resurrection experiences of encounter will confirm the pioneering and paradoxical confidence of this unique Scapegoat Victim.

5.4 'Founding murder' overturned: discerning the resurrection anthropologically

Girard, as anthropologist, cannot and will not speak about this Event *theologically*. He looks to his theologian colleagues to explore the *theological* implications and consequences. Their response, from Balthasar onwards, has not infrequently been: but why this hermeneutical *deficit*, this theological *defection*?

Yet Girard understands pertinently the full Christian meaning of the Resurrection, albeit as *anthropologically articulated*. The Resurrection is that which surprises all the actors; and which *throws into reverse gear* and eventually *overthrows* the process of self-mystifying sacralization. So that not only does the scapegoat's condemnation not 'stick', not only is the scapegoaters' hatred exposed for what it is ('they hated me without a cause', Ps 35:19), but the entire enfolded-enfolding logic of emissary victimization and scapegoat

violence, diffused throughout all human cultures, is, for the first time, pierced through, and fully laid bare.

Reality returns; truth bounces back. In these observed 'differences', the anthropologist glimpses a new revelation of the status and nature of 'God':

> It is no longer men who create gods, but God who has come to take the place of the victim [...] *Here*, the victim is divine before becoming sacred. The divine precedes the sacred [i.e. does not *proceed from* it]. The rights of God are re-established. (BE: 104; original emphasis)

Moreover, the transformative 'replay' enacted discloses its link to that even more foundational beginning proclaimed in John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word' (1:1; cf. 17:5). For, in order to *designate the logic* of founding murder in which *humanity as a whole is aboriginally* embedded, and to be raised after doing so, the One who bears witness to the truth must, in all rigour, have transcended that logic and stand in that truth; he must have been enacting a higher identity, a prior calling.

Girard here situates himself antipodally to the liberal reductionism of Bultmann (whose conviction is that the resurrection is, all told, an interpretative event in the mind of the disciples). What the French anthropologist observes in the post-Resurrection encounters of the Gospels is an 'objective Event', which calls into being a new insight, supposing a veritable conversion of heart and mind, a penny-dropping access to the innermost meaning of the gospel proclamation, the *kerygma* (GR: 280–301). 'In some way, it is because Christ enters into the matrix of false resurrections that he is truly risen' (BE: xvi). Only Someone who shares that *other Identity, that other, prior Beginning*, can designate the evolutionary archetype and transform human misrecognition; only such a One can break its hold over humankind *in principle*.

So constitutive is the mythical blindness of humans ('they know not what they do', Luke 23:34), and so truly 'foundational', that God-from-God can *only* be glimpsed differentially, in the very act of being rejected by his own (see 'Near is/And difficult to grasp the God'; in BE: 120–130; WTB: 98). The unveiling of the hidden truth about humankind will be, in historical culture-time, world-changing. It is out of this knowledge that humankind 'will learn, slowly, very slowly […] to slip underneath the persecutory representation of violence' (S: 108). Where the world's religious mythologies were universally complicit in the mystifying cover-up of humankind's enfoldment within a sanctioned archaic-sacral violence, the gospels represent the archaic-sacral mystification machine working at full tilt and, for the first time, failing to carry the verdict of God or of history.

In its *represented failure to do so*, they enable their followers to deconstruct the very mechanisms of religious authority, political power, mystified sacred rage, social

advantage, and doublethink that allow 'the system' as such to function 'below the line', subterraneously. Hence, 'this extraordinary work of the gospels: persecutory representation abrogated, broken, revoked' (S: 103). The Gospels, on this reading, declare the very thing that, historically, has made – and still makes – 'archaic religion' *archaic*.

5.5 Is the Cross a 'sacrifice'?

The church fathers, Girard considers, were certainly aware of the action of unmasking he advances. Yet, being unable to express this insight in terms of generative scapegoating, they instead understood the violence of the Cross as a supreme one-off transactional event brought about by God for *unfathomable*, or else *all-too-human*, reasons (GR: 282; cf. RG-RS: 92; and see Galvin 1989).

R. Schwager, pursuing this key insight of Girard's onto the slippery terrain of atonement theory, supplies with all requisite subtlety and rigour the necessary *theological complement*. Jesus himself promised his hearers the forgiveness of their sins through the message of the coming reign of God ('eschatological soteriology'). He did not, in his earthly ministry, proclaim a special expiatory doctrine of redemption. Certainly, he addresses the world's evil 'staurologically' (through the cross), but only as and when constrained to do so by the hardness of human hearts, *rejecting this primary offer of salvation*. Even then, he seeks and effects a conversion of the heart *within this same eschatological framing*. The Cross is misconstrued when seen as a self-standing expiatory Transaction (Schwager 1985: 112–113; see also TH: 213; PH: 179–184).

Recalled to its prior framing, Christ's death – Schwager suggests – is *ultimately* 'sacrificial' in a very *different sense* from what Girard describes as sacrifice in the context of primitive societies. It can be correctly be called a sacrifice if this is understood to mean an *offering* which includes the following elements: (1) obedience to the Father as willingness to be persecuted even to the point of death; (2) the identification with all persons who find themselves in similar situations and who are victims of evil; (3) intercession for his brothers and sisters before God, an intercession which is essentially linked to that obedience which led to his being rejected and being killed. This free offering (sacrifice) calls to conversion, and within the history of salvation the Holy Spirit who makes the conversion possible, flows from this self-offering (Schwager 1985: 115; see also GR: 280; OSC: 40–45; PH: 201–208).

Archaic sacrifice thus receives a novel (inverse and antipodal) form, imprinting into the old word (freighted still, dramatically, with its first meaning) a new meaning and concept. These novelties are the *'work' of the Cross*; which thereby declares its own necessity. Only so can the very spring and principle of *blood sacrifice*, enfolded deep into all human works and systems – and, even before that, permitted a place within a free, self-organizing creation – be *reworked into a triumph of Love*. Only so does the mimetic creature have

an adequate model of mimesis; and the new gathering, the ecclesial community of God-with-us, come to a new and adequate foundation. The radical and elegant simplicity of this divine invention inclines the later Girard towards the so-called 'mousetrap theory' of atonement first mooted by St Paul (1 Cor 2:7–8; see RG-RS: 6; GR: 206–207).

It also justifies Schwager's tribute to Girard:

> Girard's magnificent attempt to bring the human sciences again into contact with the biblical writings does not demand 'too high a price', as some maintain, but a real contribution is made to distinguishing the uniqueness of Christ's 'sacrificial death' from other sacrifices. The new analyses help us grasp the internal dramatic logic which lies behind the gospel narratives. They contribute to resolving the apparent contradiction between the Kingdom message and the doctrine of redemption through the Cross; and they urgently point to the greater danger of projecting the darkness of one's own heart onto other people and ultimately onto God. (Schwager 1985: 122)

5.6 Satan and deliverance from evil

Girard's last work of religious commentary takes its title from a strangely unfamiliar saying from Luke's gospel (10:18), *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (1999; 2001 in English translation). Jesus, welcoming back the seventy disciples sent out on a mission of Kingdom proclamation and healing, learns of their power to *reproduce* – this is *Spirit-empowered mimesis* – his own miracles of healing and exorcism, gives voice to his exultant realization that the grace of overcoming evil has passed from himself, bringer and bearer of the Kingdom, to those who follow him.

Jesus sees the 'Prince of this world' falling in a lightning bolt of apocalyptic devastation from a turbulent and violent heaven; but thereby also *falling to earth*, undone in the very act of his ascendancy, stripped of his sacralized prestige, and broken in his power over God's creation. That, he manifestly foresees, is how the epiphany of the truth of the loving-kindness and mercy of God will shine through and gain traction in a world of evolutionary survival (as we would today call it) and sacred violence.

This potent and prophetic image presages the entire theme of *Christus Victor* (Christ the Victor, which refers to the conquest of sin and death). Starting with the very idea of the Cross itself: from the greatest peril, will be crafted the supreme opportunity; from the poison itself, the antidote will be drawn. The Christ himself must take the 'hit' of man's *ersatz* transcendence – the *apocalypse of human wrath* masquerading as divinity, invoking divine sanction and inspiration, i.e. *projected onto God*. He must proclaim the 'things hidden since the foundation of the world'.

This insight into the otherwise enigmatic vocation of Jesus to die by crucifixion in Jerusalem is the key to Girard's account of evil: that is, of Satan. His conviction of a single authentic transcendence at work in the gospels, allied to his background in post-

structuralist deconstruction (which commonly speaks of the 'subject *of the system*') incline him to view Satan as an impersonal principle, rather than a literal '*Prince*' (cf. analogous New Testament expressions: 'powers of this world', 'celestial powers', 'principalities and powers', etc.; see SFL: 95–100). Satan signifies the Accuser: 'Satan's power is his ability to make false accusations so convincing that they become the unassailable truth of entire communities' (GR: 201). 'To call this process "Satan", which is what the gospels really do, is highly appropriate' (GR: 201); not least because it captures the snowballing dynamic of interlinked mimetic rivalries or 'scandals' (GR: 198–210). 'Satan' here represents a principle of *false transcendence*: false in the sense that it is not genuinely supernatural, but very real in the sense that the power of social and political institutions is rooted in pagan religion (GR: 202). This also means that the false principle of transcendence commonly imitates the truth; so that – without the Cross – it is *diabolically difficult* to distinguish the one from the other.

John's Gospel records (8:44) a naked clash between the two rival forms of transcendence and the authority they bestow. Jesus, accused of blasphemy, responds by calling his accusers offspring of Satan, 'a liar and the father of lies' (GR: 204). He can do so because 'men are forever rooted and re-rooted in the foundational violence that allows them to remove scandals vicariously' [i.e. by sacrificial scapegoating]. 'The order and disorder of human cultures *are from the same source* which is not directly divine; and this is unique to the gospels; so unique that to my [Girard's] knowledge it has never been really understood' (GR: 202).

If Jesus sees Satan falling like lightning to earth, desacralized and unmasked by his own thunderbolt, it is that he has also discerned *how Satan can be made to cast out Satan* (cf. Mark 3:23). The unmasking will proceed from the Passion itself; it will recruit the process itself of sacred violence in order to lay bare its evil and lead us out from this death-dealing and uninhabitable place. The real secret of Satan's power is what the Gospels 'force out of hiding, merely by their faithful representation of one collective murder, typical of them all, typical of the process that has dominated human culture since the foundation of the world' (GR: 206). This entire theme-set is reprised in SFL.

If the Cross overcomes the very principle of false transcendence in man, which elements of orthodox Christian soteriology (if any) are left inaccessible to 'complementary' theologians? What remains unintelligible to modern man; or falls short of the 'good news'?

6 Girard's legacy: the potentials of Mimetic Theory

Two 'after Girard' books appeared following the French-American thinker's death in November 2015 (see Kaplan 2016; Perret 2018). Both confirm directions of research already well-established among Girardians. From this consensus, something of Girard's

assured legacy emerges; but also the larger promise of things yet-to-be-explored in development of the Mimetic Theory he leaves behind.

6.1 Sacred violence and reconciliation

Girard offers original insights into the relational dynamics of sacred violence, both inter-individual and collective-social; its continuity with and difference from animal violence; its aboriginal implication in 'religion'. He lays bare the concealed sacrificial logic, writ large in the ritual murder of the emissary victim; he exposes the poetics of the human fabrication of the gods, with its binding-and-bonding magic; its false transcendence; its containing codes and rituals; its self-vindicating myths; its turbocharging Self-sacralizations and its Other-demonizing fervour (see Ricœur and Williams 1999; Palaver 2020).

Schwager points out that the Old Testament itself contains some 600 references to human violence; and that, in over 1,000 further cases, it refers to a vengefully violent God (see Schwager 1987; Galvin 1982: 180–181). R. Daly, SJ reviewing, in a forum of Girardians, the dossier of violence within institutional Christianity, details thirty-six contexts of conspicuously violent institutional behaviour. His conclusion asks whether this violence has not been secretly super-determined by the logic of the 'monstrous double', projecting onto a vertical axis the excess of a self-regenerating *inter-human wrath* (Daly 2002: 4–33)

American historian Jon Pahl and comparative religionist James Wellman have likewise questioned a certain strand of Reformation theology which has been made to justify a culture of 'innocent domination' or even 'innocent violence': from the Puritan wars against Native Americans, through the epics of internal and then external US expansion, up to George Bush's war on terrorism and the killing of Bin Laden (Antonello and Gifford 2015a: 71–93). What we are seeing, they suggest, is, in situations of stress and hyper-mobilization, an ever-possible resurgence of the archaic foundations. In modern minds, in modern cultures, alive and well, there is black economy of *archaic* sacrifice, putting 'God on our side' (cf. Bob Dylan's song of 1964).

Yet Girard's contention is that sacred violence is not, as cognitivist socio-biologists suppose, simply the opposite of human collaboration and community. Rather, it is the *dark correlative* of those virtualities, their apocalyptic shadow side. It follows that, just as mimetic desire can tip from negative to positive (as in Cross and Resurrection), so human violence, finding its tipping point (cf. the 'almost instantaneous conversion' of TH: 217), can open the way to reconnecting with that Other – divine – enterprise of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor 5:18–19).

Mimetic Theory provides a simple, concrete, but almost infinitely flexible – and therefore always pertinent – 'grid' for identifying problem-contexts and scanning their active components. It also suggests a counter-dynamic of transformation (simple in principle,

fruitful in practice and variously applicable), namely the transformation (metamorphosis, conversion) of bad (negative, hate-generating) into good (positive, generous, loving) mimesis (see Gifford 2020: 101). The Northern Ireland conflict and the Good Friday Agreement provide a case study, explicating the verdict of Duncan Morrow, ex-Director of Northern Ireland's Community Relations Council: 'a good part of the way has been illuminated by René Girard' (Antonello and Gifford 2015a: 186; see also PH: 395–402, 493–500, 501–508; Kaptein 1993).

6.2 Apocalypse Now: can we survive our origins?

The coming of the Prince of Peace does not immediately bring about an era of universal love, forgiveness and reconciliation (cf. Luke 12:51 ff.). Girard interprets Luke's 'divisive' effect on a historical scale. Two momentous metamorphoses are set running. The Gospel liberates the potential of the human creature and his morally ambiguous Promethean energies; so that human cultural and scientific development has followed a spectacularly accelerating upward curve. At the same time, by undercutting archaic religion and its sacrificial system, the Gospel increasingly deprives *homo religious* (as he strangely remains) of his aboriginal failsafe mechanism against catastrophe (see PH: 335–342). As Prometheans unloosed, we fear for our *survival*; but as a species still caught in the travail of conversion and birthing, we have a scant notion of, or care for the salvation prepared by our Heavenly Father, let alone trust or hope in that salvation (see EC: 234–238).

The result is that apocalypse in its *archaic* definition, beloved of tabloid newspapers ('paroxysmal and terminal catastrophe') looms large in the many self-generated, end-of-the-world scenarios that haunt us: nuclear war; the ecological crisis; the clash of civilizations; wars between haves and have-nots; rivalries of regional superpower blocks vying for the limited resources of an ever more globalized world. As Girard states,

> Our impression of moving into a trap we have set for ourselves will become more acute. The whole of humanity is already confronted with an ineluctable dilemma: human beings must become reconciled without the aid of [archaic] sacrificial intermediaries or resign themselves to the imminent extinction of humanity. (TH: 136; see also: PH: 353–386, 403–420; Antonello and Gifford 2015a)

Girard's last work *Battling to the End* (2007) disentangles the exacerbated tensions proper to the era of henceforth unlimited warfare, and the seeming fatality of humankind's extermination by its own uncontained dynamic of sacred violence. These developments emphasize the relevance of the mini-apocalypses of the Synoptic Gospels; and they point to the Christian counter-motif of an unveiling of the ultimate Kingdom-that-comes:

> The apocalyptic spirit [...] can make sense of the trend towards the worst only from within the framework of a very profound hope. However, that hope cannot do without eschatology.

> Identifying the dangerous emergence of the principle of reciprocity and showing it at work in history should be the rule of all apologetics. (BE: 113)

Many Girardians have entered into this ongoing and vital debate centred on the notion of 'apocalypse'. Still-to-be published are the awaited Paris-based ecumenical seminars (2017; 2019) on the Book of Revelation by James Alison.

6.3 The problem of further acceptance

Girard's legacy is however 'subject to further acceptance' (Kaplan 2016). Why is his work still sometimes dismissed as a special case for amateurs and enthusiasts? What is it – Girard himself asks – that *holds his working hypothesis back* from serious mainstream consideration? Girard frequently questions his own ability to present a complex big picture cogently or to deliver, without gaps, a systematized and totally consistent overview of the vast themes envisaged (EC: 160). He recognizes, too, what is intrinsically complex in his mode of thinking:

(1) *the 'tricky' ambivalence of the 'double bind'* i.e. the mimetic structure of desire which involves a single principle having two possible realizations, producing two opposite series of effects within the same or different fields of evaluation (EC: 5–6; and see DBB). My model is also my obstacle; founding murder is at once savage and salutary; violence is 'contained' but also 'contains us'; in the Cross itself is inscribed the paradoxical structure of 'sacrifice' (etc).

(2) *the problems of demonstrating a logic of generation and of genesis*. Myths do not thematize founding murder. It is precisely in order to avoid doing so that they conceal and deny it. 'It is the most difficult thing to make people aware of this generative centre [...] It's the sort of thing you either see or do not see. It's like a flash of lightning; you either get it or you don't. Ordinary reasoning just loops back on its own premises' (GR: 267).

(3) *the further difficulty of grasping imaginatively the single 'one long argument'* that Girard pursues, Darwin-like, given that the timeframe of the action represented is tens – if not hundreds – of thousands of years. This clearly means that here must always be missing links and evidential gaps.

On occasion, Girard also protests against a poverty of understanding or even normal goodwill on the part of deficient readers. He sees himself as counter-cultural thinker expounding a 'religious' hypothesis in an anti-religious (and/or insecurely religious) age. His message, moreover, is such as to trigger *a priori* a mobilized impatience of dismissal; perhaps turbocharged, all-unnoticed, by an inability to question basic assumptions (EC: 170) or a 'denial' of the pre-conscious and unwelcome realities explored (GR: 268–269).

His predominant response, however, involves the big picture that others fail to see. A fundamental heuristic method and an epistemological priority are in play here. Counter-

culturally, Girard adheres to the priority of truth as sense-making operational coherence. The hermeneutical models he follows are: the *detective quest* in which the clues *add up*; and *the jigsaw puzzle*, which functions well when all the successive pieces *fit in* with the big picture, as it emerges and self-authenticates.

Girardians have applied themselves to bridging the culture-bound epistemological and hermeneutical credibility gap. Sometimes philosophically (in the admirable rethinking of Paul Dumouchel), sometimes (like Jean-Pierre Dupuy) by recourse to game theory harnessed to self-organizing systems; sometimes more practically (like Pierpaolo Antonello), by seeking out an entire series of lateral confirmations from the latest research findings of neighbouring human sciences: ethology, ethnology, linguistics, sociology, psychology and archaeology (for new light on this last, very promising connection, see Gifford 2020: 52–57; PH: 69–78).

Two examples of this latter type:

(1) The threshold of becoming human is traditionally referred to the invention of language (more properly, to the advent of symbolic thought and utterance). What is newly established here is that the *condition* of any functioning symbolicity is a closed set of common experiences, giving a *centred totality of reference*. The killing of the scapegoat victim and its sacred aftermath would entirely fit the bill (EC: 103–104).

(2) It has been observed quite recently that our *nearest evolutionary relatives* the chimpanzees, are also among the most violent of animals: forming raiding parties; practising mobbings, ambushes, killings of members of their own or similar species, particularly of a different ‘tribes’ or smaller monkeys; even to the point of cannibalism. This ‘shocking new insight’ on *our closest relatives and talented fellow mimetics* provides confirmatory evidence pre-tracing the ‘inside/outside’ logic of scapegoat selection; and, of course, confirming the high probability of founding murder in humans (EC: 105).

The most thought-provoking hermeneutical insight is suggested by the reception of Darwin himself. In 1848 (the year before the *Origin of Species* was first published), palaeontologists discovered the fossilized ‘Gibraltar skull’, in a form *midway between an ape and a human*. It went misunderstood and totally ignored until twenty or more years later when Darwin’s ‘one long argument’ began to gain traction and take hold in the Victorian imagination. It then *became*, as it remains today, ‘real evidence’ (EC: 167).

6.4 The Bible: anthropological readings and revelation

On the concept of revelation, in Girard, and theologically, see Ranieri 2017: 173–178. Girard’s position is contained in germ in the practice of Simone Weil, invoked on the cover of his most developed last work of scriptural commentary (French edition, 1999 [see

bibliography]); the gospels, before becoming theology (i.e. a science of God) are, first all, anthropology (i.e. an understanding of man). On Simone Weil and Girard, see also Palaver 2020.

Established biblical scholars have not, of course, always welcomed Giradian perspectives and the scriptural commentaries they engender (especially by less experienced PhD students). The intrinsic tension between specialist exegesis and theory-led readings of 'sacred texts' is, however, becoming better understood and less conflictually managed. Girard himself often disarms specialist dissent by concrete illustration. The notoriously enigmatic gesture of Jesus in the episode of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2–11) is elucidated by invoking the structurally pertinent reverse case of Apollonius of Tiana. Jesus *looks down and doodles*, writing in the sand so as not to challenge the turbocharged sacred rage of the Accusers by *immediate eyeballing defiance and counter-condemnation*. This is a *tactic of delay and deflection* (SFL: 49–61).

Among Girardians, James Williams develops a methodical Girardian reading of the whole of the Old Testament (Williams 1991). Swartley and colleagues elucidate points of Girardian contention or reticence: the epistle to the Hebrews, for instance, is read as a *transitional* text; the theme of 'imitation' is followed through the New Testament in its positive (theological) dimension, so often identified but only very gingerly treated by Girard: namely, human discipleship as imitation; and Jesus's own imitation of his Heavenly Father within the life of the Trinity (Swartley 2000). R. Hamerton-Kelley develops Girardian harmonics around the theology of Saint Paul (1992), while Anthony Bartlett probes the violent grammar of Christian atonement theories (Bartlett 2001).

Michael Hardin, meanwhile, tackles the important topic of 'American Protestant Reception of Mimetic Theory: 1986–2015' (2017: 225–232). The work of Sandor Goodhart enables faithful Jews to test, contest and enrich the Girardian legacy (particularly in respect of some overconfident universalizing of Christian perspectives) (see e.g. PH: 241–248). Michael Kirwan SJ has begun to open a Girardian dialogue with Islamic colleagues (Kirwan and Achtbar 2019).

Following Schwager (1985; 1987; 1988; 1999), high-level Catholic and Protestant studies by, notably, James Alison (in a courageous series of illuminating works: 1996; 1998; 2001; 2006; see also Edwards 2014: 121–130); Mark Heim (2006; in a single theological blockbuster; and see also PH: 179–184); Miroslav Volf (1996) – all constantly invoke Girardian readings, understandings and procedures in order to challenge culture-bound theology and renew outdated Christian practice. Popular versions of Girardian exegeses of scripture and culture are broadcast, meanwhile, on North American airwaves (see Hardin 2015; Cayley 2019).

Strategic underlying questions have begun to surface. *Where does the immediately perceptible co-resonance with theology come from?* Do theologians not *start from the other end* of the same lived process of existential revelation-through-anthropogenesis, having *capitalized* in varying ways on its deliverances about the ultimate Actor/Author? The drama of salvation is intelligible as read from either end. May not anthropological and theological approaches call each to the other; and both be more fully blessed in their complementarity? Is not the 'Son of God' *also* the 'Son of Man'? Is not the Girardian hermeneutic a harbinger of Christic 'mediation' – indeed of the 'Incarnation' itself? All these elements of an answer belong to the era of geological time known as 'the Anthropocene' (reminding us just how novel and significant are the presence and action on the Earth of humankind).

The opening up of 'the Scriptures concerning himself' offered by the risen Jesus to the disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:19–35) suggests further questions. How do the two accounts (Girard's and Luke's) of the 'inside-track story' of divine revelation differ? How far do they converge? What do specialist biblical scholarship and theological 'hindsight' add: both in particular cases (in scholars such as the high-level Giradian theologians mentioned above); and in collective disciplinary practice?

How do the hermeneutical assets of theology become fossilized, its tools blunted; thereby deflecting renewed understanding of the scriptures? How does Girardian anthropology re-sharpen them? Girard suggests: by opening up the gospels 'to their own generative centre and witness' (GR: 282; see also PH: 127–150). When, where, and why is the baton of interpretation to be *handed over*?

6.5 Towards an apologetics for the coming times

Girard inherits (from Pascal, notably) a giant-slaying role in respect of the atheistic establishment of his time: from Nieztsche, Freud, and Frazer, via Lévi-Strauss and Derrida (see 'Against relativism' OSC: 1–48; EC: 136–158) to neo-Darwinians various, including 'new atheists' Richard Dawkins (see EC: 99–100), Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennet (see PH: 423–430). This is just one aspect of his larger mission to recover Christian truth from the marshy embrace of 'mythology', and from all its positivistic and deconstructionist counter-reductions (see OSC: 103–126). In respect of ritual, Girard answers Frazer decisively: 'because it reproduces the founding event of all rituals the Passion is connected with every ritual on the entire planet' (TH: 167).

Mimetic Theory is already widely seen as an ally made-to-measure in theology's formidable twin callings, valid both for the pursuit of faith's own quest for understanding, and for the outreach required of it, if it is to challenge culturally naturalized disbelief and

bring our own post-modernity back into lively imaginative contact with the possibility of believing. Kaplan pertinently invokes Karl Rahner:

> to awaken explicit faith, the apologist must present the contents of Christianity not as an extraneous element foreign to the hearer's personal experience but rather as an interpretation of what they have already encountered through the inner workings of grace in the depths of their consciousness. The primary task of the apologist, then, is to exhibit how the whole system of Christian teaching is the one complete answer to the primordial question that man is to himself. (cit. Kaplan 2016: 10)

The entire range of doctrinal theology – from creation and kenosis to incarnation, via original sin and redemption to the Trinity and the Last things – is henceforth, if we follow Kaplan, opened up; stimulated in its energies of challenge; programmed to find a new intelligibility and coherence; re-affirmed in pertinence and rejuvenated in its persuasive appeal. Alison, in particular, takes us where Girard himself feared to tread, asking with consequent radicality, which ecclesiology and ecclesial practices result from a Girardian reading of Cross and Resurrection (see Alison 1996; 2001; 2006; 2011 etc; and see Kaplan 2014).

7 Conclusion

The Mimetic Theory bequeaths to 'those who come after' the same theology-compatible structure and form as appears in Girard's personal itinerary: in its account of mimetic desire; in its anthropology of human origins; above all in its anthropology of the Cross, which espouses effortlessly the shape and intentional movement of the doctrines of redemption, reconciliation and new creation; and has the potential to recover a post-Darwinian coherence between natural theology and revelation itself.

> I think the power and the truth of Christianity is that it completes the great forms of monotheism [...] by witnessing to the God who reveals himself to be the arch-scapegoat in order to liberate humankind (GR: 263; cf. EC: 216–217).

The immediate future lies where Girard, from 1991, placed it: in the hands of the Girardian Associations. The (standing) Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R), with its review *Contagion*, is devoted to 'Exploring, Critiquing and Developing Girard's Mimetic Theory' (https://violenceandreligion.com; and see Williams 2012); and the more socio-politically oriented Girardian Association 'Imitatio' which, financed by the Thiel Foundation, funds publications, symposia and international initiatives promoting Girard's ideas (see: https://imitatio.org). This site offers many brief video clips in which Girard himself expounds his ideas.

8 A note on the bibliography

For a comprehensive bibliography, particularly of Girard's prolific output of scattered shorter texts, see Dietmar Regensburger: 'Bibliography of Literature on the Mimetic Theory of René Girard', published, by successive volumes, in the *Bulletin of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion* and normally available at https://violenceandreligion.com/bibliography/.

The texts in the section below, 'Works by René Girard', are cited in the article by acronym for reasons of economy and clarity. The acronyms are included in square brackets below next to the titles of the works, along with publication details of both the English and French editions of Girard's works.

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◦ See also the Girardian Standard Manual, normally referenced by acronym:

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