

Commentary on René Girard's Account of Mimetic Theory

By

Robert Hamerton-Kelly

Stanford University (ret)

Chair of the Board of Advisors:

“Imitatio: Integrating the Human Sciences.”

RG has given us a unique gift in this one-paged definition of Mimetic Theory. Hitherto he has refused to put the theory "in a nutshell." I sat with him for the several hours it took to write and I have for the archives his hand-written copy of the document, with the crossings out and additions. The definition is perforce compact and concentrated and every line commands commentary. Since one cannot comment on every line I shall try here to spotlight the two main features so as to orient the reader to the highlights.

The first notable feature is the primacy of reciprocal violence. It surprised me when RG so emphatically made reciprocal violence central to the definition, and vengeance the pivotal cultural institution. There have been recent discussions in Girardian circles about the possibility of "good mimesis" and the focus of discussion has at times wavered from imitation as violence to imitation as compassion. On this definition mimesis is necessarily violent, and benign mimesis is the the result of meliorative factors in culture, but the first of even these meliorative factors remains violence, the good violence that controls the bad via the ritual of religion.

To be sure, neutral imitation is the starting point of the definition, as RG says when he calls it "Mimetic or Imitative Theory," but in the context of the theory imitation is never neutral, but rather necessarily competitive and inevitably violent. There is no "good imitation" or "good mimesis" within the purview of the theory. In human development there may be good

imitation prior to the advent of mimetic rivalry, - which arrives after all animal needs and instincts have been satisfied, - and after mimetic rivalry, when one has entered a sphere of saving grace, Christian, Buddhist other - but when mimetic desire is operating it is necessarily competitive and necessarily violent, to be controlled only by the violent mechanism of the surrogate victim.

Mimetic desire operates all of the time, everywhere there are two or three human beings together. No individual or society escapes the violence of the mimetic stage of desire. So, formally speaking, there are three stages in human development, pre-mimetic (i.e. purely imitative), mimetic (imitative and reciprocally violence), and post-mimetic (i.e. the Apocalypse and the Kingdom of God). These stages are logical not actual, because in our experience they overlap (The Kingdom overlaps as Hope)

Violence in the form of Vengeance is the institutional presence of mimetic desire in human community and

in the human individual. Vengeance would destroy human community were it not curbed. The mechanism of the Scapegoat or Whipping Boy curbs the escalation of vengeance to the extreme by the emergent surrogate victim mimetically attracting violence to himself, that is by the same mimetic mechanics as generate the violence in the first place, and thus mimetic violence moves mimetically (i.e. by imitation driving reciprocity, becoming competitive and ultimately violent) from the group to the representative of the group, the surrogate victim. Sacrifice imitates the event of the surrogate victim, and founds a technology to control violence by violence, actual violence by ritual violence, uncontrolled violence by controlled violence.

This imitation of the moment of surrogate victimage is Religion, which founds the world of the more or less ordered community by using mimetic (imitative) violence to control mimetic violence. The best analogue to this religious technology is the

pharmaceutical process whereby a little poison drives out a lot, a lesser poison drives out a greater. In Religion the small poison of killing the surrogate under controlled circumstances (ritual) manages the big poison of chaotic violence.

Vengeance and Scapegoating, or "Payback" and the "Blame game", or "I'll get even with you, because you're to blame not I," and all the whipping boys, suckers, patsies, saps and schlemiels, all the fall guys, greenhorns, dupes and sitting ducks are the ubiquitous, sorry symptoms of the truth of MT. The average office, club, faith community, family and faculty meeting attests the sad banality of MT. MT is, alas, just common sense, the obvious truth about us.

The second salient point is the claim that true Christianity uncovers (apocalypse = unveiling) the dirty ruse of the surrogate victim, now become the ritual of the Scapegoat in Religion. The Gospel placards the torture-to-death of a young Jew as a

crime not a sacrifice. This victim is innocent and this deed is murder, not a saving sacrifice. Nevertheless it saves; it is a saving murder. Because of this paradox and all the subtlety of interpretation MT demands, Christianity for the most part misunderstands itself and presents itself as the best of all (sacrificial) religions, when it is actually the End of Religion and the Death of the Gods. MT is a terminally critical theory of religion, which many of its own followers misuse as a way to improve Christianity and make it the best Religion of all. So we have not only profound paradoxes but also tragic ironies.