

# The uniqueness of Christianity in the mimetic theory of René Girard

---

## Introduction

---

René Girard was born in Avignon in 1923, though for most of his adult life he lived in the USA, teaching and researching across at least five universities. His early career focussed on French and literary criticism but later moved into cultural studies, anthropology, mythology and theology. His primary contribution to those fields has been the *mimetic theory*, which provides an account of human violence and its mitigation (Kirwan 2009, 14–16; Girard 1996, 1–6). For readers unfamiliar with Girard’s work, I have summarised the key progression of ideas in the mimetic theory in an appendix.

According to Girard, the mechanism responsible for both the escalation and the control of violence, forming the basis of both culture and religion, has been challenged in a fundamental way by Christianity. In this essay I describe the unique contributions that Girard claims are made by Christianity, and evaluate challenges to those claims of uniqueness.

In some way, this essay is an explication and commentary on this quote:

“I can see quite clearly that everything is governed, in the final analysis, by the gospel text itself; all we are doing is to go beyond the sacrificial reading that is inevitable at the first stage, thanks to the mimetic crisis that our own history has become, and the new perspective that it opens for us” (Girard 1987, 435).

## The contribution of Christianity

---

A core component of Girard’s project is to show that the influence of Christianity has led to the undermining of sacred support for the single victim mechanism. “With [Jesus] there takes place a shift that is both tiny and gigantic—a shift that follows on directly from the Old Testament but constitutes a decisive break as well. This is the complete elimination of the sacrificial for the first time—the end of divine violence and the explicit revelation of all that has gone before. It calls for a complete change of emphasis and spiritual metamorphosis without precedent in the whole history of mankind” (Girard 1987, 200).

The uniqueness of Christianity is not that God suffers at the hands of humanity, for that is found in other religions as well. Neither is uniqueness located in any supernatural claim about miracles, nor in Jesus’ exemplary character or ethics. Instead, the contributions that have no precedent are the deconstruction of human violence, the denial of any divine warrant for sacrificial violence, and the revelation of a god in whom there is no violence (Girard 1987, 429). To clarify those interwoven components, I will first examine two chapters from Girard’s book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Girard 2001, chap. 9–10) and then augment them with ideas from other sources.

### **I See Satan Fall Like Lightning**

At a surface level, the structure of the Gospel is the same as that of myth: a mimetic cycle leads to the victimisation of Jesus and to a subsequent declaration of his divinity (Girard 2001, 106). It is true that after the events reported in the Gospels, Christianity no longer requires any blood sacrifice, but

although that is a step forward, it is not unique to Christianity (Girard 2001, 105). There is a deeper element beneath the structure, however, that sets the Christian story apart: by making the single victim mechanism explicit and visible, the Gospels provide a key to understanding myth, in which that mechanism has always been present and yet hidden (Girard 2001, 104).

Girard's exposition of how the single victim mechanism is revealed by the Bible starts with some observations about the way victims are presented in the Old Testament. First, he compares the story of Joseph in Genesis with the Greek myth of Oedipus. Although there are many similarities, such as their unanimous and violent expulsion during childhood, and their elevation to senior roles in a foreign country, there is one "irreducible difference": "In the myth the expulsions of the hero are justified each time. In the biblical account they never are" (Girard 2001, 107–109). Regardless of how we might view Oedipus' culpability now, the internal perspective of the myth expresses no doubt of either his guilt or the appropriateness of his punishment. The Bible, on the other hand, presents Joseph as innocent and the violent treatment of him as unjustified.

Second, Girard notes the overwhelming textual space given to victims who cry out against their persecutors in the Psalms. Raymund Schwager points out that "in 100 of the 150 Psalms we encounter a victim at the center of a group of persecutors" (Cowdell 2013, 93).

Third, in the book of Job, Girard sees a hero with the audacity to deny the guilt projected onto him by his friends. Furthermore, he does so in a way that positions God on the side of victims (Girard 2001, 117).

Joseph, the Psalms and Job all exemplify a pattern in the Old Testament in which, contrary to the mythical perspective, the executioners are guilty of persecuting innocent victims. This reversal of innocence and guilt is unprecedented and "the keystone of biblical inspiration" (Girard 2001, 118).

Apart from exposing the injustice of victimisation, the Old Testament also creates a bi-directional separation between divinity and victimisation. The abhorrence of idolatry makes it impossible for victims to become deified, and the portrayal of the one true God makes it impossible for Yahweh to be victimised (Girard 2001, 119). This separation gradually undermines the primitive religious endorsement of sacred violence so that God first calls for animal sacrifice to replace human sacrifice, and later repudiates *any* interest in sacrifice.

Girard's analysis then proceeds from the Old Testament to the Gospels. The Gospel proposal that the victim Jesus is the one true God once again shares surface-level affinities to the mythic structure that need to be examined more deeply. Two aspects of the Gospels separate them from myth: they continue the Biblical theme of viewing the victim, Jesus in this case, as innocent; and the deification is proclaimed only by a "dissident minority" – the disciples – rather than the collective mob (Girard 2001, 123).

The minority who declare Jesus to be divine demonstrate a rupture of the unanimity typical of the mimetic cycle. An important cause of that rupture is the Resurrection, which opens the disciples' eyes to the reality of the mimetic cycle and the role of Jesus as scapegoat in that cycle (Girard 2001, 124–125). Prior to the Resurrection, Jesus was totally correct to declare that "they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34) because the dynamics of the single victim mechanism were so well hidden. Consequently, Girard can claim that the Gospels break free from the primitive sacred in which the divine arises out of a confusion about the role of victims, and instead portray a God who voluntarily assumes the role of a victim in order to expose the victimage mechanism (Girard 2001, 130).

In this section of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard seems to depend on circularity and a form of double-speak. As I try to summarise his intentions, they seem impossible to state clearly without being internally contradictory. Is God a victim or not? Is the mob unanimous or not? Is the victim

deified or not? In all these cases Girard answers both yes and no, and yet he contends that the underlying mechanism is clearly exposed.

The difficulty in pinning down the logic is in part because “Jesus’ passion narratives confront the world of myth by internal subversion rather than external assault” (Cowdell 2013, 99). Such a subversive approach will inevitably rely on contradiction, such as the Gospels’ insistence both that Jesus was innocent and that he was universally condemned. How else could God intervene? “A non-violent deity can only signal his existence to mankind by having himself driven out by violence—by demonstrating that he is not able to establish himself in the Kingdom of Violence” even though that tactic “looks like total impotence to those who live under the regime of violence” (Girard 1987, 219–220).

Nevertheless, it seems to me that there is an explanatory gap in the case presented in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. It is simple enough to claim that the Gospels expose and consequently undermine the single victim mechanism, but I do not find this presentation by Girard sufficiently clear as to *how* the reports by the Gospels actually achieve that goal, nor that the writers were consciously pursuing that goal.

### Other Girardian sources

Perhaps further clarity can be found in other Girardian sources. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard argues that the innocence of Jesus highlights the innocence of all sacrificial victims. The Gospels explicitly assert that Jesus was killed as a scapegoat (e.g. referring to Jesus as the “Lamb of God” in John 1:29), which is a remarkable departure from other myths and historical accounts of collective violence. Although those other accounts can be seen from our external viewing point to treat the victims as scapegoats, internally that justification is conspicuously absent (Girard 1989, 117). Whereas the other texts studied by Girard invariably treat the victim as guilty, the Gospels present Jesus as wholly innocent. Furthermore, the Gospels effectively backdate that innocence to all victims “from Abel to Zechariah” (Matthew 23:34-35). Jesus stands aloof from the process of victimisation directed towards himself, neither agreeing with the accusations nor seeking vengeance (Girard 1989, 126).

In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Girard discusses the nature of scandal as it is used in the Bible. The Greek word *skandalon*, used in places like Matthew 18:6-9 and 1 Corinthians 1:23, may signify an offence, an obstruction, or a stumbling block. To Girard, the Cross is the supreme scandal that exposes the mechanism of scandal – a mechanism that can only be effective when it is hidden (Girard 1987, 393–431). The entirety of human culture, of humanity’s ability to live communally, rests on the cornerstone of mimetic violence, and yet that very fact is a scandal that the builders of culture reject. Christ is that cornerstone made visible, the epitome of victimage. Rejecting the cornerstone of violence is itself a stumbling block that most people have yet to step over, and yet once that cornerstone was made visible by the Cross it could no longer support the edifice built on it (Girard 1987, 429)<sup>1</sup>.

Once again, I sense here too much hand-waving and equivocation. What exactly is the logic of how Christ (or the Cross) becomes the stumbling block that undermines the mimetic cornerstone of culture? Is the scandal the victim mechanism? Or is the scandal the rejection of that mechanism? Girard wants it both ways.

A further thread in the tapestry of Christian uniqueness is that Jesus not only exposes mimetic rivalry but provides the “antidote” (Williams 1996): his life and his death demonstrating servanthood as an

---

<sup>1</sup> A passage in *The Scapegoat* claims roughly the same thing, perhaps more simply: “Once understood, the mechanisms can no longer operate; we believe less and less in the culpability of the victims they demand. Deprived of the food that sustains them, the institutions that derived from these mechanisms collapse one after the other about us. Whether we know it or not, the Gospels are responsible for this collapse” (Girard 1989, 101).

alternative to the violent response to violence. The Joseph story discussed earlier reveals a strategy for exiting the spiral of mimetic violence: the substitution of vengeance with forgiveness (Girard 2001, 111). In the Gospels that strategy is more fully recognised as divine, for they describe how God, in Christ, displays a willingness to soak up human violence rather than being co-opted into the mimetic cycle.

“Following Christ means giving up mimetic desire” (Girard 1987, 431) – but this is not a call to eschew imitation. On the contrary, “The Gospels and the New Testament ... do not claim that humans must get rid of imitation; they recommend imitating the sole model who never runs the danger—if we really imitate in the way children imitate—of being transformed into a fascinating rival” (Girard 1987, 430). Paul writes that we should be like him in his imitation of Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:1), while Jesus claims that he only copies his Father (John 5:19, 8:28, 12:49). Since there is no sense in which God could ever be in competition with us, the type of imitation recommended by Paul and Jesus does not result in acquisitive desire or rivalry. In this way, the Bible invites a conversion of the heart that would allow us to “dispense with organized violence without sliding into the abyss of uncontrollable violence, the apocalyptic abyss” (Bailie 1997, 15).

### **A non-violent reading of the Bible**

The Girardian understanding of how Christianity undermines the primitive sacred and the single victim mechanism relies heavily on a non-violent reading of the Bible (explicitly addressed in Girard 1987, 180–223). How is such a reading possible given the extent of violence within the text and its explicit divine support for violence?

On the surface, the Bible can resemble many primitive texts that depict human and divine violence, and that justify one with the other. According to one survey by Raymond Schwager, there are at least 600 examples of violence condemned in the Bible, but also at least 1,000 expressions of God’s own violence (Kirwan 2009, 86). Once the Bible’s internal criticism of that dynamic is understood, however, the whole text becomes more subversive. Significant passages question the value of and the divine sanction for violence. In particular, several statements by Jesus explicitly claim that God neither requires sacrifice (e.g. Matthew 9:13) nor seeks vengeance (e.g. Matthew 5:44–45). Jesus presents an image of a non-wrathful, non-retributive God, in contrast to the “Janus-faced God” (Hardin 2010, 42) commonly inferred from the dichotomy of the Old and New Testaments.

Girard points out that the Bible’s frequent portrayal of violence is part of a strategy to question that violence and expose its source. The Bible deliberately draws attention to the dynamics of violence that myth has always hidden (Girard 2001, 143–144). Rather than reading the Bible as a static theological snapshot, Girard reads it anthropologically: as the gradual unveiling of human culture and of human engagement with the sacred. Read in this way, the Bible articulates a powerful trajectory away from violence.

One aspect of that trajectory is the presentation by the New Testament of Jesus as the final sacrifice (see for instance Hebrews 10:1–18). Girard expressed dissatisfaction with the violent connotations of this way of interpreting Jesus’ death (Girard 1987, 227–231)<sup>2</sup>, and I agree that one sense of the word “sacrifice” is in conflict with the Gospel’s presentation of Jesus death. Since Jesus calls attention to the prophetic claim “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6, Matthew 9:13, 12:7), it is highly unlikely that Jesus or the Gospel writers thought that Jesus was sacrificed to fulfil a requirement of God. There is a second sense of the word “sacrifice”, however, that is consistent with a non-violent reading. That second sense is the concept of self-sacrifice embedded in Paul’s

---

<sup>2</sup> Though Kirwan claims that in later life Girard acknowledged a more positive role for self-sacrifice (Kirwan 2009, 79).

observation that Jesus “gave himself”<sup>3</sup>. This non-retributive alternative allows Jesus’ death to be seen as a sacrifice and yet fundamentally different from the mythic archetype.

## Summary

Girard identifies a series of interlocking attributes within Christian scriptures that make a unique contribution to the cultural progression away from the primitive sacralisation of violence. These include revealing the innocence of victims, exposing how the single victim mechanism operates and in doing so undermining its ability to function effectively, the divinity of Jesus proclaimed by a minority rather than the crowd, a demonstration of forgiveness rather than retribution, and a call to imitate God rather than human rivals.

## Critiques

---

Such a paradigm-changing theory, especially when it includes bold claims for the distinctive merit of Christianity, invites criticism from multiple angles. I will discuss some of those criticisms under four headings, loosely captured by the questions – Is it scientific? Is it universal? Is it Christian? And is it unique?

### Scientific?

Girard clearly presents his theory as scientific: “I could be right and I could be wrong, but I do not have to be fundamentally right in order for the only adjective that fits my hypothesis to be *scientific*” (Girard 1989, 97). But is Girard’s position as scientific as he imagines?

The scope of the theory’s application is vast and a surprising amount is derived from very few basic principles. Such parsimony and explanatory power is undoubtedly a mark of brilliance. These are qualities aspired to by any scientific theory. When reading Girard, there is a frequent sense that he could account for virtually anything within the mimetic theory. Therein lies a problem, because it is not at all clear what sort of evidence would disprove his hypothesis. He finds ways to interpret any incongruity so that apparently opposite historical observations are both seen as supporting the mimetic theory. For example, Girard claims that myths report the murder of a victim by a crowd (even though that act is often heavily veiled). In the myth of Noah, however, a small group survives while the crowd perishes, apparently contradicting Girard’s claim. When asked about that myth, Girard argued that the mimetic theory is still intact: that Noah is simply an “inverted form” emphasising “a return to life” rather than a murder, and in which “the victim is the principle of survival” (Girard 1987, 39). With that example as a precedent, it is hard to imagine any discrepancy that could not be explained away.

Girard admits “My demystification of Guillaume de Machaut can certainly not be considered ‘falsifiable’ in the sense that Popper used the term” (Girard 1989, 98). I do not think that Girard would limit the scope of that quote to his treatment of Guillaume de Machaut: that is simply the paradigmatic example of his treatment of all persecution texts and myths. This admission, however, severely undermines his claim of being scientific. Current academic understandings of what constitutes science have moved beyond Karl Popper, and yet very few would not include falsifiability as a necessary condition for any claim to be scientific<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Repeated six times in Pauline letters: Galatians 1:4, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 5:2, Ephesians 5:25, 1 Timothy 2:6, Titus 2:14.

<sup>4</sup> This at least applies to the *ideal* of science, even if one admits that a variety of socio-political factors contribute substantially to the *practice* of science.

The important point for this essay is that Girard's claim of being scientific must influence the approach to evaluating his theory. If he positioned the theory as an attempt to deconstruct certain texts within specific cultures then evaluating the validity of his claims could be framed at the same conceptual level. But by positioning the claims as universal and empirical, Girard invites an evaluation that is itself universal and empirical.

### Universal?

A second but related question is whether the universality of Girard's claims are justified? Girard's writings are peppered with the word "all": for instance that scapegoating is present in *all* cultures (Girard 1989, 24; Girard 2011, 63) and that the basis of *all* prohibitions and rituals is mimetic conflict (Girard 1987, 21). These claims are rarely supported by a thorough analysis of every culture or every religion and consequently appear to be over-generalisations.

It is not clear to me that Girard's insights apply to the experience of *all* people. For instance, a question central to Toril Moi's criticism of Girard is whether it is reasonable to conflate male and female experience of desire (Moi 1982)? Similar questions could be asked of gender-specific experiences of imitation, conflict and violence. As an example, consider the claim that the condemnation of Jesus was unanimous, including the betrayal of his closest friends (Girard 1989, 105). Girard either ignores or dismisses<sup>5</sup> the Gospel observations that there were several who did not join the collective violence: another victim on the cross next to Jesus is one, but more significantly there were women who "mourned and wailed" as Jesus carried his cross (Luke 23:27), a group of "many" women at the cross (Mark 15:40-41), and even Pilate's wife (Matthew 27:19). I think this supports Moi's contention that Girard's analysis is primarily masculine and misses the mark when it comes to the experiences of many females.

In an essay published in 1993, Girard comments that "myths reflect a contagious process of disorder that culminates with the death or expulsion of a victim" (Girard 1996, chap. 9). Despite Girard's insistence that when key characteristics of scapegoating are missing from myths it is because they have been obscured and eventually removed over time (e.g. Girard 1996, 138), I doubt that this claim can be universally true. I am no expert in mythology, but a cursory exploration of documented myths easily brings to light examples such as the Cherokee myth of the origin of strawberries (Mooney 1902, 259), in which there is no social chaos or crisis, no accusations, and no death or expulsion. In the Japanese story about the relative beauty of white and a yellow chrysanthemums (Davis 1912, 163), there is a death but it would be very difficult to infer any sacred victimage. In the Zulu legend of the origin of death (Honey 1910, 147), there is no crisis, no accusation and no suggestion of mob violence against a victim.

These examples, from the Bible and from myths, do not deny the value of Girard's insights, but they do imply that those insights cannot be universally applied.

### Christian?

Third, is Girard's version of Christianity sufficiently orthodox: does he accurately present the Christian stance or merely a *Girardian-Christianity* that would be rejected by other Christians? The importance of this question is that if he is mis-representing Christianity then whatever he says about Christianity's unique contribution is misplaced.

There will undoubtedly be segments of Christendom that disagree with Girard's assumptions and conclusions. The non-violent reading of the Bible (and the Atonement in particular) is controversial,

---

<sup>5</sup> In one place claiming parenthetically that "their witness does not carry the weight of authority in the historical setting" (Girard 2001, 125).

as are his readiness to interpret as human projections many Biblical passages that the text explicitly reports from the mouth of God, and his depersonalisation of Satan.

“Christian” is a broad label that encompasses far wilder deviations than those of Girard, and there can be no single authoritative or representative Christian analysis. It is clear, however, as Girard admits, that although the effectiveness of the victimage mechanism has been in decline since the Cross, to a large extent historical Christianity as both ideology and institution has actively sought to *resist* that decline (see for instance Girard 1987, 288). Even if the mimetic theory was a Christian theory, it has not been comprehended by historical Christianity.

What this shows is that my initial question was poorly constructed. We should not be concerned about whether Girard’s view is *Christian*, nor whether there is a unique contribution by *Christianity*. Rather, the issue is whether Girard’s analysis is faithful to the New Testament text, and whether that text has brought unique insights to bear on the human condition. It matters not that Girard takes numerous unorthodox positions, except that such unorthodoxy highlights that historical Christianity has gone badly astray. With that in mind, my opinion is that Girard does not represent the majority of historical or current Christianity, but does accurately represent the Biblical trajectory.

### Unique?

This leads to a fourth group of concerns that directly address the claimed uniqueness of the New Testament’s contribution to the undermining of the single victim mechanism. My approach here, in line with the earlier discussion of Girard’s encouragement to view the theory scientifically, is to look for possible counter-examples.

One such possibility, proposed by Sandor Goodhart, is that “There is nothing that Girard says about the innocent victim in Christianity that is not already fully present in Isaiah 52-53” (Goodhart 2014, 33 and extended on p. 63), which is to say that the Hebrew scriptures are a counter-example to Girard’s claim that the New Testament contributes something unique. Although Girard admits that the Hebrew scriptures contain numerous passages that question the need for sacrifice, and affirms the view of Moses Maimonides that sacrifice is “a temporary crutch made necessary by the weakness of humankind” (Girard 1987, 444), to claim that Girardianism is simply Jewish (Goodhart 2014, 253) ignores important differences.

Even if much of the mimetic theory is latent in Jewish tradition and scripture, the fact of its latency is important. Girard’s argument would not hold water, nor even be formulated, without the additional texts of the New Testament. As Girard notes in a response to Goodhart, although there is a revelation of scapegoating in the Old Testament, it is marginal: the New Testament makes it central (Goodhart 2014, 81). But I believe the difference goes further than simply the degree of emphasis. Through the Old Testament, a conceptual framework for announcing the innocence of victims was *stated* but not *enacted*. In contrast, the Gospels explicitly demonstrate rather than simply claim the innocence of Jesus, and, through the Resurrection, suggest a divine vindication of that innocence. In the Old Testament, law (prohibitions) and sacrifice (rituals) are criticised but they continue. It is not until the Gospels that these fundamental pillars of religion are made redundant (Girard 1987, 158). As Girard notes in another context, although the Old Testament portrays mimetic crisis and collective violence, a third, crucial, element is missing: “the sacred revelation, the resurrection that reveals the divinity of the victim” (Girard 2001, 106).

A second possibility is that other religions may deal effectively with violence in ways that are completely independent of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Hinduism, for instance, includes strategies for dealing with violence (mentioned in Kirwan 2009, 125, though they are not described) and perhaps the Hindu worldview has such a different approach to suffering that the Girardian analysis

of violence and scapegoating do not make sense (Kirwan 2009, 125–126). Alternatively, the Buddhist tradition promotes non-violence and does not include any ritual sacrifice (Kirwan 2009, 126).

In response, Girard claims that, although the Eastern religious traditions attempt to move adherents away from anger, resentment, envy and violence, they do not understand the scapegoating mechanism. “They know what sacrifice is and they progressively try to forbid it. The difference that I see between them and Christianity is that the latter was able to formulate in the Gospels and unmask in a full light the anthropological mechanism of mimetic scapegoating and sacrifice” (Girard, quoted in Kirwan 2009, 128).

In a series of lectures delivered in 2003, Girard considers Hindu mythology through an analysis of the Brahmanas – a collection of Indian religious texts that pre-date Christianity. After describing the typical style of stories in the Brahmanas, Girard emphasises the fundamental difference between the mythical and Biblical: “The mythical remains to the end the dupe of scapegoat phenomena. The Biblical exposes the lie by revealing the innocence of victims” (Girard 2011, 75). He then claims that nearly all the Brahmanas fall under the mythical trance and do not challenge it (Girard 2011, 87).

Girard’s analysis, however, is frustratingly incomplete. He admits that the Brahmanas include at least two stories with anti-sacrificial themes but that he has “neither the time nor competence” (Girard 2011, 88) to evaluate them. But surely these are exactly the type of potential counter-example that he should be evaluating! If not Girard then researchers in comparative religion, working with a Girardian framework, should be undertaking such investigations. That would be the appropriately scientific approach: a bold hypothesis would be progressively tested by a broad range of research teams seeking to uncover any evidence that might contradict the hypothesis.

A third domain in which counter-examples may be found is the Western intellectual tradition itself. On the one hand, Girard notes that “to break the power of mimetic unanimity, we must postulate a power superior to violent contagion” and claims that no such power exists on earth: the change requires the Spirit of God<sup>6</sup> (Girard 2001, 189). On the other hand, Paisley Livingston argues that Christianity has “not brought about the transformation of our mimetic inheritance to the extent that Girard contends” and that one could effectively be a Girardian without the Cross (Williams 1996).

If we admit that there has been a significant anthropological change in Western attitudes towards victims, it is difficult to entangle the web of causation that led to that change: was it the Spirit of God through the Gospel that highlighted the innocence of victims, or did that arise as a result of other influences such as Modernism and secularisation? A dominant discourse today seems to claim that secular modernity and post-modernity have successively dismantled the errors of Christianity, and in that discourse Christianity is painted as one of the *sources* of violence rather contributing anything to its demise. In his recent book *René Girard and Secular Modernity*, Scott Cowdell argues the contrary, I think persuasively. The causal path is from Jesus, to an undermined primitive sacred, and then to the rise of modernity with its incomplete attempts to restrain violence in the absence of the mimetic mechanism (Cowdell 2013, chap. 3–4). It is naïve to attribute the wane of Christianity in the West to the rise of secular modernity, and more accurate to interpret the change as a waning of the primitive sacred in the light of the Gospel.

---

<sup>6</sup> Introducing the supernatural at this point is atypical of Girard, at least within the writings covered by this essay. Girard more normally emphasises the anthropological basis for the mimetic theory and denies that it requires any spiritual presuppositions. But Girard’s point here, near the end of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, is that while the process of undermining the single victim mechanism is completely natural, that process could never have been instigated by people trapped within mimetically-driven culture. On the other hand, the Spirit of God could instigate this process through Jesus and can continue to inspire the anthropological change, because the Spirit is outside the system and consequently free of the mimetic contagion.



Cowdell and Girard both interpret Nietzsche as the first to grasp that the uniqueness of Christianity lies in its commitment to the victim (Cowdell 2013, 112–115; Girard 2001, chap. 14). Enlisting the support of Christianity's intellectual arch-enemy is a bold move, but once the mimetic theory has disentangled the essence of Christianity from the sacred, the move is successful. The Gospel message does indeed lead to a preference for solidarity with the victim, and that does separate it from other Western traditions.

There are, however, exceptions, which make it difficult to accept the absolute uniqueness of the Gospel's insight. With regard to his generalised claim that the Bible is the first text to highlight the innocence of victims, Girard himself acknowledges exceptions such as Socrates and Antigone (Girard 1989, 199). Scott Cowdell's positive appraisal of Girard excuses these on the basis that their influence did not transform a whole society (Cowdell 2013, 89). But this is surely inadequate, for Girard's claim that the Christian texts are unique depends on their conceptual contribution rather than the extent of their influence. If there are culturally independent or chronologically prior examples of concepts such as the innocence of victims, then the claim of the New Testament's uniqueness is seriously undermined.

## Conclusion

---

The New Testament presents a radically new understanding of our psychological and cultural proclivity for violence, as well as a radical alternative to the process of scapegoating that had previously been the primary mechanism of social crisis management. René Girard's mimetic theory offers a clear and comprehensive formulation of the genesis of violence, the historical role of religion in constraining that violence, and the Bible's contribution to undermining the foundations of sacred violence.

Contrary to Girard's assertions, however, I do not believe that the mimetic theory, or at least Girard's presentation of it, is properly scientific. Too many of his insights are phrased as universal generalisations that cannot be falsified.

Universal claims such as the core assertions of Girard are extremely difficult to prove, but at least should be open to disproof. There can be no theoretical or *a priori* proof in this case because the claims are too empirical, relating to actual history and actual human cultures. The other option – to enumerate all myths, cultures and religions, and to test Girard's claims against each one – is incomplete. Girard does not attempt to provide such an enumeration but rather chooses a sample of texts to support his case. Admittedly, he chooses many texts that are challenging for his theory, but to a large extent he asks us to trust that he has undertaken sufficiently exhaustive investigation of any possible counter-example. I have offered several examples that do not support Girard's claims.

The mimetic theory expresses a remarkable convergence of anthropology and theology. Even though much of historical Christianity has misunderstood this core message, and much of current Christian thinking and practice continues to be at odds with it, I am convinced that this convergence is faithful to the trajectory of the Biblical text.

For Girard and others, the Bible was undoubtedly the text that inspired a commitment to the innocence of victims and to the possibility of a post-sacrificial world. However, his claim that the Christianity is the unique determinant of this radical change in human culture remains an empirically open question for me. There may have been cultures not founded by the single victim mechanism or which discovered other means for managing internal conflict. There may have been religions that did not sacralise violence. There may have been other influences at work in the Western tradition other than the Gospel that helped to reveal the innocence of victims.

These uncertainties do not mean that I reject any of Girard's core claims, but that he has overstated the weight of supporting evidence. It seems to me that a significant project of evidence-gathering and analysis is still required before the universality of those claims is established, and in particular the claim that the Bible's contribution is unique.

## Reference List

---

- Bailie, Gil. 1997. *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*. New York: Crossroad Pub.
- Cowdell, Scott. 2013. *René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Davis, F. Hadland. 1912. *Myths & Legends of Japan*. George G. Harrap.  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/45723>.
- Girard, René. 1987. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- . 1989. *The Scapegoat*. Johns Hopkins paperbacks ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 1996. *The Girard Reader*. Edited by James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad.
- . 2001. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. Maryknoll, N.Y. : Ottawa : Leominster, Herefordshire: Orbis Books ; Novalis ; Gracewing.
- . 2011. *Sacrifice*. Breakthroughs in Mimetic Theory. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Goodhart, Sandor. 2014. *The Prophetic Law: Essays in Judaism, Girardianism, Literary Studies, and the Ethical*. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture Series. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Hardin, Michael. 2010. *The Jesus Driven Life : Reconnecting Humanity with Jesus*. Lancaster, PA: JDL Press.
- Honey, James A. 1910. *South-African Folk-Tales*. The Baker & Taylor Company.  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/38339>.
- Kirwan, Michael. 2009. *Girard and Theology*. Philosophy and Theology. London ; New York: T & T Clark.
- Moi, Toril. 1982. "The Missing Mother: The Oedipal Rivalries of Rene Girard." *Diacritics* 12 (2): 21–31.
- Mooney, James. 1902. *Myths of the Cherokee*. Washington: Government Printing Office.  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/45634>.
- Williams, James G. 1996. "Rene Girard without the Cross? Religion and the Mimetic Theory." *Anthropoetics* II (1). [www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/AP0201/girardw.htm](http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/AP0201/girardw.htm).