

Account of Mimetic Theory

By René Girard, March 2009

Mimetic or Imitative Theory is an explanation of human behavior and human culture.

Human beings imitate each other in everything, including desire. As a result they choose the same objects and compete for them. Paradoxically, therefore, the same imitative force as brings people together, pulls them apart. The mimetic theory claims that this misunderstood phenomenon is the most important cause of human violence, and that **vengeance** is the most important form it takes. Vengeance is the first characteristically human institution. We call this first insight the *moment of mimetic desire or mimetic rivalry*.

Limitless vengeance will destroy the species unless some antidote appears. Paradoxically the antidote originates in the same mimetic impulses as cause the problem in the first place. The mimetic reciprocity of vengeance is deflected upon a single victim, which mimetically attracts all the violence to itself. This is the process the Greeks called *Katharsis*, which means the purifications of violence through one solemn, sacrificial death. We call this second insight the moment of the *scapegoat*.

Archaic religion is essentially the ritualized repetition of this sacrificial death, in order to renew its efficacy. We call this third insight the moment of *religion*.

Christianity, as atheistic anthropology correctly points out, is exactly the same schema, with one fundamental difference, systematically ignored by modern anthropology, *the attribution of guilt is reversed and the scapegoat victim is explicitly vindicated*. This is why Christianity, far from being just one more religion, reveals the lie of all religions (including itself when misunderstood).