

Girard and the Ukraine-Gaza Escalation

[The Bulletin of Colloquium of Violence and Religion, no 81, august 2024.](#)

To take on Phillip Bodrock's challenge in his reply to Mark Anspach's pointed *Letter from the Negev* (see Bulletins [78](#), [79](#), and [80](#)) means entering into an escalating worldwide dispute with roots in a religious controversy that Girard spent much of his life to try and unravel. As a Dutchman writing from Poland, on how the Gaza war dovetails into Putin's Ukrainian "operation," I realize that these two nations, like so many others, have been part of this ordeal from the very start and are called to help deescalate and solve it. After the Nazis accrued their crimes on Polish soil as if minding Caiaphas's order (cf. John 19:14) to sacrifice some so as to save humanity from ruin, the Netanyahus together with many other Polish migrants expectantly went to make Israel a new home. On the Dutch side, support of that Israel has been firm; but so was also their Premier Lubbers's lobbying for an Energy Union with Russia, during his 1991 EEU presidency at Maastricht; which was to lead to a dependency that proved beset with grave dangers, once Putin chose to tackle the West's global hegemony. Although these facts may seem unrelated, we will note how the present Gaza drama fits into the violent project that Putin and his advisers, like the far-right political philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, engage in. Shortly before he launched his 2022 Ukraine "operation," Putin termed this a fight against the "polonization," by which term he referred to an old East-West church polemic in Ukraine, thereby giving his political ideals a tint of religious rivalry Girardians are called to analyze.

Is it conspiracy thinking on our part to follow the analysts that saw the Gaza drama fit in with the Kremlin plans to sacrificially insert various belligerent parties into a wider combat? Let us ponder this coincidence, how shortly after the ICC in The Hague had sentenced Putin for his Ukrainian crimes, which stopped him from attending the vital BRICS meeting in South Africa, the Hamas carnage provoked Israel's predictably harsh retaliation, inspiring South-Africa's ANC promptly to go and indict Israel in The Hague of possible genocide and of war crimes similar to Putin's. Taking into account Moscow's long-standing support of the ANC anti-apartheid struggle and its more recent aid to Palestinians, the said analysts conjectured that the Kremlin saw the strategic opportunity to strike at the West's Achilles heel in the Middle East so as to divert public attention away from its (ailing) Ukraine operation. Indeed, the Gaza war made the USA put on hold its massive aid to Ukraine and weakened the European media's indignation over Russia's invasion. Through acts like the Houthi attacks on the Red Sea shipping lanes, the escalating global conflict came to appear as a case of Israel with its Western supporters having actually provoked a justified revolt.

Bodrock rightly observes that peace will be elusive as long as Israel and Palestine remain enemy brothers, and many a Girardian has commented on this standoff. But which peace is meant? May one not discern a geopolitical plot behind this drama that dates from well before the Shoah and deserves an analysis in wider Girardian terms? Clearly the shots are called from afar, where “escalation to the extreme” is a stated strategy, and brinkmanship a favorite game. Whichever Gaza peace plans may arise, the cards in US hands will be challenged by the alliance around the Kremlin, whose friends in BRICS, along with many countries seeking to shake off Western controls, tend to exonerate Hamas. And the moral anger among intellectuals over Israel’s rude retaliation now starts to eclipse the one over events in Mariupol, Kiev, or Kharkiv.

How to assess this in Girardian terms? Reflecting on Islamist violence in *Battling to the End*, Girard saw the “escalation to extremes” enter a new phase. But as reactions to the double-edged Gaza drama waver on which side to back and whether the West’s claim that Israel is fighting for democratic values can stand, a Girardian analysis will no doubt have to consider Putin’s project and its backing by the BRICS associates. On the other hand, the shifting moral anger also holds a prophetic, say Girardian, inspiration about the democratic values Israel and its supporters are alleged to defend against what is unfolding. The weight is tilting to a division that has so far hardly been noted. Where Putin and the Islamists both refute the “absolute priority of the individual,” on which democracy boasts itself to rest, and even dub it the root of a recurrent fascism, the question arises if this does not somehow echo a basic Girardian concern, making his notion of “interdividuality” score well in various circles, whether or not they forswear violence.

In this context, we may consider the extremes to which Putin has been going in his “anti-polonization” fight. After showing pitiless brutality in Chechnya and Georgia, and while preparing to attack Ukraine’s Crimea, Putin is strongly believed by many to have dared a most hideous offense. This happened in April 2010, against the Poland that once hosted the military counterpart of NATO in the Warsaw pact, which was home to the Pope who made the Soviet empire unstitch, and whose President Lech Kaczynski was siding with Georgia’s liberals. Having reluctantly agreed to erect a monument for the thousands of Polish WW II officers executed in 1940 at Katyn under Stalin, and to join Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk for the inauguration of this memorial, he insisted that President Kaczynski—opponent of Tusk’s party—shouldn’t visit that place until the next day. The Polish presidential Tupolev-jet had been in a Moscow “service” for six months and had been returned just for this flight. Before Pres. Kaczynski and nearly one hundred officials took off, the special air control equipment that was installed on Smolensk airfield for the Putin and Tusk flights was secretly removed. When an unexplained mist suddenly covered the airfield and faulty orders from the control tower made the pilot fatally lower his course, a crash-with-explosion followed. Putin adamantly claimed the right to investigate the event and all evidence was moved to Moscow; flight boxes were meddled with, the victims’ remains were fumbled, and when finally the coffins were released, Polish relatives were told not to open them. As this order was ignored, the scam was discovered, including traces of explosives that are held to have blown up the plane in the air before touching the trees. Nonetheless, Tusk was persuaded to let the issue rest, so as not to endanger EU-Russian relations, and notably the North Stream energy project. After being voted out and indicted of this negligence and other issues, of which he was oddly acquitted, Tusk was offered the Brussels EU presidency. To Putin this signaled that he could safely go ahead in his adventures, such as the 2014 invasion of Crimea, and test the West’s coherence.

We perceive four dissimilar sacrificial excesses that Girard's theory may assimilate. The crashing of a President's plane for siding with the opponent is truly sacrificial; but so is letting this go unchallenged for material gain. And in the Gaza-controversy we see collateral damage being taken for granted as listlessly as the brutal murder of innocent civilians to allegedly compensate for ongoing oppression. With Patriarchs and Ayatollahs approving of such atrocities as torpidly as Chaplains may extenuate the collateral damages, we see an escalation to extremes that Girard in his Clausewitz study saw developing in the modern state monopoly of violence and in the revolts it provokes. But we note that this occurs in a new international realm where opponents share a globalized power scheme under the overarching frame of a nuclear deterrent that functions as a new "umbrella of divine order." In my work as a chaplain studying Girard's career with students, we perceived a new setting, where medieval methods of torture grow into mimetic extremes of State terror. But the belief arose that Girard's Christian perspective, culminating in his Clausewitz study, might hold a solution.

As we read Girard's career via the lens of his Augustinian-type conversion, as Joseph Niewiadomski has also proposed of late, its core appeared to be his radical critique of the West's sacrificial view of redemption, which made the saving cross paradoxically turn into a source of reviled individualism. The idea that Christ's gracious salvation offered a personal election could easily inspire hegemonic arrogance, while inversely, the divine Father's demand of sacrificial obedience tended to incite atheist revolts and a Promethean type of rivalry that challenged eternal rules in matters of technical and social power, from medicine to ecology. In Girard's vision, the ensuing escalation to extremes can be curbed only if this sacrificial reading of the Gospel is inverted. That would facilitate a new dialogue with the Orthodox and the Muslim hermeneutics of Christ's prophetic message. Islam actually originated as a critique of the Pauline vision of Jesus (Isa) as a divine son sent to save humanity by a ritual sacrifice, which obscured the Q-tradition of the Gospel stressing ethical love and trust in the divine clemency. In turn, such a new focus on social coherence, in Girard's understanding of "interindividualism," will also align with the Orthodox focus on St John's tradition of love, which sees the essence of human life rooted in God's Trinitarian union.

As the violent extremes are escalating to World War proportions, and a ceasefire with occasional shooting across demarcation lines is no solution, a trilateral reflection on the basis of Girard's anti-sacrificial reading of the Gospel is indicated. To review the prophetic roots of these belligerent traditions and integrate the three hermeneutic lines anew, while we recognize the deviations that have engendered such ugly rivalries by ignoring the prophets' order to halt each other's victimization, may enable a collective resolve to face the mounting challenges of climate, biodiversity, and poverty crises. Putin's stated ideal of a multipolar balance underpinning the BRICS opposition to Western hegemony is also bound to be stillborn without a shared reflection on its ideological roots of power and rivalry. Girard's innovative view seems well designed to help realign the three hermeneutic lines of the Gospel that are underneath the conflicting social constructs.