Support FIRST THINGS by turning your adblocker off or by making a donation. Thanks!

FIRST THINGS

HOW TO READ GIRARD

by
[Joe Carter](#)
7 . 16 . 09

FIRST THINGS is delighted to be able to share with our readers an original essay and an exclusive interview with René Girard, one the most intriguing and influential thinkers of modern times. Unfortunately, too many of our readers may not intially grasp the appeal of his work. As our editor Joseph Bottum noted earlier this week, "The article is a dense and difficult piece by a member of the *Académie française* , and different readers will have differing interpretations."

Comprehending Girard's work is certainly no easy task. But the specialized terminology that has accreted over decades to explain his concepts can make his writing appear even more daunting. Unlike many other French theorists, Girard isn't deliberately obscure. Familiarity with a few key concepts can aid in gaining a toehold into his refreshingly original thought.

The following is rudimentary glossary, with quotations from online sources (including a surprisingly well-written Wikipedia entry). I've put the concepts in an order in which, I believe, they build on each on another and help us with Girard's theory.

Mimesis/Mimetic desire —"The preeminent characteristic of human beings is that we imitate each other (thus the term "Mimetic Theory"). This mimesis is not mere mimicry, but an instinctive and preconscious

impulse. Even our desires—especially our desires—come from the imitation of others. Because we want the same things that others want, we come into conflict over who will possess the desired object. This rivalry is in turn imitated so that it escalates into violence. The rivalry does not remain limited to the first individuals involved, but others imitate it until it spreads to the entire community, generating a mimetic crisis. Violence threatens to destroy everyone involved, unless a solution is found." (Britton Johnson, "How Girard's Mimetic Theory Can Help Us Understand the Relationship Between Science and Religion")

Mimetic violence —"If two individuals desire the same thing, there will soon be a third, then a fourth. This process quickly snowballs. Since from the beginning the desire is aroused by the other (and not by the object) the object is soon forgotten and the mimetic conflict transforms into a general antagonism. At this stage of the crisis the antagonists will no longer imitate each other's desires for an object, but each other's antagonism. They wanted to share the same object, but now they want to destroy the same enemy. So, a paroxysm of violence would tend to focus on an arbitrary victim and a unanimous antipathy would, mimetically, grow against him. The brutal elimination of the victim would reduce the appetite for violence that possessed everyone a moment before, and leaves the group suddenly appeased and calm." (Wikipedia)

Mimetic crisis —"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* ." (FIRST THINGS ONLINE , "An Interview with René Girard")

The Scapegoat Process —"One individual is singled out by the community as the scapegoat whose death

absorbs the violence in the community, delivering the community from this threat. The community mistakenly believes that the scapegoat was at once the cause as well as the all-powerful cure for the chaos of the mimetic crisis. The pagan concept of the gods emerges from this misrecognition. The deliverance brought about by sacrificial violence is the basis for the primitive sacred. It is also the basis of archaic religion and the foundation of human culture." (Ibid)

Violence and the Sacred —"The brutal elimination of the victim [the scapegoat] would reduce the appetite for violence that possessed everyone a moment before, and leaves the group suddenly appeased and calm. The victim lies before the group, appearing simultaneously as the origin of the crisis and as the one responsible for this miracle of renewed peace. He becomes sacred, that is to say the bearer of the prodigious power of defusing the crisis and bringing peace back. René Girard believes this to be the genesis of archaic religion, of ritual sacrifice as the repetition of the original event, of myth as an account of this event, of the taboos that forbid access to all the objects at the origin of the rivalries that degenerated into this absolutely traumatizing crisis. This religious elaboration takes place gradually over the course of the repetition of the mimetic crises whose resolution brings only a temporary peace. The elaboration of the rites and of the taboos constitutes a kind of empirical knowledge about violence." (Wikipedia)

Christianity as Destroyer of Sacred Myths —"[T]he election of a scapegoat may in fact have worked to found culture in the days before biblical revelation, but the Gospels reveal how it works, and an understanding of how it works destroys the possibility of it working. If we know the victim to be innocent, we can still pronounce him guilty, but we will not succeed in being drawn together—we will not succeed in founding a culture—with the pronouncement." (Joseph Bottum, "Girard Among the Girardians")

"The Gospels ostensibly present themselves as a typical mythical account, with a victim-god lynched by a unanimous crowd, an event that is then commemorated by Christians through ritual sacrifice — a bodily re-presentation in this case— in the Eucharist. The parallel is perfect except for one detail: the truth of the innocence of the victim is proclaimed by the text and the writer. The mythical account is usually built on the lie of the guilt of the victim inasmuch as it is an account of the event seen from the viewpoint of the

anonymous lynchers. This ignorance is indispensable to the efficacy of the sacrificial violence.

The evangelical "good news" clearly affirms the innocence of the victim, thus becoming, by attacking ignorance, the germ of the destruction of the sacrificial order on which rests the equilibrium of societies. Already the Old Testament shows this turning inside-out of the mythic accounts with regard to the innocence of the victims (Abel, Joseph, Job, . . .), and the Hebrews were conscious of the uniqueness of their religious tradition. With the Gospels, it is with full clarity that are unveiled these "things hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matthew 13:35), the foundation of social order on murder, described in all its repulsive ugliness in the account of the Passion. " (<u>Wikipedia</u>)

Apocalypse —"The apocalypse is not God's final act of vengeance against a sinful humanity but the historical circumstances under which the failure of Christian revelation finally becomes clear. Apocalyptic violence seeks an end in sacrifice but never finds it; it is war with neither cathartic virtue nor foundational potential. The death of Christ on the cross exposed the lie of the scapegoat mechanism from within and offered humanity the chance to establish a new and more mature relationship to the divine. Instead of seizing this opportunity, however, humanity ultimately turned away from what the Passion—the word made flesh—had to say about violence. This was the beginning of the first stirrings of modern history, of that "strange war" waged by violence against truth. Each refusal to accept the truth about violence only put off what Girard calls our inevitable "rendezvous with the real." Today, the rise of the suicide bomber and the blurring of distinctions between the natural and anthropological realms suggest that we are entering a critical period. The more we do away with traditional institutions, with borders and barriers of all kinds, the more de-institutionalized violence comes back to haunt us, suggesting that politics and technology are now powerless to save us from ourselves." (<u>Trevor Merrill, "On War: Apocalypse and Conversion Review Article on René Girard's _Achever Clausewitz_</u>)