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Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with René Girard[1]

Robert Doran: Shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001 you participated in an interview with the French news daily *Le Monde*, in which you stated that "what is occurring today is a mimetic rivalry on a planetary scale."[2] This observation now appears truer than ever. All evidence points to a continuation and intensification of mimetic conflict: wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; transit bombings in Madrid and London; even the car burnings in the Paris suburbs are not unrelated. How do you see the events of 9/11 in retrospect?

René Girard: I think that your statement is right. And I would like to begin by making a few comments on that very point. It seemed impossible at the time, but I think that many people have forgotten 9/11—not completely forgotten, but they have reduced it to some kind of unspoken norm. When I did that interview with *Le Monde*, everyone agreed that it was a most unusual, new, and incomparable event. And now I think that many people wouldn't agree with that statement. Unfortunately, in the United States, because of the war in Iraq, the attitude towards 9/11 has been affected by ideology. It has become "conservative" and "alarmist" to emphasize 9/11. Those who want to put an immediate end to the war in Iraq tend to minimize it. Now, I don't want to say that they are wrong in wanting to end the war in Iraq, but they should be very careful and consider the situation in its entirety before they deemphasize 9/11. Today this tendency is very general, because the events that you are talking about—which have taken place after 9/11 and which are in some way vaguely reminiscent of this event—have been incomparably less powerful, striking, and so forth. And therefore there is a whole problem of interpretation: what is 9/11?

RD: You yourself see 9/11 as a kind of rupture, a seminal event?

RG: Yes, I see it as a seminal event, and it is fundamentally wrong to minimize it today. The normal desire to be optimistic, to not see the uniqueness of our time from the point of view of violence, is the desire to grab any straw to make our time appear as the mere continuation of the

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violence of the twentieth century. I personally think that it represents a new dimension, a new world dimension. What communism was trying to do, to have a truly global war, has happened, and it is real now. To minimize 9/11 is to try to avoid thinking the way I do about the importance of this new dimension.

RD: You just made reference to the Cold War. How would you compare the two threats to the West?

RG: The two are similar in that they represent a revolutionary threat, a global threat. But the current threat goes beyond even politics, since there is a religious aspect. Therefore the idea that there could be a more total conflict than the one conceived by the totalitarian peoples, like Nazi Germany, that it would become in some way the property of Islam, is just such an amazing thing, so contrary to what everybody believed about politics. This demands an immense amount of thought, for there is no corresponding reflection about the coexistence of other religions with Islam and in particular Christianity. The religious problem is the most radical one in that it goes beyond the ideological divides—which of course most intellectuals today are not willing to let go of. And if this is the case, then our reflections will remain superficial with respect to 9/11. We must be willing to think in a wider context, and in my view this wider context is the apocalyptic dimension of Christianity. The apocalyptic dimension of Christianity is a threat because the very survival of the planet is at stake. Our planet is threatened by three things, all of which are the creation of man: the nuclear threat, the ecological threat, and the biological manipulation of the human species. The idea that man cannot be trusted with his powers is as true in the biological field as it is in the military field. So it is a triple threat of global proportions that has taken shape over the last century.

RD: I will return to the apocalyptic dimension in a moment. In a recent book, Zbigniew Brzezinski (National Security Advisor to President Carter) writes that "behind almost every terrorist act lurks a political problem. […] To paraphrase Clausewitz, terrorism is politics by other means."[3] Though it may have other motivations, is terrorism not always in part political, to the extent that, no matter the actual target, it is always ultimately directed toward governments?

RG: Well I think that it is not even by other means. Terrorism is a form of war, and war is politics by other means. In that sense, terrorism is

political. But terrorism is the only possible form of war in the face of technology. The greatest mystery of what is going on now in Iraq is the confirmation of this immensely important fact. The superiority of the West is its technology, and it proves to be nothing in Iraq. Of course they put themselves in the worst possible situation by saying that we were going to turn Iraq into a Jeffersonian democracy, which was the stupidest thing to say! This is precisely what they cannot do; they are powerless before Islam. The divide between the Sunni and the Shia is infinitely more important. They manage to fight each other at the very moment when they are fighting against the West, which is truly amazing. Why should the West involve itself in this conflict within Islam? We don't even understand it. It appears to us like a reemergence of the quarrel between the Jansenists and the Jesuits. We don't see how enormously powerful it is in the Islamic world.

RD: Is it our incomprehension of the role of religion?

RG: It is incomprehension of the role of religion, and the incomprehension of our own world, of the weakness of the things that bind us together; for when we invoke our democratic principles, are we talking about things like equality and elections, or are we talking about capitalism, consumption, free trade and so on? One can say that in the coming years the West is going to be tried. The question is how the West will react: strongly or weakly? Will it dissolve itself? The West should start thinking about whether it really has principles, whether they are Christian or purely consumerist. Consumerism has no hold on those who engage in these suicide attacks. This is what America should be thinking about, because America has been expanding in the world, giving everyone what we consider more seductive than anything else. Does it really not work on the Muslim people? In other words, do they pretend that it doesn't work; is it resentment? Do they have a well-organized defense mechanism against it? Or is their religious view in some way more authentic and powerful? This is the real problem.

RD: Your original interpretation was that 9/11 was due to resentment.

RG: I'm much less affirmative than I was at the time of 9/11 that the reason was total resentment. I remember that I got carried away at a meeting held at the Ecole Polytechnique when I agreed one hundred percent with Jean-Pierre Dupuy about the resentment interpretation of

the Muslim world. But now I do not think it is sufficient. Can resentment motivate this ability to die like that? Could the Muslim world really be indifferent to the culture of mass consumption? Perhaps they are. I don't know. It is thus perhaps too excessive to attribute to them an envy of that. If the Islamists are really on a world domination kick, then they are beyond that. We don't know if there will appear something like rapid industrialization in the Muslim world, or if they will try to win on the basis of population growth and the fascination they exert. There are more and more conversions in the West. The fascination of violence certainly plays a role.

RD: But the resentment interpretation seemed logical in view of your thought.

RG: There is resentment there, of course. And this is what must have moved those who applauded the terrorists, as if they were in a stadium. That is resentment. This is obvious and undeniable. But is that the only force? Is that the main force? Can it by itself lead to the suicide attacks we see? I'm not sure. It is also true that the accumulated wealth in the West as compared with the rest of the world is a huge scandal, and that 9/11 in not unrelated to this fact. Thus I do not want to completely suppress the idea of resentment. There is certainly a strong element of resentment, but it cannot be the entire explanation.

RD: And the other force?

RG: The other force would be religious. Allah is against consumerism and so forth. What the Muslim really sees is that religious prohibition rituals are a force that keeps the community together, which has totally disappeared or is on the way out in the West. People in the West are united only by consumerism, good salaries, etc. The Muslims say: "their weapons are terribly dangerous but as a people they are so weak that their civilization can easily be destroyed." This is the way they think, and they may not be totally wrong. I think there is something right about it. Ultimately, I believe that the Christian view of violence will overcome everything, but we might consider this a great test.

RD: In his contribution to this volume, Jean-Pierre Dupuy calls 9/11 "a true sacrifice in the anthropological sense of the term."[4] Can 9/11 be thought according to a logic of sacrifice?

RG: I want to be very prudent in answering this question. One must be careful not to justify 9/11 by calling it sacrificial. I think that Jean-Pierre Dupuy doesn't do that. He maintains a kind of neutrality. What he says about the sacred nature of Ground Zero is, I think, perfectly justified. I would, however, like to quote from an insightful essay by James Alison, who has written on this very subject:

> And immediately the sacrificial centre began to generate the sort of reactions that sacrificial centres are supposed to generate: a feeling of unanimity and grief. […] Phrases began to appear to the effect that "We're all Americans now"—a purely fictitious feeling for most of us. It was staggering to watch the togetherness build up around the sacred centre, quickly consecrated as Ground Zero, a togetherness that would harden over the coming hours into flag waving, a huge upsurge in religious services and observance, religious leaders suddenly taken seriously, candles, shrines, prayers, all the accoutrements of the religion of death. […] And there was the grief. How we enjoy grief! It makes us feel good, and innocent. This is what Aristotle meant by catharsis, and it has deeply sinister echoes of dramatic tragedy's roots in sacrifice. One of the effects of the violent sacred around the sacrificial centre is to make those present feel justified, feel morally good. A counterfactual goodness which suddenly takes us out of our little betrayals, acts of cowardice, uneasy consciences.[5]

I think that James Alison is right to speak about *katharsis* in the context of 9/11. The notion of *katharsis* is tremendously important. People think that it is an Aristotelian word. This is not true. It's a religious word. It really means "the purge" as purification. In the Orthodox Church, for instance, *katharos* means purification. It's *the* word that expresses the positive effect of religion. The purge makes you pure. This is what religion is supposed to do, and it does it with sacrifice. I consider Aristotle's use of the word *katharsis* to be pure genius. When people condemn the mimetic theory, they don't see what formidable support it has in Aristotle. Aristotle seems to be only speaking about tragedy, but tragic theater is nothing but sacrifice reenacted as drama. This is why it is called "the ode of the goat."[6] Aristotle is always conventional in his explanations—conventional in the best sense. A very intelligent Greek seeking to justify his religion would, I think, use the word *katharsis*. Thus my answer to this question would place a great emphasis on *katharsis* and on Aristotle's understanding of the term.

RD: Certainly the spectacular aspect of 9/11 suggests an analogous relation to theater. But with 9/11 we could all be witnesses to a *real* event as it happened.

RG: Yes, with 9/11 there was television. Television makes you present at the scene, and thus it intensifies the experience. The event was *en direct*, as we say in French. You didn't know what was going to happen next. I saw the second plane hit the building not as a replay but as a live event. It was like a tragic spectacle, but real at the same time. If we hadn't lived it in the most literal sense, it would not have had the same impact. I think that if I had written *Violence and the Sacred* after 9/11, I would have most probably included 9/11 in this book.[7] This is the event that makes possible an understanding of the modern event, for it renders the archaic more intelligible. 9/11 represents a strange return of the archaic within the secularism of our time. Not too long ago people would have had a Christian reaction to 9/11. Now they have an archaic reaction, which does not bode well for the future.

RD: Let us return to the apocalyptic dimension. Your thought is generally considered pessimistic. Do you see 9/11 as a signpost on the way toward an apocalyptic future?

RG: The apocalyptic future is not something historical. It is something religious, and as such it is something that you cannot do without. This is what modern Christians don't understand. Because in the apocalyptic future, the good and the bad are mixed in such as way that from a Christian point of view, you cannot talk about pessimism. It is just being Christian. It is saying that all of the texts are part of the same totality. In order to understand this, you only have to quote the First Letter to the Corinthians: if the powers, meaning the powers of this world, had known what would happen, they would have never crucified the Lord of Glory—because it meant their destruction. Because when you crucify the Lord of Glory, the trick of the powers, which is the scapegoat mechanism, is revealed. To show the crucifixion as the killing of an innocent victim is to show the collective murder and to make it possible for people to understand that it is a mimetic phenomenon. Therefore the powers are ultimately going to perish from this truth. And all of history is simply the realization of this prophecy. Those who say that Christianity is anarchistic are somewhat right. The Christians are destroying the powers of this world, in the sense that they are destroying the legitimacy of all violence. From the point of view of the State, Christianity is a force of anarchy. Anytime it recaptures its old spiritual strength, this reappears in a way. Thus the conflict with the Muslims is really much more significant than even the fundamentalists believe. The fundamentalists

think that the apocalypse is the violence of God. But if you read the apocalyptic chapters, you'll see that the apocalypse is the violence of man unleashed by the destruction of the powers, that is, of the states, which is what we're seeing now.

RD: But this understanding makes it possible for violence to continue on another level.

RG: Yes, but not as a religious force. The religious force is on the side of Christ, ultimately. However, it appears as though the real religious force were on the side of violence.

RD: What will it look like when the powers are defeated?

RG: Well, when the powers are defeated, violence will become such that the end will come. If you take the apocalyptic chapters, this is what they announce to you. There will be revolution and wars. State will rise against state, nation against nation. These are the doubles. This is the power of anarchy we have now, with forces capable of destroying the whole world. So you can see the coming of the apocalypse in a way that wasn't previously possible. In the early days of Christianity, there was something magical about the apocalypse. The world is going to end; we'll all be in paradise, and everything will be alright. The "mistake" of the first Christians was to believe that the apocalypse was going to be an instant affair. The first Christian texts, chronologically speaking, are the Letters to the Thessalonians, and they are an answer to the question: why is the world continuing when you announced its end? Paul says that there is something holding back the powers, the *katochos* (something that holds back). The most common interpretation is that it is the Roman Empire. The crucifixion has not yet dissolved all order. If you look at the apocalyptic chapters of Christianity, they describe something like the present chaos, which wasn't there in the beginning of the Roman Empire. How can the world end when it is held so tightly by the forces of order?

RD: Then Christian revelation is ambivalent in that it has both positive and negative consequences?

RG: Why negative? Fundamentally it is religion that announces the world to come; it is not about fighting for this world. It is modern Christianity that forgets its origins and its real direction. The apocalypse at the

beginning of Christianity was a *promise*, not a threat, because they really believed in the next world.

RD: Then could one say that you are pessimistic in an a priori sense?

RG: I am pessimistic in the sense that everybody understands the word pessimism. But I'm optimistic in the sense that if one looks at the present world, it already verifies all the predictions. You can see the shape of the apocalypse increasing every day: the power capable of destroying the world, ever more lethal weapons, and the other threats that are multiplying under our eyes. We still believe that all of these problems are manageable by man, but if you take them all together you can see that this is not the case. They acquire a kind of supernatural value. Like the fundamentalists, many readers of the Gospels are reminded of the world situation when they read these apocalyptic chapters. But the fundamentalists believe that the ultimate violence comes from God, so they don't really see the relevance of what is going on now—the religious relevance. That shows how unchristian they are on a certain level. It is human violence that is threatening the world today; and this is in greater conformity to the apocalyptic theme in the Gospels than they realize.

RD: Can't we say that we have made moral progress?

RG: But the two are possible together. For example, we have less private violence. If you look at statistics from the eighteenth century, it was amazing how much violence there was compared with today.

RD: I was thinking about something like the peace movement, which would have been inconceivable just a hundred years ago.

RG: Yes, the peace movement is totally Christian, whether it knows it or not. But at the same time there is an unleashing of technological inventions that are no longer restrained by any cultural force. Jacques Maritain said that there is more good and more bad in the world all the time. I think this is an excellent formula. In other words, the world is both more Christian and less Christian, constantly. But it is fundamentally disorganized by Christianity.

RD: What you're saying, then, is in opposition to the humanist perspective of someone like a Marcel Gauchet, who says that Christianity is the religion of the end of religion.[8]

RG: Yes, Marcel Gauchet is the result of the whole modern interpretation of Christianity. We say that we are the heirs of Christianity, and that the legacy of Christianity is humanism. This is partly true. But at the same time, Marcel Gauchet does not look at the world at large. You can keep everything together with the mimetic theory. As the world looks more threatening, religion is sure to return. And in a way, 9/11 is the beginning of this, for in this attack technology was used not for humanistic ends but for radical, metaphysico-religious ends, which are not Christian. That is why it is such an amazing thing for me, because I'm used to considering religious forces and humanistic forces together, not as if one were true and the other false; and then suddenly archaic religion is coming back in an incredibly forceful way with Islam. Islam has many aspects of the Biblical religions minus the revelation of violence as bad, as not divine but human; it makes violence totally divine. This is why the opposition is more significant than with communism, which is a humanism. It is a bogus humanism, the last and most incredibly foolish form, which results in terror. But it is still humanism. And suddenly we're back in religion, in archaic religion—but with modern weapons. What the world is waiting for is the moment when the Muslim radicals will somehow be able to use nuclear weapons. And the point you have to look at on the map is Pakistan, which is a Muslim nation that has nuclear weapons. And Iran is trying to develop them.

RD: Thus you see the Cold War as being superseded both in scope and importance by the conflict with Islamic radicalism?

RG: Totally superseded, yes. And the speed with which it was superseded was just something unbelievable. The moment the Soviet Union revealed that they were human is when they didn't try to force Kennedy's blockade, and from that time on they didn't scare anybody anymore. After Khrushchev you had to get to Gorbachev fairly quickly. The moment when Gorbachev came to power was the moment when the oppositions were no longer inside humanism. The communists had wanted to organize the world so that there wouldn't be any more poor people, and the capitalists had said that the poor were insignificant. The capitalists have prevailed.

RD: And this conflict will be more dangerous because it is no longer a struggle within humanism?

RG: Yes, though they do not have the same weapons as the Soviet Union—at least not yet. Things change so fast. However, more and more people in the West are going to see the weakness 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.

RD: You mean a conflict between the consciousness that violence is human and the consciousness that violence is divine?

RG: Yes, with Islam I think the opposition is total. In Islam, if you are violent you are inevitably an instrument of God. Thus it is really saying that the apocalyptic violence comes from God. In the United States the fundamentalists say that, but the big churches do not. However, they are not coherent enough thinkers to say that if violence does not come from God then it comes from man, and therefore we are responsible for it. We accept to live under the protection of nuclear weapons. This has probably been the West's greatest sin. Think of its implications.

RD: You're referring to the logic of mutual assured destruction.

RG: Yes, nuclear deterrence. But these are lame excuses. We are putting our faith in violence; we believe that violence will keep the peace. But this assumption is inevitably false. We are trying not to think radically today about what this confidence in violence means.

RD: What do you think the effect of another 9/11-like event would be?

RG: I think that more people would become more aware. But it would probably be like the first attack. There would be a period of great spiritual and intellectual tension followed by a slow relaxation. When people don't want to see something, they are pretty good at not seeing it. I think that there are going to be spiritual and intellectual revolutions in the not too distant future. What I'm talking about now seems totally mad, and yet I think that 9/11 is going to become more meaningful all the time.

RD: Has your view of the role of violence in Christianity changed?

RG: There are mistakes in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*:[9] the refusal to use the word sacrificial in a good way, for example. There

was too much opposition between the sacrificial and the non-sacrificial. In Christianity, all sacrificial acts are intended to render violence more distant, to make it possible for man to do away with his own violence. I think that authentic Christianity completely separates God from violence; however, the role of violence in Christianity is a complex thing.

RD: At the time of *Things Hidden* you said that Christianity was a non-sacrificial religion.

RG: Christianity has always been sacrificial. It's true I gave the non-sacrificial interpretation too much importance—in order to be heretical. That is what was left of the avant-gardist attitude in me. I had to be against the Church in some way. The attitude was instinctive, since my whole intellectual training came out of surrealism, existentialism and so forth, which were all anti-Christian. It was probably a good thing, for the book might not otherwise have been successful.

RD: If you had appeared more orthodox?

RG: If I had appeared orthodox, I would have been silenced immediately, by the silence of the media.

RD: What is your current view of sacrifice in Christianity?

RG: One has to make a distinction between the sacrifice of others and self-sacrifice. Christ says to the Father: "you wanted neither holocaust nor sacrifice; then I said: 'Here I am.' " In other words: I prefer to sacrifice myself than to sacrifice the other. But this still has to be called sacrifice. When we say "sacrifice" in our modern languages it has only the Christian sense. Therefore the passion is entirely justified. God says: If nobody else is good enough to sacrifice himself rather than his brother, I will do it. Therefore I fulfill God's requirement for man. I prefer to die than to kill. But all other men prefer to kill than to die.

RD: But what about the idea of martyrdom?

RG: In Christianity you are not martyring yourself. You're not volunteering to be killed. You place yourself in a situation in which the observance of God's precepts (turn the other cheek, etc.) will get you killed. But you will be killed because men want to kill you, not because

you volunteered. This is not like the Japanese notion of the *kamikaze*. The Christian notion means you're ready to die rather than to kill. This is the attitude of the good prostitute in the judgment of Solomon. She says: Give the child to my enemy rather than kill him. Sacrificing her child is like sacrificing herself, for in accepting the equivalent of death, she sacrifices herself. And when Solomon says that she is the real mother, this does not even mean that she is the mother according to biology, but according to the spirit. This story is from the Book of Kings, which in some ways is quite a savage book. But I would say that there is no pre-Christian symbol of Christ's self-sacrifice that is superior to this one.

RD: Do you see this in contrast to the concept of martyrdom in Islam?

RG: I see it as contrasting Christianity with all archaic religions of sacrifice. Now, since the Muslim religion has copied Christianity more than anything, it is not openly sacrificial. But the Muslim religion has not destroyed the sacrifice of archaic religion the way Christianity has. No part of the Christian world has retained pre-Christian sacrifice. Many parts of the Muslim world have retained pre-Muslim sacrifice.

RD: Wouldn't spontaneous lynchings in the South be examples of archaic sacrifice?

RG: Yes, of course. You have to go to Faulkner to find the truth about this—to a novelist. Many people believe that Christianity is embodied by the South. I would say that the South is perhaps the least Christian part of the United States in terms of spirit, although it is the most Christian in terms of ritual. There is no doubt that Medieval Christianity was much closer to what fundamentalism has remained. But there are many ways to betray a religion. In the case of the South, it is very obvious, because there is such a return to the most archaic forms of religion. You must define these lynchings as a kind of archaic religious act.

RD: What do you think about the way in which people use the term "religious violence"?

RG: People use the term "religious violence" in ways that do not clear up the problems that my thinking is trying to clear up—that of a constantly moving relationship to violence, which is also historical.

RD: Would it be fair to say that according to your thinking any religious violence is necessarily archaic?

RG: Well, I would say that any religious violence includes a degree of archaism. But some aspects are so complicated. For example, in the First World War, what was Christian in the soldiers who accepted to be drafted in order to die for their country, many of them in the name of Christianity? There is something in this that is untrue to Christianity. But there is also something that is true. This does not, in my view, invalidate the fact that there is a history of religious violence, and that deep down, religions, especially Christianity, are continually influenced by this history, though its influence is perverted most of the time.

Notes

1. This interview took place, in English, on February 10, 2007 at Professor Girard's home in Stanford, California. A brief follow-up interview was conducted on August 8, 2007, also at Girard's home.
2. Interview with Henri Tincq, *Le Monde*, November 6, 2001.
3. Zbigniew Brezezinski, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership*, (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 28.
4. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Anatomy of 9/11: Evil, Rationalism, and the Sacred," included in this volume.
5. James Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Girard, Merton, Tolle," [http://www.thecentering.org/Alison_Contemplation%20in%20a%20world%20of%20violence.html], accessed August 8, 2007.
6. The Greek word *tragoidia* is a combination of *tragos* (goat) and *ode* (song): "goat song" or "the song delivered at the sacrifice of a goat."
7. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977).
8. See Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge, fwd. Charles Taylor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 101.
9. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World. Trans. S. Bann and M. Metteer.* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1987).