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CHRISTIANITY WILL BE VICTORIOUS, BUT ONLY IN DEFEAT

AN INTERVIEW WITH RENÉ GIRARD

by
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*Editor's Note: In the August/September 2009 issue of FIRST THINGS, currently on news stands, is a major new essay by René Girard drawn from his recent book, *Achever Clausewitz*, forthcoming as Battling to the End: Politics, War, and Apocalypse from Michigan State University Press. Here, as a FIRST THINGS web exclusive, literary journalist Cynthia Haven interviews Girard about his book.*

Cynthia Haven: Just when people think they know what Girard is about, you surprise us. Your work has expanded into new and revelatory directions at several junctures in your long career. Now it appears to have changed again with your latest book on Carl von Clausewitz.

René Girard: *Achever Clausewitz* is a book about modern war, really. Clausewitz is a writer who wrote only about war; he was in love with war. He hated Napoleon, the enemy of his country, Prussia, but he also loved him because the emperor had restored war to its glorious nature after the eighteenth century, which weakened war by having conflicts that made maneuvers and negotiations more important than actual fighting. That is why Clausewitz's hatred for Napoleon was curiously united to a passionate admiration for the man who had restored war to its former glory.

CH: The love-hate nature of “mimetic rivalry” is apparent here, but is there anything else that attracted you to this offbeat topic?

RG: I found another interesting correspondence with my own work. Because Clausewitz talks only about war, he describes human relations in a way that interests me profoundly. When we describe human relations, we usually make them better than they are: gentle, peaceful, and so forth, whereas in reality they are often competitive. War is the most extreme form of competition. That is why Clausewitz says that business—commercial business—and war are very close to each other.

CH: You’ve pointed out that our whole contemporary society is reaching a point of “mimetic crisis.” What, exactly, causes a mimetic crisis?

RG: A mimetic crisis is when people become undifferentiated. There are no more social classes, there are no more social differences, and so forth. What I call a mimetic crisis is a situation of conflict so intense that on both sides people act the same way and talk the same way even though, or because, they are more and more hostile to each other. I believe that in intense conflict, far from becoming sharper, differences melt away.

When differences are suppressed, conflicts become rationally insoluble. If and when they are solved, they are solved by something that has nothing to do with rational argument: by a process that the people concerned do not understand and even do not perceive. They are solved by what we call a *scapegoat process*.

CH: You say that the history of scapegoating is suppressed by those who do the scapegoating.

RG: Scapegoating *itself* is the suppressing. If you scapegoat someone, only a third party can become aware of it. It won’t be you, because you will believe you are doing the right thing. You will believe that you are either punishing someone who is truly guilty, or fighting someone who is trying to kill you. We never see ourselves as responsible for scapegoating.

If you look at archaic religions, it becomes clear that religion is a way to master, or at least control, violence. I

think that archaic religions are based on a collective murder, on a lynch-mob murder, which unites the people and saves the community. This process is the beginning of a religion: salvation as a result of scapegoating. That is why the people turn their scapegoat into a god.

CH: You've said elsewhere: "I think ultimately the Christian view of violence will overcome everything, but we might consider this a great test." Do you really have that kind of confidence?

RG: Christianity will be victorious, but only in defeat. Christianity is the same scheme as archaic religions; it is an instance of scapegoating, but—and this difference is enormous—instead of blaming the victim, and joining the scapegoaters, it realizes that the victim is innocent and we all try to interpret this type of situation in the light of the innocent victim, that is, Christ himself. In a world that is no longer organized along the rigid lines of scapegoating and the sacrifices that reenact it in the penal systems, we have more and more disorder. More and more freedom, but more and more disorder.

CH: So tell us a little about this "great test"?

RG: History, you might say, is this test. But we know very well that mankind is failing that test. In some ways, the gospels, the Scriptures, are predicting that failure, since they end with eschatological themes, which predict the end of the world.

CH: You've said that, for modern societies, "the confidence is in violence. We put our faith in that violence, that violence will keep the peace." How can nations be strong without violence?

RG: Truth begins with the acknowledgement of our violence that Christianity requires of us. Well, the alternative is the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God is, by definition, nonviolent. It never comes true, because people are not Christian enough and this is the same as what I said before: We must acknowledge our own scapegoating and we cannot do it.

CH: It's hard to imagine going to the negotiating table in the Middle East, without having the prospect of

war as a last resort.

RG: I agree completely. But this is the same as our eternal deadlock. We must see history as a long process of education. God is trying to teach man to renounce violence. The kingdom of God would be no violence at all, and we do not seem capable of it. That's why you have the apocalyptic texts at the end of the gospels.

Right now, the world is moving more and more towards various types of catastrophes. It knows this very well; it talks about little else. Today we are in such a situation that we cannot distinguish the instruments of war and the instruments of peace.

When you look at the apocalyptic texts, they seem absurd and childish because they often mix up culture and nature. This sounded absurd until recently, but now it really happens. When there is hurricane in New Orleans, we wonder if it is not man rather than nature that is responsible. Unbelievers think that the apocalyptic texts of Christianity are antiscientific because they mix up nature and culture. But in our world it cannot be denied that man can interfere with the functioning of nature. The world has never known such a possibility before, but it does now and I think this situation is specifically Christian. So, far from seeing a Christianity that is outmoded and ridiculous, I see a Christianity that makes a great deal of sense. This sense is just too amazing to be understood by people who stick to conventional thinking.

CH: You've said: "More and more people in the West are becoming aware of the weaknesses of our humanism; we are not going to become Christian again, but there will be more attention to the fact that the fight is really between Christianity and Islam, more than between Islam and humanism."

RG: Yes. I believe it, you see, because Christianity destroyed sacrificial cults. Christianity reveals that our world is founded on violence. The main resource of government and civilization, in the archaic world, is the scapegoat phenomenon. The great paradox is that the scapegoat phenomenon operates only as long as it remains unperceived by the people it unites. The gospels make it visible that Jesus is a scapegoat. When people say there is no difference between a myth and Christianity, it is almost true. In both instances, the

story culminates in a big drama: A victim is collectively killed and is divinized. But, in these two instances, the victim is not divinized for the same reason. Jesus is divinized because he suffers the Passion, in spite of his innocence, and he reveals their own violence to his murderers. In archaic religions, the guilt of the murderers remains invisible, unperceived. It's the reconciliation effect of scapegoating which is emphasized as the positive significance of the process. In Christianity, the criminal violence of the murderers is revealed as well as the innocence of the victim.

An archaic religion is nothing but a scapegoat phenomenon that succeeds, so to speak, as it is naively interpreted by the scapegoaters themselves. In the gospels, this scapegoat phenomenon fails and its meaning is revealed to the scapegoaters themselves, that is, mankind as a whole. Christianity destroys archaic religions because it reveals to us their reliance on scapegoat violence.

The self-denigration of the modern world, as well as its intellectual superiority, is rooted in this awareness of scapegoating. Unfortunately, we are not aware that the entire process is rooted in Christianity, which many people reject together with the false scapegoat religions.

In a way, the Western world has been sitting on its privileges, and paid not the slightest attention to Islam. It has been absolutely sure that "in all its ways, even the least Christian" it was superior, which in a certain sense is true, but it's due to something that Christianity has not earned.

CH: In what way superior?

RG: All the spiritual advantages it has because it knows the truth. It knows the sinfulness of man, the fact that man is a killer, a killer of God. In the East, their contempt for Christianity is due to the fact that they feel absolutely scandalized by the Crucifixion. What kind of God is it that will allow himself to be persecuted and killed by men? In a way, it's good to see because of the shock, you know. In a way I think what God is saying is that "I allowed these scapegoats. But you, I teach you the truth. So you should be up to that truth, and become perfect, and that is the kingdom of God." You are the chosen ones, in the Jewish

sense.

CH: And you said Christianity had these advantages but had not earned them?

RG: It has not earned them, and it has not behaved as it should have. Christians are unfaithful to Christianity.

CH: You have said that this apocalypse is not necessarily a bang, or even a whimper, but rather a long stasis.

RG: In the Gospel of Matthew, it says: “Except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved”—because it’s an infinitely long stretch.

CH: So this is the period we’re in?

RG: I think it may well be. We are proud of the achievements we call modern and there are scriptural indications that they coincide with the dangerous times we live in.

Some of the fundamentalist Christians think the eschatological themes show that God is angry with man and is going to put an end to the world. But the eschatological texts are more meaningful if you understand the situation as I just defined it. If man doesn’t become more modest, his violence will increase in an unlimited way. This violence doesn’t increase through physical fighting and wars only, but through the increase and multiplication of weapons, which now threaten the very survival of the world. Our violence is not created by God but by man; in a world that is practically more and more oblivious God, if you look at the way nations behave with each other, at the way individuals behave with each other.

Before the invention of apocalyptic weapons, we couldn’t see how realistic apocalyptic texts have become. Today we can see that, and we should be extremely impressed by this realism. Now only one thing is left to man if he wants to survive: universal reconciliation.

CH: Who is the antichrist in your interpretation?

RG: Well, we don't know, but there are many plausible candidates. Obviously there is something very insidious about the antichrist, who is a seducer. So it must not be someone like Stalin or Hitler since they failed miserably. And the antichrist doesn't seem to work by force. But I think you could see that it's a certain modern spirit—the spirit of power, the idea that man has become totally master of himself, and that he doesn't have to bow in front of powers greater than himself, and he's going to triumph in the end.

CH: So this crisis you see us constantly going through, how does it end?

RG: We're going through a slow increase in the symptoms of destabilization that characterizes the modern world.

CH: And then what will happen?

RG: I don't know. You have two conceptions of time to consider: the eternal return, which I think is the founding murder of a scapegoat, and therefore a new religion. The scapegoat phenomenon is so powerful, that a community can organize itself around it.

And then we have continuous time, which carries through to the destruction of the world, the Second Coming. Obviously, that withdraws the source of renewal, which is the sacrificial murder of a scapegoat. With the Bible there is no renewal, no new religion.

CH: Nietzsche noted that we've gone almost two thousand years with no new god.

RG: Nietzsche has some texts, which are very interesting, because he would like to go back to the eternal return; therefore he is not really apocalyptic, because he is not really waiting for the kingdom of God. He would like to go back, and he hopes that there will be an end of Christianity.

CH: You point out that he hated the gospels, that he didn't see them from a theoretical or historical perspective.

RG: No, he didn't. He saw them as the worst possible thing for the world, because he saw it as a cause for decadence, of people becoming incapable of energy and moving in history in such a way that civilizations would not renew themselves and die. It was pre-Nazi. He was nostalgic for archaic religion.

CH: Did he have a point? Is there a kind of decadence to where we are now?

RG: Sure, he had a point. Because that long, endless period of apocalypse is getting a little tiresome. And, then, if you really look it is probably extremely noncreative. Today do you feel the arts are as productive as they were in the past?

The kingdom of God will not arrive on this earth, but there is an inspiration of the kingdom of God in our world, which is partial and limited. And there is a nonchristian, antichristian decadence in all its ways. We still have the prophesied "abomination of the desolation" to get through, undoubtedly.

CH: Given this long apocalypse we're going through, what do we do?

RG: Nothing spectacular.

CH: We just sit it out?

RG: We just sit it out. But we must try not to surrender to the spiritual decadence of our time and rise above the world around us.

CH: What about this quotation: "Except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened"?

RG: It means that the end times will be very long and monotonous—so mediocre and uneventful from a religious and spiritual standpoint that the danger of dying spirituality, even for the best of us, will be very great. This is a harsh lesson but one ultimately of hope rather than despair.

Cynthia L. Haven writes regularly for the Times Literary Supplement, the Los Angeles Times Book Review, the Washington Post, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Kenyon Review, the Georgia Review, and others. Her An Invisible Rope: Portraits of Czeslaw Milosz will be published next year by Ohio University Press/Swallow Press.