

## Can We Be at Peace Without Sacrifice? The Connection between Sacrifice and Crisis in the Work of René Girard<sup>1</sup>

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In the work of Girard, ‘crisis’ is an inevitable and fundamental dimension of our existence. As humans we are constantly busy causing, avoiding, or resolving crises. The threat of losing control and being overwhelmed by a crisis is never completely absent. Our imitative behaviour often leads us directly into conflict, especially when we copy the wishes, desires and ambitions of those who serve us as examples. When our desires are directed at something that belongs to another person, something that by its nature is indivisible, such as prestige or a lover, then a clash is imminent. Conflicts have a tendency to aggravate, and they have us land in situations that I and my adversary cannot get out of without external aid. Such a situation, when a relationship to a special other is at risk, can be characterized as a crisis. Compared to animals, man distinguishes himself by his vulnerability on this point. Animals accept their defeat when the battle runs high. They have no problem to go on coexisting in relatively stable dominance patterns without letting the past interfere with their relationship, and bring them to the verge of crisis once again.

According to mimetic theory, the human individual’s wishes and desires are not merely extensions of a survival strategy given with the species. They originate within a dynamic of imitation between members of the species, a dynamic that Girard called *mimesis*. In order for us to know what to desire, we are inspired by models. We do not find guidance in ourselves. We only become eager to possess a specific object, or to perform a particular action, after we have seen the object or action being positively valued by a significant other: a parent, an admired member of our peer group, or a celebrity. Something cast away by another appears to us to be valueless, and only under special circumstances will we be able to want it, for example food

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when we are hungry. To accept what has been thrown away by a person known to us, someone we perceive to be an equal, is a humiliation. Only circumstantial pressure can bring us that far.

Objects, achievements or people therefore only become truly interesting when they are associated with a person or group that we, consciously or not, look up to. According to Girard there is no given individual, authentic core that expresses itself in our life, or that we should bring to expression in our lives as a fulfilment of a calling to be true to ourselves. From the first time we open our eyes, our behaviour is responsive to that of others.<sup>2</sup> Our being is embedded in mimetic interaction that is dependent on others. What we want to have or to be, we copy from others. This is also true for our most intimate wishes – for happiness or a partner.

The triangle in which my desire, and that of my model, are directed at the same object is, according to Girard, the source of conflict *par excellence*. He distinguishes between the *mimesis of appropriation* (mimésis d'appropriation) and *mimetic rivalry*. In the first case, the aim is to obtain something specific: access to resources, conquering a partner, acquiring a disputed property, etc. Since the mimetic motive is apparent and the conflict is over something concrete, it is possible to reach a compromise, for example when an independent party respected by both is invoked to arbitrate. In such a case, a crisis can be prevented. A situation of *mimetic rivalry* arises when the parties do not succeed in solving the conflict. The focus of attention shifts from the desired object towards the adversary. Who will win has now become the main question. The issue that triggered the dispute now at most serves as an argument justifying the growing hatred. Girard characterizes the motivation of rivals as *metaphysical* or *ontological desire*, as opposed to the object-directed desire of the mimesis of appropriation. The rivals become *mimetic rivals* who are obsessed with each other, caught as they are in a drama of *conflictual mimesis*. The intensification of the conflict brings about a dynamic in which no one can remain a bystander if he does not want to be accused of treason. On the level of the parties concerned, mimetic rivalry is insoluble and inexorably leads to crisis.

Three notions play a role in Girard's analysis of a crisis: undifferentiation, doubles and contamination. Undifferentiation is the blurring of cultural differences and the loss of identities between the parties confronting one another. In the exchange

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<sup>2</sup> As empirical research by Meltzoff and Moore (1977) on imitation in neonates demonstrates.

of accusations and punches, the escalating mimetic dynamic causes the singularity and identity of the conflicting parties to fade and to make both parties increasingly look alike to the point that they become one another's mirror-image. Girard expresses this by calling them each other's 'doubles'. Doubles can arise at all levels of conflict, from a politically all-encompassing level --for example, between the militant Islam and the West (Dumouchel 2011, 318)-- to icons of a cultural avant-garde (Nietzsche vs. Wagner, Girard 1976), domestic quarrels and street-fights. Fighting is contagious. The fighters appeal to the mimetic susceptibility of the bystanders who, in a sort of domino-effect, start mingling in the dispute, supporting one of the parties in ever-growing numbers. In mimetic theory, the metaphor of contamination is used to denote this snowball effect. Contamination is the motor of further undifferentiation and cultural decay. In mythology and literature, epidemics, plagues, floods, drought and incest are often used as metaphors for the loss of differences. Incest jeopardizes the role-differentiation within the family sphere. Are the children that Oedipus fathered with Iocaste his siblings, or offspring? Is Iocaste their mother or their grandmother? In many cultures, committing incest is an important element in sacred kingship, and underlines the affinity of the king with crisis as such, something I shall elaborate upon later in this piece.

### **The Turning Point in the Crisis**

As more individuals and groups get involved in the conflict, the crisis escalates. Existing alliances fall apart, leaving room for new polarizations. It becomes harder to discern who can be trusted and who cannot. The intensity of the violence and the number of victims rises. As self-destruction becomes a real possibility, finding a way out becomes more and more urgent. Suddenly the solution presents itself, at the very moment when the violence of all happens to be directed at one individual or group in particular. Suddenly all find themselves in the same camp. The target of aggression may be a deviant, the 'odd one out', a suspicious minority, or a group member whose low profile is suddenly questioned and seen as proof of his guilt. Seen from the outside, the choice is completely random. The evildoer is rendered harmless and the divisive conflict mimesis seems to have evaporated. The peace seems to come from outside. 'Did the victim maybe perform a miracle?' people wonder. Anyway, one can make a new start. In approximately these terms, Girard evokes the turning point in the

primeval crisis. This dynamic, in which the violence of all is discharged in the persecution and collective annihilation of one victim, Girard calls the scapegoat mechanism. According to him it is the motor of hominization and the foundation of culture.

The peace came as a miracle. It had everything to do with the expelled evildoer, but the expulsion was much more than just losing the malefactor. It resulted in an instant transformation of the bunch of competing individuals into a community that is now trying to find words for the good thing that has happened to it. If there is again the threat of a crisis, or an actual outbreak, the events that seem to have caused the miracle are repeated in an attempt to keep or restore the peace. The re-play and representation of an event that cannot be empirically confirmed, and is also not instinctual, in Girard's anthropology makes up the moment of hominization. The new attention – very different from a feeling of hunger, sexual lust, or the urge for dominance – is the first manifestation of symbolic consciousness. The victim who caused the fighters to reconcile becomes the first symbol of the new human way of togetherness. It is the primeval sign, the condition for the creation of all later language. Using the De Saussurian terminology, for Girard the victim is the signifier (*signifiant*), while the peace, the possibility of a cultural order and all the positive and negative associations that are connected with the primeval event, are the signified (*signifié*) (Girard 1987, 99-103). The initial victim represents both the evil of the crisis and the blessing of salvation, or, in psychoanalytic terms: it is both the object of positive and negative transference.

Crisis remains an inevitable dimension of human evolution. Communities learn from experience and proceed more and more preventively by regularly organizing ritual simulations of the crisis that led to their salvation. While the rituals copy the practices and the ambiance of the primeval drama as closely as possible, the the first human communities also attempt to render the ritual drama as controllable as possible. The choice of the victim is not left to chance, but a selection is made according to set criteria – first-borns, the king, prisoners of war, cattle, or by drawing lots. The collective expulsion of the cause of evil becomes a 'sacrifice', a *sacrificium*, a controlled operation that activates the sacred through a killing – or an act that represents or implies a killing. In this way, religion allows the first human communities to survive their destructive, mimetic nature.

## **Kingship**

Sacred kingship is one of Girard's best known examples of a ritual complex that stages the scapegoat mechanism. On the basis of ethnographic material – especially from Bantu Africa – he demonstrates how various traditions that at first sight seem bizarre – the violent capture and humiliation of the king at his installation, the ritual killing of the ruler, the belief that he has power over the natural conditions of life (rain and the fertility of man, cattle, and land), receive a plausible explanation if they are held against the light of the scapegoat mechanism.

In this context, I would like to present a few observations from my own research on sacred kingship among the peoples of the headwaters of the Nile. Compared to Bantu kingship that served Girard as material, things are rougher in the case of the Nilotes. The necessity to approach as closely as possible the violence of the primeval expulsion seems to be taken more seriously here. When a crisis presents itself – as a result of war, disputes or drought – it is the king himself who in the end is lynched. Not only the king, but also his subjects are constantly alert to the possibility of the outbreak of a crisis, and are ready to blame each other for having instigated it. If the ritual response comes so close to the reality of the violence of the primeval crisis, things can easily go wrong. The consensus around the king – as the target of blame and his community's saviour – may collapse. In such cases, the community falls apart – usually into polarized halves, sometimes into more fragments. In order to prevent this, communities have a clear interest in keeping the violence at greater distance, by ritualizing it further, and in keeping it out of the reach of the common man. The Bantu kingdoms have, in general, and they possibly thanked their greater stability to it. As a social formation grows increasingly stable, its tolerance for a full-scale ritual reproduction of the violence of the crisis diminishes. Human sacrifice is stopped and substituted by for example the burning of a group totem, the slaughtering of an animal victim, or, at the modern end, the smashing of a bottle. Ritual innovations that play down the violent side of the primeval crisis often meet with resistance from the responsible priesthood, who—tellingly-- often defend it as the moment of violence as if it were the core of the faith. This used to be the case in the past, but even today differences of opinion on the need of the use of violence evoke strong feelings, as is proven by the debate on the implementation of laws meant to

mitigate or mask the violence used in the ritual slaughter of animals in the Netherlands.

## **War**

As is the case with kingship, war has the possibility of mobilizing the community as a whole and so pre-empt an internal crisis. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard analyzes the warfare of the Tupinamba of Brazil in terms of the scapegoat mechanism (Girard 1977, 274-280). For the Tupinamba, who are caught in permanent chains of revenge and counter-revenge, war is the central social institution. They prefer capturing their enemies to killing them. The prisoner of war waits in relative comfort for the moment he will be killed by the captor. He enjoys an array of privileges and is even given a sister of the captor/killer as a wife. After a stay that may last up to several years, he is killed by his captor and, during a savage feast, torn up and eaten by the community – another example of an attempt at faithful reproduction of the violence of the primeval drama. Girard explains the pampering of the prisoner of war as a way of connecting his fate as closely as possible to the intended well-being of the community of the victors. Of course, the same consensual, crisis-averting effect can also be achieved without bringing the enemy home and eating him, or displaying his skull as is common in other cultures. In societies where the communities of origin retrieve the corpses of the combatants from the battlefield, war has an equally powerful unifying effect on both parties in the conflict. In this case the victims are sacralised as national martyrs. It is the only form of sacrificial death that has survived even under regimes that define themselves as strictly secular.

## **Ritual**

Besides the superinstitutions of war and kingship, archaic communities have recourse to extensive ritual repertoires to fend off the danger of crisis. Some rituals are preventive, others strengthen social order by creating or sustaining the necessary cultural differentiation, others again are restorative and healing. In the eleventh chapter of *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard shows that in their core all rituals correspond to the same sacrificial scheme (Girard 1977, 274-308). First they instigate

or stage a moment of disorder and confusion; then a specific individual or group is designated as its cause; after that the elimination of the evil element is effectuated; and finally all participants celebrate the restoration of order and unity in a festive, communal meal.

Sacrifices that are aimed at preventing crisis and personal misfortune or at boosting social order and personal prosperity are usually framed as gifts to the gods in the expectation that the gods will reciprocate the offering according to the principle of ‘*do ut des*’<sup>3</sup>. In Girard’s primeval drama, gods do not play any role. They are an after-effect of the drama, its *apotheosis*, not a condition for the performance of a full-fledged sacrifice. Kings and other sacred powers can just as well serve as addressees of the offering. The Lotuho whom I have studied perform a ritual in which they expel ‘god’ as the cause of crises and tell him to go to their enemies. Gods are the personalized representations of the sacrificially expelled violence that continues to loom outside the community, and often looks for a way to re-enter (Simonse 1992, 319-320). The framing of the relation between the community and the threatening forces from outside as an exchange of human offerings for divine blessings provides the community with a perspective for action and with the possibility to build confidence within a context that is fundamentally insecure.

Rites of passage form a good example of a class of rituals that serve to establish and maintain order and to ward off confusion and disorder. These manage and maintain the boundaries between girls and nubile women, between adolescents and warriors, between community leaders and retired elders, as well as the boundary between the living and the dead. The sacrificial dimension of these rites is manifest in the real or symbolic bloodshed that is part of the ritual. In rites of initiation, the drawing of blood by the novites is central: passively (circumcision) or actively (by killing an enemy or a carnivorous animal, or by just offering a domestic animal for sacrifice). The initiation ceremonies take place at a spot where the rules of social differentiation do not apply, outside of the regular dwelling places in the bush. In these rites too an effort is made to simulate the primeval crisis. Girard presents ethnographical examples where this simulation is taken very literally and actual punches are dealt out and received.

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<sup>3</sup> Latin: ‘I give so that you will give’

Of course, when boys are taken to the bush for initiation, there are not meant to be any deaths, but if they do happen – as I was told by informants from South Sudan – it is not necessarily a bad sign for the new generation that is about to take over the responsibility for the security and order in the community.

Purification rituals are there to keep violence -- or the possible contamination with it-- outside the door. The warrior who comes home from the war may only enter the village when he has dissociated himself from the violence of war, usually by eliminating the uncleanness through the sacrifice of an animal. Before the cultivation season, in many communities, all disputes have to be settled, and endorsed by purificatory sacrifices made by the parties at loggerheads. The same goes for the breaking of rules. All of this serves to prevent crisis.

### **Prohibition**

The word ‘prohibition’ has been mentioned. In Girard’s first anthropological texts, prohibition is presented as the negative counterpart of ritual, as in the work of the French sociologist Durkheim. The rite is positive: it encourages an atmosphere of crisis, and through the repetition of the primeval drama, it announces peace. The prohibition, on the other hand, nips the tendency towards violence in the bud. Girard presents the rite and the prohibition as complementary, the prohibition being a ‘negative rite’, and sacrifice a ‘positive rite’. Culture does not just spring from the reconciliation brought about by sacrifice; it stems from the double imperative of prohibition and ritual. (Girard 1987, 28)

Often prohibition is aimed at acts that emanate from the mimesis of appropriation, for example the Old Testament’s ‘You shall not covet your neighbour’s house, etc.’ (Exodus 20:17). The incest prohibition must also be seen in that context. It forbids men to have sexual access to their sisters and daughters. Sexuality and procreation become part of a complex of transactions of giving and receiving, as described by Mauss in his *Essai sur le don*. The incest prohibition creates unambiguous relations of kinship, so that a mother cannot at the same time be a sister, etc. Rules concerning the division of game and food create order in another domain. In the course of history, these are supplemented and refined with prohibitions and regulations regarding certain objects and acts that in themselves do not cause violence but summon images of crisis and violence – for example, blood (including menstrual



blood), noise, or the sharp edge of a knife. In the last case, etiquette prescribes that when laying the table the blade of the knife has to be turned towards the plate -- that is, not turned towards the other. Work, often dangerously competitive, is also targeted by a prohibition, for example in the form of a day of compulsory rest every seventh day. Behaviour that is demonstratively imitative -- mimicking, dancing -- is forbidden. In this context, Girard points to the widespread taboo concerning twins. In many communities either both infants or one of the two is killed after birth. In communities that I have researched, both children are placed on the steps of a kind of ladder, the firstborn on the higher rung. In this way the differentiation between senior and junior is achieved, and the dangerous equality repelled.

### **Hominization**

For Girard the realization by the scapegoating mob that the peace that had descended upon it was somehow the work of the victim, is the defining moment of hominization. How the re-enactment of the scapegoating scenario consolidates into a premeval religion -- as a result of a series of trials and errors spread across millenia, or as a single event --, is hard to pinpoint given the current state of knowledge. It seems plausible that the activation of the scapegoat mechanism must often have fallen short in defusing a crisis -- possibly because the necessary unanimity was not reached and the society fell apart into mutually hostile segments. It is probable that many prehistoric cultural communities collapsed as a result of crisis (Girard 2007, 79). It is no surprise, then, that other researchers working from similar premises put forward alternative models for the explanation of the process of hominization. Eric Gans, one of Girard's first students, now a professor at the University of California in Los Angeles, starts from the supposition that human behaviour is mimetic, as does his teacher. In opposition to Girard, he defends the position that prohibition, and not the scapegoat mechanism, is the most important lever of hominization (Gans 1981, 1985). He deems it improbable that the protohuman groups whose aggressive impulses were still kept in check by animal dominance patterns were able to fall into as deep a mimetic crisis as Girard postulates. According to Gans, such a crisis could only have happened to creatures who, through the use of language, had taken more distance from their primary wants and needs. Further, he finds it hard to imagine that it is possible for cultural order to be born from the kind of chaos that Girard ascribes to the

primeval crisis. Gans therefore proposes an alternative drama. His primeval scene places a number of individuals, driven by the mimesis of appropriation, around an attractive object. At the moment that all reach out for it, there is a flash of awareness of imminent violence. The group freezes, its members signaling to hold back. In this collective renunciation a new, non-violent togetherness becomes possible. The object's simultaneous connection with the shunned violence and the non-violent togetherness defines the sacred. The primeval object, according to Gans, is the transformative moment that turns the desired object into a sacred presence –dangerous and benevolent– and into the prototype of all symbols. With the prototype of all symbols. With the communal consumption of the sacred object, the typically human form of attention and being together is affirmed.

Gans's hypothetical presentation works best in the case of hunting spoils, because they can, after the signal of prohibition, be divided and communally consumed. This same scheme can, without drastic modifications, be applied to the incest prohibition that renders women – the other conflict-arousing valuable in the archaic context – accessible in a symbolically regulated manner. While in Girard's model the transition from crisis to peace, from non-instinctive attention to symbolic representation, comes about by the crisis running its full course, this is accomplished in Gans's model by a gesture that halts the crisis and suspends it.

In the interviews with Antonello and De Castro Rocha, Girard responds to Gans's criticism (Girard 2007, 178-183). His reply is: How could these protohumans be so afraid of violence if they had not been exposed to it before, and how could a simple forbidding gesture or a flash of insight at a moment of great excitement have had enough force to prevent the violence from breaking out? According to Girard, the prohibition can only arise after the crisis has run its full course. Girard suggests that Gans's allergy to religion prevents him from recognizing murder as the foundation of culture, spurring him to develop a theory that can do without the collective murder.

I have mentioned Gans's approach for two reasons. In the first place, I want to show that the premiss that human behaviour is mimetic is capable of generating several explanatory models for different aspects of human behaviour. Girard presents his theory as a coherent set of scientific hypotheses, not as dogma or the residue of a single revelation. As research progresses, mimetic theory will undoubtedly become more multiform and develop into various schools and ways of thinking. Secondly, this

tangential discussion shows that even if other conclusions are drawn from the mimetic presuppositions, the notion of crisis maintains a central place.

### **Sacrificial Crisis**

Over thousands of millenia, man battled oncoming crises, and threats of crisis, through the means of sacrifice and prohibition. The institutions built on sacrifice and prohibition differentiated into a wide variety of cultural forms. They provided shorter or longer periods of social stability, in which the danger of a new crisis seemed defused. It is likely that religious regimes emerged, flourished and crumbled according to a predictable life cycle: stable sacrificial regimes raising the self-confidence in man's capacity to manage his violent nature, relaxing the fearful concern be as faithful as possible in copying the primeval sacrificial scheme, and resulting in a mitigation of the more drastic forms of sacrificial violence. As the life-cycle of a sacrificial regime unfolds, sacrifice is increasingly used preventively and the dosis of violence is measured. For every threat to peace and prosperity, there is a tailored sacrificial response ready at hand. The liturgy of ceremonies becomes increasingly elaborate. Ritual calendars develop in every stratum of the community – in the household, neighborhood, village, province, state. A priestly hierarchy emerges that monitors the compliance to religious regulations and prohibitions. The more the mechanisms that are supposed to control the crisis are perfected, the more the self-confidence of those in charge grows, and the more refined, powerful and attractive the positions of responsibility become. As the opportunities for competition, excellence and perfection grow, so grow rivalry and struggles for power. These become more frequent and undermine the structures from within, having them collapse or making them an easy target for enemies. The regime that takes over is likely to carry through a return in the direction of 'the old time religion'. It will be more drastic in its sacrificial operations, and be more open **for** intuitions tending towards violent action, as well as more rigid in its interpretation of tradition.

This inflexibility usually implies the willingness to use violence in enforcing faithfulness to tradition and social consensus, a harsher sacrificial practice, and rigorous restrictions on the freedom to ask questions concerning the rationale of prohibitions and commandments, the latter being a way of securing the

*méconnaissance* of the scapegoat mechanism.<sup>4</sup> According to Girard, the scapegoat mechanism can only function if its truth stays hidden for all involved participants. The durability of the sacrificial peace depends on the endurance of the lie that the victim is guilty and the community innocent. The fact that the cognitive content of religious doctrine is from the very start a distortion of the truth of the scapegoat mechanism, opens the door for ever new claims to true knowledge regarding the operation of sacrifice. This search for truth also inspires the first attempts to account for the coherence of the universe.

After the spread of the use of writing, the search for the most effective repetition of the primeval drama gains fixed points of reference. The role of oral tradition, religious intuition and mythical logic, is taken over by the recognition of the authority of the holy scriptures. The possibility of comparing texts and testing them on their reliability renders the question of the truth of the events delivered by these texts urgent, especially in times of crisis. Questions arise regarding the gods' ambiguous moral character – being violent and bringing peace simultaneously. Priests feel forced to rid the gods of their ambivalent character by morally cleaning them up and ascribing their negative qualities to lower, evil demons – like in India. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard discusses Plato's struggle with the ambiguous character of the Greek gods (Girard 1982, 113-115). He shows how Plato oscillates between respect for tradition -- in which the gods are both the authors of crisis and the saviors from it --, and the reliance on his own faculty of reasoning. Plato trivialises the crimes of some gods, while he censures those of others. The introduction of writing not only influences the belief in mythology, it also affects the faith in the effectiveness of ritual. In the religious transformation that takes place in the first millenium before our era in different places on the Eurasian continent – Zoroastrianism in Central Asia, Jainism and Buddhism in India, Confucianism and Taoism in China, the Mosaic religion and the prophets of the Old Testament in Palestine, and the tragedies and philosophy of Greece – the appeal for personal responsibility becomes stronger, at the expense of strict compliance to ritual prescriptions.

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<sup>4</sup> A central tenet of Girard's theory of the scapegoat mechanism is that it works best where it is least understood. The concept of *méconnaissance* (translated as 'misrecognition' or 'misunderstanding') is discussed in Girard, 1978, 1-38.

## **Monotheism as an Answer to the Sacrificial Crisis**

*Violence and the Sacred* begins with an extensive discussion of the sacrificial crisis as it manifests itself in classical Greek tragedy. A number of tragedies explicitly deal with the effectiveness of sacrifice, for example Euripides' 'The Madness of Heracles'. (Girard 1977, 39-67). When Heracles offers a sacrifice that is supposed to cleanse him from the violence committed during his Twelve Works, he suddenly mistakes his own wife and children for enemies and kills them. The message of the tragedy appears to be that the good and bad violence of the sacrifice can no longer be clearly separated. The tragedy as a genre consists of a series of confrontations between protagonists defending irreconcilable positions. It proceeds as the bouncing back and forth of assertions and objections by adversaries who increasingly become each other's mirror-image. According to Girard, the unstoppable reciprocity of the conflict ---the symmetry of the accusations, the loss of differences between adversaries who become each other's *doubles*--- reflects, , a wider *sacrificial crisis* in the Greek society of the fifth century BCE. The search of the hero for a way out of the crisis – often represented as a plague or an epidemic– often leads to the tragic recognition of his own complicity in the crisis. Girard sees a close parallel with the prophets of the Old Testament who preached the failure of the sacrificial rites around the same time.

Monotheism is one of the answers to the sacrificial crisis. Monotheism, according to Girard, is in first instance about *devictimizing* religion. It forbids the fabrication of new gods. The Biblical prophets confront the logic of sacrifice with the logic of obedience to God's law. The law prescribes exactly which sacrifices are pleasurable to God, and what punishments are to be used against offenders. The arbitrariness that is characteristic of the choice of scapegoats is in this way curtailed. From the new perspective, disobedience to the law by the community is the cause of crisis. The prophets radicalize this message even further – from an external obedience to the law, towards an engagement with values such as compassion and justice. Over a broad belt of the Eurasian continent, from the Mediterranean up to the China Sea, the sacrificial orientation of religion topples. If the old religiosity was on the side of the sacrificers and their ongoing demand for new victims, the new teachers emphasize a way of life corresponding to ethical principles.

The religious transformation that led to the founding of the contemporary world religions has been termed the *Axenzeit* by Karl Jaspers (1949). The

popularizing historian of religion Karen Armstrong (2006) makes the notion *axial age* central to her comparative study of the world religions . To her and Jaspers, this axial age is a period of expansion of the boundaries of human consciousness. The innovation is due to the penetrating insight of ingenious spiritual leaders who substitute the religiosity connected to sacrifice and ritual with a deeper understanding of the human condition and a higher ethos aimed at compassion, nonviolence and the detachment from worldly desire. The spiritual and moral transformation of the axial age is seen as a crucial step forwards in the cultural epos of man, a step that, according to Armstrong, has remained unequalled up until this day.

On the point of the expansion of consciousness, Girard would indeed agree with her. A tip of the veil of the *méconnaissance* accompanying sacrifice is lifted during the axial age. The founders of the world religions saw that sacrifice was no longer capable of producing peace and consensus. They lay the responsibility for the use and abuse of violence with man. But where the deeper understanding of man's nature harboured in the world religions is a reason for optimism for Armstrong (as it is for many other religious and non-religious believers in evolutionary progress), Girard (who often emphasizes his indebtedness to the Judeo-Christian tradition) puts the emphasis on the increased vulnerability of human relationships: because the sacrificial safety valve no longer provides solace, and peace has increasingly become the responsibility of mimetic human beings.

In Girard's opinion, the gospel is the last and definitive step in this huge spiritual transformation. Christ radicalizes the stakes of the prophets. The fulfilment of the law does not lie in compliance with the law, but in the willingness of both the offenders and the upholders of the law to test their acts and deepest intentions against the spirit of God's law. This spirit gives priority to the attention to victims of persecution and exclusion over the interests of lawmakers, the sacrificers, politicians and the crowd in whose name sacrifices are made. This is what was at stake in Christ's controversial teachings.

While Christ's sentencing, his deliverance to the anger of the mob, and his martyrdom show the virulence of the scapegoat mechanism, the revolutionary character of the gospel, according to Girard, does not lie in its recognition of the horror of the events, nor in the evident innocence and uniqueness of the victim. As an account of a collective murder, the Passion is no more than an exemplary case in an inexhaustible historical list. The new element in the gospel is the unwillingness of a

small group of followers of the victim to be dragged along in the compelling sacrificial consensus that unleashes the murder. They only barely succeeded, as even the most committed followers appear to be far from immune to the seductive force of mimetic unanimity. By maintaining that Christ was innocent and that he had God on his side, they undermine the sacrificial transfiguration of the victim. This is where, for Girard, the fundamental break with archaic religiosity occurs. The manner in which Christ's followers retell the story of his conviction invalidates all the other stories of victims of collective rage that were deified because of the peace that their deaths brought (Girard, 1993).<sup>5</sup>

A new age dawns in which the violence directed against the scapegoat – and in consequence every religiously legitimated cosmological representation – can no longer remain the object of *méconnaissance*. According to Girard, the development of independent scientific research in Europe is, in last instance, indebted to the liberating, antisacrificial impulse of Christianity. This same impulse, however, corrodes religion – including the church which would for centuries continue to package its message in sacrificial ritual and idiom. This corrosion only really takes effect in modern times. It has become a global phenomenon by the beginning of the 21st century. Managing the potentially violent mimetic dynamics increasingly becomes a responsibility of politicians who often fall back on a raw, no longer sacrificially embedded, scapegoat thinking. Never before were people mobilized on such a scale to eradicate a perceived evil in genocides, in ethnic and religious cleansing campaigns and in mass-slaughter to eradicate a perceived evil for the sake of a dreamed-up image of social harmony. As sacrificial operations, these mass killings are bound to fail. They miss any cathartic effect and leave society congested with unreconciled violence. The only thing these operations accomplish is the ideological, ethnical, or racial homogenization of the populations that were subjected to scapegoating regimes, causing enormous, irreversible human and cultural loss.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Girard shows that the passages from the New Testament that serve as proof of an anti-Jewish bias only show their true meaning when they are read from a universal perspective within the history of religion -- a perspective, moreover, that supersedes the conflict between the Abrahamic religions. Girard also opposes the view that the story of the resurrection is a variation of the ancient theme of salvation through a deified scapegoat (Frazer 1913, Pt.VI). This thesis had been given new life shortly before Girard's publication by Maccoby (1987) who, through new text-critical insights, constructs a hellenistic, anti-Semitic Paul, who is supposed to be at the base of the merging of the messianism of the Jesus movement with eastern spirituality that resulted in historical Christianity.

<sup>6</sup> A thorough discussion from a Girardian perspective of the connection of political violence --- including genocide and ethnic cleansing --- and the modern state is Dumouchel 2011.

### **Crisis at the Individual Level**

As the sacrificial crisis progresses, the anchorage of individual and group identity in the sacrificial order is undermined and the individual is exposed to an increasingly unrestrained mimetic dynamic. Without prohibitions and the catharsis of sacrifice, individuals lose their own sense of direction and are left to their own desires, which cling to random models. Desire, says Girard, is the mimetic crisis itself --- the mimetic rivalry with the other--- brought to a head. We find this rivalry in all of our undertakings, from our private lifestyle to our professional and intellectual ambitions. Desire is what happens with human relations if the victim disappears (Girard 1987, 299).

Without the sacrificial safety valve, no one escapes a personal crisis and the necessity of dealing with his/her mimetic impulses. It is certainly possible to manage one's personal crisis and to reach a degree of stability, but in no instance does one arrive at a definitive solution. Many people get stuck in their crisis and become a psychiatric case. In the third part of *Things Hidden*, Girard and the French psychiatrists Lefort and Oughourlian, review some of the the common psychological disorders and explore the possibility of describing these in mimetic terms. The suggestions are stimulating and relieve psychology of a great deal of its theoretical ballast (the unconscious, narcissism etc.). For example, manic depression can be read as the self-perception of doubles in competition in which one feels on top of the world at one point and deep down the next, depending on the vibrations of admiration or envy that you believe you detect. Attacks of hysteria – a term which has become a catch-all for just about anything according to the three gentlemen – correspond to manifestations of antagonistic, negative mimesis. Psychosis is a condition in which the individual has detached himself completely from day-to-day reciprocity with others and feels as if he stands alone in opposition to the rest of the world, as a target of persecution, and/or as a god. The psychotic individual falls, as it were, back to the degree zero of culture. In Girard's perspective, there is no discontinuity between psychological stability and insanity. We are all doubles at the mercy of permanent mimetic fluctuations. However, some individuals, as a result of circumstance or by luck, comes out of it better than the others.



## From Crisis to Apocalypse

In Girard's later work, the term 'crisis' is rare. That the world is in a crisis is a *fait accompli*. We now witness a world which is in the process of causing its own collapse. From the cyclical time of crisis and recovery, we have now arrived in an unavoidably linear, escalating end-time. The interviews with Chantre translated into English as *Battling to the End* have to do with this imminent apocalypse (Girard 2011). According to Girard, Clausewitz, describes the dynamic of the final struggle with great lucidity in his *Vom Kriege*.<sup>7</sup> The principle of 'going to extremes', which Clausewitz analyzes and recommends as the strategic principle of modern warfare, has an irresistible dynamic. Clausewitz was writing in a time in which warfare was still subjected to restrictions that limited the involvement and exposure of the civilian population. His idea that parties at war 'go to extremes' contributed to the erasing of those restrictions. The wars between states, that Clausewitz was writing about, have now become a rarity. Most wars are carried out between states and nonstate actors in which citizens are involved, actively and passively, on a scale never before seen. The struggle of Islamist militants against 'the power of evil' embodied in the West is a context in which 'new extremes' are achieved. Terrorist suicide attacks are a 'new extreme' of sacrificial negativity. While in archaic sacrifice a person was killed in order to save others, in a suicide attack one kills oneself with the aim of dragging others along into death. The Western response to Islamist terrorism also reveals new extremes in the manner in which terrorists are prosecuted and in the subordination of the law to these new methods of prosecution.

During the Clausewitz interviews, Chantre repeatedly prompts Girard to get him to suggest specific action perspectives that might turn the tide. At these moments, Girard seems somehow embarrassed and admits that Chantre is addressing a weak point in his thought. As an excuse, Girard proffers that his Christian perspective possibly tempts him to place concrete political choices too quickly in a broad eschatological context (Girard 2011, 193). He readily admits that without political resistance to extremist polarization, the world would already have gone to ruin. At the same time, he wonders whether it is possible at all to link eschatology to active political involvement. He does not deny that an obvious consequence of his ideas

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<sup>7</sup> Girard translates Clausewitz's 'das Streben nach dem Äussersten' as 'la montée aux extrêmes' which the English translator has turned into 'the escalation to extremes'.

might be the assumption of an exemplary role within the present-day political context but adds, after quoting the gospel of St. John (4:44) ‘that a prophet has no honour in his own country’, that in our time positive models hardly get a chance to stand out in the public domain and media, controlled as they are by negative imitation. The most that can be achieved in the existing context is the rule of law which, in the end, is still a sacrificial figure, the small violence of the law keeping the larger violence in check. Moreover, Girard remarks, corners are more and more often cut in the application of the law. It won’t be long before this dam against violence also gives way (Girard 2011, 108).

What interests Girard as an eschatological thinker is the transformation of the undifferentiating negative escalation – along the lines of Clausewitz’s ‘escalation to extremes’ – into the positive undifferentiation of Christian love. This transformation into the kingdom of love comes about when the struggle between the ‘thrones, dominions, principalities and powers’ (Colossians 1:16) that is grafted on mimetic violence is decided to the advantage of the truth that knows how these powers function. Girard stresses that the outcome of the struggle is far from certain (2011, 46). That does not mean that this transformation would not be possible within a confined, self-renewing community. The idea that a deep chasm lies between war and peace or between violence and reconciliation is, he thinks, a great misunderstanding. In the heart of the violent identity lies a peace-loving identity concealed ‘as its most secret possibility’. This secret is the strength of eschatology (2011, 46). Medieval literature is full of examples of passionate reconciliation between antagonists who previously sought each other’s death with equal passion. The greatest obstacle for a radical change of this sort is our illusion of individual autonomy. The transformation – Girard uses in the French version the words ‘*transmutation*’ and ‘*mue*’<sup>8</sup> and not the individualizing ‘*conversion*’ – is not a historical dialectical process but proceeds as a collective, mimetic reversal (Girard 2007, 100 and 2011, 47).

What has happened, in the discussion between Chantre and Girard, to the term crisis? In the end-time at the centre of the discussion, all human relationships, without exception, are affected, according to Girard, by an escalating sacrificial crisis. But this crisis is sterile, no longer carries within it the promise of reconciliation, and will finally collapse as a result of its own dynamic. Girard appears to reserve the term

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<sup>8</sup> Mould, moulting, shedding, sloughing, breaking of the voice (in puberty), *Larousse Modern Dictionary* (French-English/English-French)

crisis for the productive chaos in which culture came into being and for the historical events that undermined the sacrificial order.

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