

Evidence of this may be seen in Protestant alarms about the increase of Popery. These were no doubt excited and exaggerated. However, what has been taken as evidence against it comes from the Catholic gentry and their chaplains, who saw the Catholic Relief Act principally as a step towards Catholic Emancipation. The Relief Act made no difference in practice to their own worship in their own manor houses with their tenants and servants, and did not open up enough public offices, but it did make public the presence of crowded chapels 'in some of the manufacturing and trading towns'⁹. Alarms about these must be played down, lest Emancipation should be delayed or averted. It did not occur to the Catholic gentry or to the politicians that the future of England lay in the manufacturing towns, and the future of the English Catholic community in chapels reinforced by displaced persons from country parishes in the three kingdoms. The origins of this English Catholic community are more complex than we have supposed.

1 Volume 19, no. 3, May 1989, pp. 313—31.

2 E.L. Glew, *History of the Borough and Foreign of Walsall*, Walsall 1856, p.76.

3 F.W. Willmore, *History of Walsall*, Walsall 1887, p. 150.

4 Francis Martyn, *Lectures*, Walsall 1830, p.6.

5 *Staffordshire Catholic History* 17, 1977, p.23.

6 *Ibid*, p.43.

7 In *The English Catholic Community, 1570—1850*, London 1975, *passim*.

8 P.24.

9 See Joseph Berington, *The State and Behaviour of the English Catholics from the Reformation to the Year 1780*, London 1780, pp. 114—9. This is the principal source of Newman's sermon on the second spring.

Charles Davis *versus* René Girard

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In the course of the past twenty years René Girard has offered us a theory of the structure of human desire. Because desire is something very fundamental, his hypothesis is far-reaching and it gives us many original and, I believe, plausible results. However, not everything is explained and put into a new light because of a new insight into the structure of human desire. Thanks to Girard's hypothesis, I think we can see how many apparently very varied things may have much more in common than we thought, and sometimes we can even perceive much better why there are differences and what they are. But even I, who have restricted myself in the three articles on Girard which I have published in *New Blackfriars*¹ mainly to expounding his hypothesis, consider that hypothesis to be less embracing than Girard himself sometimes seems to think.

Nevertheless, although any debate on Girard's hypothesis is welcome, precisely because it helps us to see what is valuable and what is not, and although it is a pleasure to see Charles Davis in the July/August issue of *New Blackfriars* contributing to this debate², the attitudes which Davis brings to the debate make constructive discussion difficult. It seems to me that Davis feels akin to the postmodern position which assumes that a universal and unifying vision of reality is impossible and that it is doubtful whether reality is a unity; that perhaps there are more realities than one at the same time. Holders of this view can thus only be suspicious: 'Suspicion, critique, uncovering: all can be turned upon oneself' (p. 327) in a never-ending process. I myself feel closer to those attempts which, like Girard's, try to dismantle the boundary fences between the various disciplines, constituting a parallel movement to postmodernism. I prefer to see where Girard's hypothesis works and where it does not. It is clear to me that somebody crossing the boundaries between the disciplines is certain to make mistakes, simply because it is impossible for anybody to have an equally clear insight into everything. Girard is writing from a literary and anthropological perspective, and is sure to slip sometimes when he ventures into, for example, theology, even if simultaneously offering new perspectives to theologians. Some reinterpretations are needed, then, but do not *necessarily* destroy the basic hypothesis.

Davis gives a fair account of Girard's hypothesis, but at times he leans too heavily on certain words and statements. In particular, he writes: 'Religion, as we shall see, is for him a deceit, a delusion, the concealment of the scapegoat mechanism by which it is constituted. At the centre of religion is a misapprehension of the sacrificial act' (p. 312). This is not what Girard is saying himself in the quotation Davis uses: 'Religion in the broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventive means against his own violence' (p. 319). The centre of religion is not the misapprehension itself, but the attempt to secure peace by means of the ritualization of the scapegoat mechanism. On behalf of this attempt it is necessary that the violence itself is obscured. We do not seem to be able to face the destructive power of violence. Even when we use it, we protect ourselves against this confrontation by means of rationalizations such as, for example, even terrorists have to offer. I am a little surprised that Davis did not mention that the distinction Girard is making between religion and Gospel fits in very well with the ongoing theological tradition of placing one over against the other, on which Girard, perhaps unawares, sheds new light.

Contrary to Davis, it seems to me to be difficult to deny that mimesis (imitation) is a fundamental law of human existence. Even the 'natural desire of God' to which Davis appeals in this context, is highly mimetic, at least according to Aquinas.³ It may well be that the recognition of the mimetic quality of human existence is itself the source

of the Christian conviction that we have been created. For, as Davis puts it: 'Mimesis or imitation is of its nature derivative' (p. 317). Gen 1:27 points in this direction: 'God created man in his own image'. Language is a mimetic system and its social character has been generally accepted. Girard shows that desire is a social phenomenon too: we do not desire spontaneously, but via our fellow human beings more or less in the same way as our thinking is dependent on the thinking (language) of our fellow human beings. There is not only a 'sociology of knowledge'⁴ but also a 'sociology of desire'. The story of Adam and Eve reveals this mimetic structure of desire. Satan is the mimetic principle in as far as he perverts human relationships and creates rivalry. He tries to direct the woman's attention to the difference between the fruit of the tree 'which is in the midst of the garden' and the fruit of the other trees, and thus he drives her to the mimesis of appropriation. The tree turns into an obstacle in her eyes and thus eating of it becomes desirable. However, what turns the scales is the suggestion that she should be like God, deciding about what is good and bad. When Adam eats because Eve eats, they are already becoming rivals towards each other who have to cover up their nakedness as a protection.⁵ The social character of both knowing and desiring was not discerned sufficiently in Aquinas and traditional philosophy. Actually, according to Aquinas, man does not have a natural desire of God because, as Davis thinks, desire is unrestricted, but because desire seeks what is good, and at the end of the day man may find (thanks, however, to grace) that God is the good he is truly after.

Davis' criticism of Girard's position concerning evil is more to the point. Girard does not say, however, that 'human nature is structurally evil' (p. 321)—this is Davis' interpretation. (I would avoid a term such as 'human nature' anyway, for the word 'nature' is a minefield. It is not always that easy to combine it with the rather recent insight that man is a 'historical being'. The word 'nature' creates more chaos in our time than it overcomes.) According to Girard our culture is based on violence. In this he is far from original; from Heraclitus till Max Weber, Hannah Arendt and to a certain extent E. Levinas this has been constantly repeated. Girard's statement that his perspective is anthropological, whereas the question of evil is ethical and theological, is not as unsatisfactory as Davis suggests (p. 322). It only proves that the anthropological perspective has its limits, as all perspectives have. Philosophically and theologically speaking, we have gained the insight that violence is a violation of something else. From a Christian perspective we cannot do very well without the term 'original sin'. This term, though, is a very confusing one; it would have been better if another metaphor had been found by the Church, for up till now it is causing damage in theology, liturgy and pastoral care. However, it reflects the profound insight that on the one hand human life is a good thing in spite of the evil and violence we come across again and again, while on the other hand this evil and violence are a product of human

decisions. 'Original sin' is preceded by the 'original blessing'⁶. This 'original blessing' is not taken away as such by 'original sin' but remains present in our world and makes itself felt. It is not necessary to assume, as Girard does, an almost unmediated divine origin of the Gospel and to make such a quick assertion of Christ's divinity. Jesus is first and foremost the embodiment of the 'original blessing'.

What is this 'original blessing'? If we want to stay within Girard's hypothesis we have to remember that mimesis precedes the scapegoat mechanism. Mimesis is not a bad thing in itself: we are human beings thanks to mimesis. The human being is the result of the reproductive activity of two other human beings—reproduction is a mimetic reality. As soon as we are born, we start imitating and only because of this are we able to learn a language, to think, to desire certain goals, to become persons. We are thus points in a network of relationships. Outside those relationships we cannot exist. Having our place within this network is for us the 'original blessing'. Violence is a violation of this network; perhaps this is the most profound reason why we have such difficulties in facing our own violence.

The manifold relationships we are living within have to be ordered lest they become a chaos. The creation story in Gen. 1 narrates how relationships can be ordered, giving each creature its place. It would have been possible, it would even have been congenial, for us to have ordered them on the basis of love, for love makes relationships both equal and different. However, as we see every day, even simply looking at ourselves, as a matter of fact we order our relationships on the basis of violence, for we reject the place allotted to us and want to be like God. Stories such as that of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Flood and the tower of Babel, are all attempts, based on ordinary human experience, to show how this can happen. By appealing to the 'original blessing', by remembering the discovery of being free when Israel was expelled from Egypt, and by referring to Christ, our violence is slowly revealed and new ways are opened.

We do not have to escape from mimetic desire as such but only from the possibility of its destructive consequences. In his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard points to a great difference between Don Quixote and ourselves by reminding us that the model Don Quixote imitated—Amadis of Gaul—was rather distantly removed from him. This gave him more space and a greater freedom than we have, who often choose our neighbours, colleagues and comrades to be our models. At least Amadis, being safely dead and a figure from a novel anyway, was not able to rival Quixote, while the models we imitate resist our rivalling them by rivalling us. The greater the distance between us and our model, the more true freedom we enjoy. Not only is there a great distance between Jesus and us because he lived in the past, but, more importantly, his life and death witness to the fact that he did not imitate the people around him in rivalry. He always pointed away from himself

to his Father in heaven. 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.' (Mk 3:35) Contrary to the envious gods of pagan (or perhaps we should rather say 'religious') traditions, the Father of Jesus does not rival with man. It is his will that all people are loved, the good ones and the bad ones. By doing his will, by imitating Him, we are set free from rivalry as well and restored to the 'original blessing'. In this sense we must understand Girard's saying that following Christ is renouncing the 'mimetic desire' (DCC p. 453) for he makes in this context a distinction between violent and non-violent imitation. Far from us being given 'groundless preaching' (p. 325), this fits in well with his original anthropology.

On the basis of an article by Burton L. Mack⁷ Davis attacks Girard's claim that the Gospels 'uncover and nullify' the scapegoat mechanism, and argues that 'there are no privileged texts and no privileged traditions' (p. 326). He writes: 'The Gospels were in fact written in such a way as to throw the blame for the death of Christ upon the Jews' (p. 326). Davis admits that 'some might well find Mack's thesis too sweeping', and that it only is 'an hypothesis current in biblical scholarship'—and too sweeping it certainly is. Admittedly, the passion stories are not straight history. Girard knows too that he is dealing with a text. We hardly know what happened, and possibly the evangelists did not know the exact circumstances of Jesus' death either, though it seems to be beyond reasonable doubt that he was executed by the Romans as a would-be king at the behest of the Jewish leadership.⁸ The evangelists themselves were not aiming at writing history: they were not interested in describing correctly the course of events which led to Jesus' death, even if that had been possible. They give a theological interpretation of his death and invite their readership to agree with this interpretation for it reveals things hidden from the foundation of the world. For this no doubt they made use of the current theology of martyrship (which was much more closely linked with the resurrection-theme than Mack assumes). The Gospels were not written for the purpose of incriminating the Jews, but of showing that we Christians were persecutors before we became converted. The passion stories are a call to a conversion similar to that of St. Peter and St. Paul. In this story Christians are not 'spectators from afar', they are implicated as people who deserted Jesus. Some women are looking from afar (Mk 15:40), but in society they were scapegoats and victims themselves.

Mack turns the Gospels into a 'myth of innocence'. For he does not believe in Jesus' innocence. According to him, 'the historical Jesus cannot be pictured as an innocent victim by any stretch of imagination' for 'the more generous the construction as to Jesus' "innocence" with respect to law and order, the less plausible his crucifixion by the Romans becomes'. Mack is talking about innocence as if this can be established as a purely objective fact. Someone living in South Africa and protesting against apartheid may well be guilty in the eyes of those in favour of

apartheid, while he is innocent in the eyes of its opponents. In the eyes of the Romans and the Jewish leadership Jesus was dangerous as someone who excited the hopes and dreams for a very different world in the hearts of many people. This does not make his innocence a myth, unless, as Mack and Davis seem to do, one sides with the Romans and the Jewish leadership, which is in itself a rational choice.

Most biblical scholars agree that the evangelists shift the culpability from the Romans to the Jews. However, the evangelists do not declare the Romans innocent. One reason why they did shift blame on the Jews is probably the discussion, even rivalry, with the body of the Jews which refused to accept the claims of the early Church with regard to Jesus. But it is far from clear that Christians were as worried about their group identity at the time the Gospels were written as Mack supposes. They did not share merely 'crossing a border between their old social arena of identity and the new social movement', but they shared positively their being related to Christ. They may sincerely have thought that the Jewish leadership, which must have informed the Romans, was more to blame than those gentiles who could not very well distinguish between Jesus of Nazareth and a zealot. The rejection of Jesus as messiah by most of the Jews concurred very well with the assumed role of the Jewish leadership and with all those biblical stories about Israel's clamouring against God. Moreover, as the chosen people, the Jews represent the whole of mankind: in the rejection by Israel the rejection of Jesus by ourselves is revealed.

In favour of Mack and Davis it has to be said that the Gospels have been used in the course of time as stories which justified and even stimulated the persecution of Jews by Christians. It is tempting to read this back into the passion stories. Even if we do not do this, such an interpretation is easily made because 'we gentiles' are still living very much under the sway of the scapegoat mechanism. I do not even exclude the possibility that something of the scapegoat mechanism syndrome of the evangelists themselves has gone into the text after all, though more research would be needed to establish this. But it is certainly not the main thrust of the text to put the blame for the death of Jesus on the Jews so as to justify both the existence of blameless (often Jewish) Christians and the persecution of those Jews who did not join the Church.

Like many theologians today, Charles Davis has problems with the uniqueness of the Christian Gospels and of Jesus himself, and this question is not going to be disposed of simply by pointing out the deficiencies in Mack's article. In the dialogue of religions that takes place on a global scale at present, claiming the uniqueness of Christ is seemingly not very helpful, and Girard makes it more difficult to give up this claim. However, wrestling with this challenge is to be preferred to giving it up too easily.

I hope to have shown here that we do not need to accept everything Girard writes down. *Some* suspicion is needed. (In the same vein,

Richard Kearney has suggested that Girard's treatment of 'myth' is too narrow⁹.) But I have also attempted to show that working with Girard's hypothesis, trying it out, exploring its possibilities and its limitations, is for the time being more fruitful than attempting to destroy it as quickly as possible because we feel that our 'modernity' is being threatened. Language is metaphorical. We only know reality through metaphors (and some say that we do not know reality at all but that metaphors only refer to other metaphors). The metaphor of the scapegoat turns out to give us a better view of the reality the Gospel refers to and of the reality we are living in than does, for instance, the Anselmian metaphor of Jesus as a sacrifice to appease God's wounded honour. That new, and possibly better, metaphors will be found in the future is likely. At this moment of time the metaphor of the scapegoat is still bearing fruit.

- 1 'The Likely Price of Peace: René Girard's hypothesis', in *New Blackfriars*, 66 (1985) 517—524, 'Economics and Human Desire', in *New Blackfriars*, 68 (1987) 115—124, and 'Girard against Fragmentation' in *New Blackfriars*, 69 (1988) 156—163.
- 2 Charles Davis, 'Sacrifice and Violence: new perspectives in the theory of religion from René Girard', in *New Blackfriars*, 70 (1989) 311—328.
- 3 Cf.: *De Ver.* q. 22 a 2, ad 2; *S. Th.* III, q. 9, a 2,c.
- 4 P. Berger and Th. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Garden City, 1967.
- 5 Cf. J.-M. Oughourlian, *Un mime nommé désir*, Paris, 1982, pp. 37—44. It may be enlightening to compare Gen. 3 with the parable of the evil vine-growers (Mk 12:1—12) who also desire what belongs to the owner of the vineyard and thus desire to be the vineyard owner.
- 6 I borrow this term from Matthew Fox OP, *Original Blessing. A Primer in Creation Spirituality*, Santa Fé, 1983.
- 7 Burton L. Mack, 'The innocent transgressor: Jesus in early Christian myth and history', in *Semeia*, 33 (1985) 135—165.
- 8 E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, London, 1985, pp. 294ff.
- 9 Richard Kearney, 'Le mythe chez Girard un nouveau bouc émissaire?', in P. Dumouchel (ed), *Violence et vérité. Autour René Girard*, Paris, 1985. Kearney raises the question whether myths only refer to past events, as Girard seems to assume, or whether they can also refer to things that transcend both past and present.

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*Charles Davis: Sacrifice and Violence :
new perspectives in the theory of religion from René Girard*

page 321, bottom line: after 'so Christ'
add 'becomes unintelligible'.
