

The Likely Price of Peace: René Girard's hypothesis

Andrew Lascaris OP

Little Tom is trying to watch the TV, but his even smaller sister Naomi, will not stop walking between him and the screen. Here is a conflict. How is it to be solved? Tom can slap Naomi, but it is very likely that a row will develop that will end up with both of them being packed off to bed. Or he may call in the strong arm of one of his parents, but—though Tom may not realize it—this could be a dangerous course too: his parents may disagree with each other and the conflict could spread. Even end in divorce! Or Tom could find himself having to accept a compromise for which he will have to pay either now or later. In fact he does not hesitate a moment: he knows what to do. He gets up and starts playing with his sister's doll. Naomi, seeing this, runs to her doll, and Tom can go back to the TV to watch his favourite programme in peace.

All of us, children and adults, often make use of the same strategem, especially in our love affairs. We all know how hard it can be to resist desiring what somebody else, or some other group, much desires, and to resist wanting what others have. The Falklands became important for the British people immediately the Argentinians commandeered them; and, because they were British-occupied, the Argentinians had for many decades desired them. In that case the conflict got out of hand and exploded into violence. How seldom are we as clever as little Tom. A much more normal procedure, when (say) Mary and I are in conflict, is for me to grow angry and say or do something, for Mary to grow angry and say or do something back, for me to respond, for Mary to reply, and for our anger to grow all the time. Or I desire something John has, and, because I desire it, it becomes more important for him, his pride in possessing it grows, with the result that I want to have it even more. A conflict develops, escalates, intensifies, we are soon forgetting what the conflict originally was about, and the more it builds up, the more I feel the temptation to go for the decisive knock-out blow, so as to break out of the symmetry in which we have imprisoned ourselves. Supposing I could get hold of a deadly weapon? And then I discover that, even if I could give John a knock-out blow, sooner or later he (or at least some of his friends) will come round. Or, worse still, other people may get upset about the way I have got rid of John, they may get convinced

that what I fought for was something clearly very important, and try to get it for themselves.

The world in which we live is a world of desire, conflict and violence. This may sound pathetic, but it is what Jesus himself is pointing out when he says: 'You will draw down on yourselves the blood of every upright person that has been shed on earth, from the blood of Abel the holy to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar' (Mt 23:35). Here Jesus is addressing the lawyers and the pharisees, persons who were behaving very much like us, who go around telling everybody to behave nicely and be good peaceful people, while we know deep in our hearts that this will certainly not work—so that in fact we are helping to perpetuate the vicious circle.

Since 1973 I have been involved in some peace work in Northern Ireland, belonging to a committee with seven members, four Northern Irish and three Dutch, which has been running conferences for people in Northern Ireland either in Holland or in Northern Ireland itself. From the beginning our 'Dutch Northern Irish Advisory Committee' has been confronted again and again with phrases such as: 'If only Protestants would accept a united Ireland, all would be well', 'If only Catholics could accept the existence of the State, all would be well', 'If only the Brits would go, all would be well', 'If only the IRA would stop bombing and shooting a way to the future could be opened'. Slowly our insight into conflict situations in general and the situation in Northern Ireland in particular grew.

In 1980 the three Dutch members more or less independently of one another got hold of the works of René Girard. Reading his writings made us understand a lot of things we had not understood before—not only things in the general field of conflict or in the Northern Ireland situation, but also all kinds of other phenomena in our society, our churches, our family or community, and, last but not least, things about ourselves.

Born in 1923, René Girard studied medieval history in France and literary criticism in Indianapolis, U.S.A. Since 1974 he has been teaching French literature and culture at Stanford University, California. He has published a great deal, mainly in French. His language is not very difficult. He seldom uses technical terms. Nevertheless, many people find it extremely difficult to understand what he is saying. This is not because the readers are insufficiently intelligent, but because Girard demands from us a new way of looking at literature, religion, our world, ourselves. As long as one reads Girard with the Freudian or the Marxist paradigm firmly fixed in one's head, his works remain a closed world. He himself offers a new paradigm, and the value of his 'hypothesis', as he modestly calls his theory, becomes apparent in working with it.

Of his publications I mention only five books, two of which have been translated into English. His first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, was published in Baltimore in 1965, four years after it appeared in French. As the English title suggests, it deals with the mechanism of human desire as seen through the eyes of novelists such as Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust and Dostoevsky. Unlike his second book, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore 1977, French text 1972), it passed almost unnoticed. His second book dealt with the origin of religion and the Freudian 'mythology'. This subject appealed to a much wider readership. But because his readers had forgotten or were unaware that he had written a book before this one, many of them read it from a wrong perspective. In his third book, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, (Paris 1978, planned to appear in English early in 1986), he takes up earlier themes—the imitative character of human desire, the origin and meaning of religion as creator of peace, and his criticism of Freud—but he adds to these a thorough analysis of Old and New Testament texts. In 1982 he published at Paris *Le Bouc Emissaire*, in which he tries to reply to his critics; half of the book consists of very interesting and profound analyses of scriptural texts. And most recent of all is *La route antique des hommes pervers* (Paris 1985), a study of the book of Job, which Girard sees as an account of an attempt—by the 'comforters'—to force Job into the role of scapegoat. For English-speaking readers a collection of some of his articles is available too: *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology* (Baltimore 1978). In his writings Girard sometimes gives a pedantic impression, but in personal conversation he is rather shy and modest. Incidentally, he drew the consequences of his study and reflecting, and changed from being a liberal atheist, to being a practising Catholic.

This is not the place for an analysis of his books; here I shall summarize his hypothesis, using images and expressions which will not always be drawn from the works of René Girard.

In the novels which he studied Girard discovered what the story of Adam and Eve already shows us: namely, that a human being desires something because it is desired by another person and thus is marked out as something important. In itself it is completely unimportant what is desired: there is no reason to be found why, of all the trees with their fruit, this particular tree appeals to Eve. The tree is made an object of desire by a third party, the 'model', to use Girard's own term. The serpent presents itself as a model for Eve, and Eve becomes the model for Adam. If we would draw a diagram, we should not depict human desire as a straight line but as a triangle. The object of the desire may be anything, it may be very trivial (as commercial advertising knows well) but if this beautiful woman, this magnificent man, eats something, does something, buys something, we tend to

follow suit and accept them as our models. In many cases we are not really interested in the object but in what the possession of this object will make us in our own eyes and in the eyes of other people: someone of substance, someone different, almost a god. 'Imitation' or, to use a Greek word, *mimēsis*, is natural to us, like gravitation. We know we learn languages, human behaviour and culture all by imitation, but seldom do we realize that we also imitate one another in our desiring: we can only desire by desiring what another person desires. And if this other person means much to us, we find it extremely difficult to resist identifying with his or her desire.

Conflict emerges when two people desire the same thing, the same woman, the same man. The expression 'the same' evokes in us feelings of harmony and peace: loving the same ideas, sharing the same interests. But what in fact happens when two or more people desire the same object? Rivalry breaks out, a conflict comes into being that may escalate, and, if it is not contained, lead to physical and psychological violence. Because the rivals—a word borrowed from the French *rive*, 'bank'—are imitating each other, they will become more and more alike in their actions, words, behaviour, and even in outlook when in the process they lose sight of the original source of their conflict. They truly become 'com-petitors': they are seeking 'together'. They become 'brothers' and 'sisters'. In Scripture, stories abound in which two brothers or two sisters (or cousins) fight for the same thing, and either kill each other or solve their conflict in a rather more creative way: Cain and Abel, Abraham and Lot, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, Sarah and Hagar, Rebecca and Leah, Elizabeth and Mary, John the Baptist and Jesus. Every time we find in a story two disciples, two blind people, two people who are possessed, we are confronted with a 'mimetic crisis', a conflict situation that blinds people, possesses them, turns them into people who debate who is going to be top. Paradoxically, the 'model' that makes me imitate his desire will often simultaneously become my rival. For he possesses what I desire, or else he desired before me. The more he is my obstacle to my becoming what he is or getting what he has, the more he becomes my 'model'. And the other way round too. The more the resistance against my desire increases, the more my desire increases. Recall the examples at the start of this article. However, often we do not know what we are imitating, for we like to think that our desire is spontaneous. Moreover, not just this or that person but the whole culture acts as a model: while the Dutch cannot possibly survive without their coffee-break in the morning, the English are supposed to drink tea in the afternoon. Even the past, and figures of this past, can become our models.

If all this is true, how can we find peace? How can we survive in a situation in which everybody becomes everybody's 'brother', 'sister',

'double', so that we cannot even distinguish friends from enemies and everybody looks alike? Girard finds his answer in a long analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Here I am taking a short cut by going back again to the Falklands crisis.

Why did the Argentinian generals decide to take over those islands after having protested many years on paper only? With Argentina in a chronic state and their own positions in growing jeopardy, they felt they had to unite the country behind them, and we all know from experience how to do that. You try to expel the violence that is threatening you by directing it at a *scapegoat*. Britain was a perfect scapegoat. The invasion gave the generals the unity they wanted. And in London Lord Carrington accepted his role as scapegoat honourably and resigned, a decision that gained him much respect. (A scapegoat, note, is not only the bearer of guilt but also, because of that and because he is recognized as such, the source of unity and harmony, and should be thanked for this. It depends entirely on the situation whether the accent is on the guilt or on the honour.) Margaret Thatcher united the British people behind her, and the British victory in the South Atlantic war conceivably could have come to be remembered for many subsequent years with parades, religious services and a special remembrance day. Annually, conceivably, the country could have felt united again and inspired to overcome the everyday troubles; on the basis of such newly-founded unity a new political future might even have been built.

As everybody knows, for various reasons things did not work out quite that way. And one of the reasons was that the religious service to celebrate the victory was politically a flop because the Archbishop of Canterbury refused to mark the Argentinians as scapegoats. Girard shows in his analysis of *Oedipus Rex* that the crisis in Thebes, symbolised by the pest, is solved by Oedipus being marked as scapegoat and driven out of the city. After this in Thebes things become clear again, the inhabitants again know who is who, and they can build a new community on the basis of their new unity. In his later tragedy, *Oedipus Colonus*, Sophocles stressed yet another aspect of the scapegoat mechanism: Oedipus is presented to us as the one who brought peace and order in Thebes. He is at one and the same time the criminal and the holy one. Because of his crime, that allowed the crowd to drive him out without feeling guilty itself, he restored peace, and thus is holy. For modern people this logic is very confusing, so they have found it almost impossible to understand the notion of a holiness that always unites in itself what is healing and what is destructive.

According to Girard, driving out the scapegoat—the term itself is borrowed from Lev. 16:20—22, where it only has a ritual meaning—is the oldest way of forming a community. As Hannah Arendt and other

authors have pointed out, Rome was founded after Romulus murdered Remus, and Gen. 4:17 tells us that Cain founded the first city after murdering Abel. In St. Luke's gospel, the preaching life of Jesus begins with the inhabitants of Nazareth driving Jesus to the brow of a hill to hurl him over.

Violence in the community is solved by means of violence. Unity emerges in a divided society almost as a miracle, when a scapegoat is found and driven out. Whereas in the situation of chaos everybody was everybody's brother or sister, everybody's 'double', now a clear distinction is discernible again: we, over against the scapegoat. This difference gives us the possibility of again structuring our society, and, by making use of some rite, we go on remembering the day that we drove out the scapegoat, covering up at the same time as much as possible the bloody aspects of it, as these may stir up uneasy feelings and thus create new conflicts. The most original rite is the blood sacrifice, the centre of what we call religion. It is the task and the meaning of religion to create peace by institutionalizing the scapegoat mechanism and the collective murder; religion protects us against the violence that may emerge within society. When a sacrificial rite fails to bring about peace, and society enters chaos again, a 'sacrificial crisis' begins which can only be solved by finding a new scapegoat.

Girard is in fact talking about things with which we are all only too familiar. For actually we are all used to the scapegoat mechanism. Think of the 'black sheep' that so many families 'cherish', complaining of him all the time and yet knowing at the same time that in this way the family is kept together. Often we need an enemy to give ourselves a sense of identity and reality. When we are angry with our fellow human beings and say or think dreadful things about them, we can be sure we are speaking about ourselves, unable to cope with the black side of ourselves. One of the first words a foreigner is taught in Britain is the word 'class'. It is a 'holy' word. The class system is an evil system, we are told by our enlightened friends, but how aware are they of the extent to which they derive their identity from their class origins and allegiance? Arguably, in Britain the class system is a religious structure by which the country as a whole is kept together, a violent system, yes, but by this violence the country survives. In Northern Ireland class is much less important: the difference between 'Catholics' and 'Protestants' is the basis on which the country is built and is kept together. Northern Ireland, though, is in a 'sacrificial crisis' in which even the sacrificing activities of the IRA and the UDA do not work any more. My own society, Dutch society, was, and partly still is, kept together by three groups—Catholics, Protestants, and a secular group made up of socialists and liberals—scapegoating one another; the word 'class' hardly has any meaning in the Netherlands.

Now, however, it seems all over the place to become more difficult to make the scapegoat mechanism work. The discussions around the Falklands war are a good example of the growing doubts people seem to have concerning violence in general and easy scapegoating in particular. A book that glorifies war cannot be written any more unless in the veiled form of a novel or a movie. Girard attributes this to the influence of the Jewish and Christian tradition. There is a general tendency in the Old Testament to take sides with the scapegoat and to declare the killer of the scapegoat guilty, rather than the scapegoat. Jesus refuses to accept Satan as his 'model' and therefore to desire economic, religious and political power. The core of the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' injunction: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Mt 5:44).

By love, the enemy—the potential scapegoat—is made human, is made like ourselves, and the distinction between 'us' and 'him' is rejected. The Sermon on the Mount is not a piece of dubious idealising but a profound analysis of human desire, conflict and scapegoating. It offers several examples of 'doing the unexpected' by which the vicious circles of conflict can be suddenly broken: for example, by refusing to give back the burden which your enemy (historically speaking, the Roman soldier) made you carry for a mile. At that very moment your enemy loses his power over you, he is at a loss and may become ready for a genuine meeting. (You have to take the risk, though, that he might not be able to bear confronting himself and will try to get rid of you!) A friend of mine did 'the unexpected' when she found a girl friend trying to slash her arm with a pair of sissors. 'Yvonne, you should not use a pair of sissors, you must use a knife,' she said. At that very moment communication was restored and suicide was not necessary any longer.

Nevertheless, 'doing the unexpected' will fail when it becomes an easy way out, a tactical device. The Sermon on the Mount demands a change of heart, an inner refusal to use violence and make scapegoats either of people outside us or things inside us. Jesus himself was scapegoated (Pilate and Herod became friends because of that, Luke says in 23:11f.), but he unmasked the scapegoat mechanism by refusing to make scapegoats himself and thus proclaiming his innocence: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Lk. 23:34). The Church is the community of those who understand this cry and put it into practice. But because the Church consists of people living in a world of desire and violence, her theology and community life and organisation are also a part of this world. The fact that today many people think the Church does not deserve to be taken seriously is not caused by her biblical message but by what we make of it, covering it up in the language of scapegoating and sacrifice, hanging the flags of the regiments that fought against our enemies in

our cathedrals.

The biblical message works like yeast, slowly leavening, till the massive structures of our cultural system crumble. Our culture has already lost the old structures which keep some other cultures together even in our own days. We are living in a society which has as its declared aims equality and freedom ... in other words, is, for example, a society in which theoretically everybody has the right to compete with everybody. It has survived up to now because we have expanded the possibilities for competition to the extreme, on the one hand by producing all kinds of objects which are similar so that a conflict over one unique object is avoided, on the other hand by exporting our violence to the rest of the world, where two-thirds of the population suffers famine, instability and war. But how long can we go on doing this? Is the 'conservatism' which is the dominant mood in most western (and communist) countries a last attempt to save a culture based on fratricide?

Girard's ideas on human desire, rivalry and scapegoating are basically quite simple ones, although they are all paradoxes. As soon as we see what he is talking about working in our lives they lose the quality of made-up fantasies, and once we begin to think about their consequences they become almost mind-dazzling. Rediscovering the biblical tradition may be the only way forward, but for us this means giving up our pride, abandoning the old models by which we used to think, and finding structures for a community that is not based on scapegoating and violence.

Seeking the Glory of Him who sent us

Romuald Horn OP

The English Dominican Father Romuald Horn, who here, on the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination, reflects on what the priesthood means for him, spent many years of his life as a priest in the once famous parish of St Dominic's, Newcastle upon Tyne (which in his early days contained some of the most deprived parts of Tyneside.) He is now a confessor at the Basilica of St Mary Major, Rome.

A golden jubilee is not an occasion for argument. If fifty years are not reason enough, it would seem useless to look further. For one can speak with the tongue, and one can say a word with one's whole life. Even to