

## The Christianity of René Girard and the Nature of Religion

LUCIEN SCUBLA

(Translated by Mark R. Anspach)

Having shown sacrifice to be the cornerstone of all religious systems,<sup>1</sup> René Girard has undertaken to construct, on this basis, a new apologia for Christian religion.<sup>2</sup> For, of all religions Christianity is in his eyes the only one to reveal the violent foundations of every human society and, most importantly, the only one to point to a remedy — the only one to lift men out of the sacrificial order by uniting them directly around the God of love instead of reconciling them belatedly over the grave of the surrogate victim.

This interpretation of Christianity has encountered many reservations, and indeed we shall see that a strictly 'non-sacrificial' reading of the New Testament runs into major difficulties.

The complexity of the subject would call for lengthy development, for Girard's thesis is a tissue of empirical assertions, epistemological postulates and theological inferences that raise problems of different orders. But by the force of circumstance, we will limit ourselves here to examining some particularly contentious points.

As a preliminary, since our arguments are in danger of being too succinct, we wish to forestall a misunderstanding. If we believe it expedient to voice unvarnished objections to certain aspects of Girard's work, our intent is certainly not to cast discredit on the whole of his output; it is on the contrary to return to the original core of the theory and to continue building on the solid foundations our author himself set.

While the final pages of *Violence and the Sacred* seemed to promise that an anthropology which had at last come of age would turn its new-found strength to the conquest of Christianity, we know what happened next. Arguing that men could not have discovered on their own the violent origins of their civilization, Girard undertook to show the necessity of attributing the knowledge, on which he himself had laboured mightily, of 'things hidden since the found-

ation of the world', not to a science sprung full-blown from an autonomous reason but to Christian revelation which had in his view made possible the advent of such a science.<sup>3</sup>

But for the anthropological and epistemological import of evangelical revelation really to be such, Christianity would have to represent the only, or at least the first and in any case the most radical refusal of sacrifice and exposure of the violent foundations of human institutions.

However, it is easy to show that the devaluation of sacrifice is neither the distinctive attribute of Christianity nor the major theme of Christ's teaching; and that the gospels cannot lay exclusive claim to the revelation of the violent foundations of human society.

Indeed, at least six centuries before Jesus, the Orphic tradition<sup>4</sup> condemned with vigour all forms of blood sacrifice and already reproached men with having founded their polis on murder, not only in the myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans<sup>5</sup> but also in the story of the death of Orpheus, peacemaking hero and bard of non-violence,<sup>6</sup> savagely lynched for having denounced the pernicious character of sacrificial rites.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand Christ does not seem, in the gospels, to have pushed the devaluation of sacrifice further than the Old Testament prophets of whom He (with justification) presents Himself as the continuator, and it is difficult to see His death as less sacrificial than that of Dionysus and especially that of Orpheus, which manifestly lacks a redemptive character.

Jesus [Girard writes] is the last and greatest of the prophets, the one who sums up and transcends them all . . . With Him comes a displacement at once minuscule and gigantic which appears as a direct extension of the Old Testament but which also constitutes a formidable rupture. It is the complete elimination for the first time of the sacrificial, it is the end of divine violence, it is the truth of all that came before finally made plain.<sup>8</sup>

But what exactly should we make of this?

By itself, the first part of this text displays clearly the venturesome character of the Girardian interpretation: compelled to recognize that the teaching of Christ is 'a direct extension of the Old Testament' even while it can establish the transcendence of the evangelical message only by the 'formidable rupture' which it is supposed to mark in the history of humanity. For if the Jewish prophets had already taken part in the 'revelation' one is hardly justified in refusing this distinction to the Orphics, to the Greek tragedians, and to a number of pagan philosophers, and that runs the risk of ruining the whole apologetic project.

But, for lack of space, we will leave these comparisons as they stand and look at whether Christianity really has the remarkable properties our author attributes to it.

I ' . . . the complete elimination for the first time of the sacrificial . . . '

'The Gospels', we read in *Des Choses cachées*, 'never speak of sacrifices except to cast them aside and refuse them all validity.'<sup>9</sup>

In reality, the gospels always speak of sacrifice in a very measured tone. In the passage from Matthew<sup>10</sup> where Girard tends to see an abolition of sacrifice, 'a setting apart of the sacrificial' and even 'a revelation of its function',<sup>11</sup> Jesus asks of men only that they reconcile themselves with their brothers *before* presenting their offering on the altar, but far from suggesting that the offering would then be superfluous, He continues to prescribe it to them as if it were needed to seal and consolidate their union. When He heals a leper,<sup>12</sup> He tells him to go and present himself at the Temple to perform the sacrifices that the Law requires.<sup>13</sup> When He Himself celebrates Passover,<sup>14</sup> He commemorates the people of Israel's departure from Egypt by immolating the traditional lamb, like any pious Jew of His time. Finally, the words of Jesus are in perfect accord with His conduct. When He teaches His disciples that 'to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices',<sup>15</sup> He is not expelling the sacrificial rites into outer darkness: He confines Himself to subordinating them to love, in the direct tradition of the prophets whose precepts He repeats word for word.<sup>16</sup>

Looking at things carefully, one realizes it is not so much sacrifice that Christianity tends the most to devalue as relationships based on marriage and kinship. For while it is impossible to find in the speeches of Jesus any pronouncements that are flatly anti-sacrificial, there are countless gospel passages in which He expressly urges His disciples, with an energy and harshness that have embarrassed numerous commentators, to relegate family relationships to a secondary position and to neglect, if not to defy outright, customary duties in this domain.<sup>17</sup> And while there is a continuity from the Old to the New Testament as regards the attitude to adopt towards sacrifice, Judaism and Christianity are in total opposition on the subject of kinship relations. Judaism is a religion which puts the accent on the father, Christianity is a religion which puts the accent on the son; the former tends to emphasize the vertical relation that

unites man with his ancestors, the latter to stress the horizontal relation that unites man with his 'brothers'.<sup>18</sup>

Even if the devaluation of natural kinship to the benefit of spiritual kinship is not an exclusively Christian trait, it is unmistakably a leading characteristic of Christianity. It is what sets it at odds with the Jewish world and with the traditional Graeco-Roman one; it is also what will impede the penetration of Christianity in China, despite the great skill and patient efforts of the Jesuits;<sup>19</sup> it is, finally, what will make the Christian religion one of the principal sources of modern individualism.<sup>20</sup>

So we see that things are clear. If there is indeed a 'formidable rupture' between the Old and the New Testament, it concerns kinship and not sacrifice. And it is because He was fighting the traditional forms of filial piety,<sup>21</sup> and not because He was desacralizing the tomb of the surrogate victim,<sup>22</sup> that Christ was able to give the impression of shaking the foundations of the social order when He opposed the cult of the dead and turned men away from their burying places. What is more, if by 'complete elimination of the sacrificial' is meant its radical condemnation, it is not here that Christianity might find the sign of its singularity; for in its era it is not Jesus but the Essenes who unreservedly proscribe the immolation of animal victims, as before them had the Orphics and the Pythagoreans with whom they have for this reason often been compared.<sup>23</sup>

But of course we will be told it is not a question of that. For the objection will be made that the impetuosity with which these various sects reject sacrifice shows how far they are still imprisoned by sacrificial logic, while *a contrario* the very fact of not violently excluding sacrifice demonstrates that the Gospel is utterly outside this logic. In other words, Orphism and its avatars would be *anti-sacrificial* movements, whereas Christianity would be the first, and perhaps the only, *non-sacrificial* religion of humanity. And it is for just this reason that the sects force their adherents into a rigid corset of alimentary taboos,<sup>24</sup> while Jesus teaches His disciples that it is not what goes into man but what comes out that is able to defile him.<sup>25</sup> Christ would therefore be alone in eliminating sacrifice, by substituting morality for ritualism and charity for prohibitions, whereas the sects would only substitute new rites for old rites, new taboos for old taboos, never actually breaking out of the sacrificial system. Indeed, Christianity would be the only religion to reveal not so much the pernicious character of sacrifice *per se* as the violent foundations

of all human institutions of which blood sacrifice is an integral part; it would be the only one fully to expose to the light of day the victimage mechanism and the 'scandalous' nature<sup>26</sup> of the mimetic desire from which it proceeds.

## II ' . . . the truth of all that came before finally made plain . . . '

Such would be the essence of Christianity: it is by revealing the founding murder, and above all the victimage mechanism which is fundamental to it, that Jesus permits men for the first time definitively to leave the sacrificial order.

'There is no essential passage of the Gospels', Girard writes, 'which does not contain the revelation of the founding victim or which is not itself this revelation, beginning with the text of the Passion.'<sup>27</sup>

However, on carefully rereading the texts 'without adding anything or cutting anything out',<sup>28</sup> what do we find? That Jesus denounces the murder of the prophets and more generally all murders from that of Abel, which inaugurates the violent history of humanity, down to that of Zacharias, which is supposed to close it:<sup>29</sup> true enough; but that on this occasion He reveals to men the founding character of the murder: certainly not. Not that the victimage mechanism is absent from the gospels – it is, on the contrary, omnipresent; but its nature and effects are never explained, and its 'use' is never condemned.

Quite the opposite. Jesus often calls on the sacrificial metaphor with a disarming spontaneity, as if He too turns readily to a logic of exclusion: 'And if thy right eye [scandalize] thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.'<sup>30</sup>

Just before giving His disciples this severe injunction, Christ made reference to the covetous gaze man casts on his neighbour's wife, that is to say the very thing that Girard calls the 'mimesis of appropriation'. He thus employs the victimage mechanism in order to turn it against itself, since instead of seeking the origin of evil outside man He goes back to the internal origin of human unhappiness: to envy, the source of the 'scandal'. But the fact remains that this celebrated text 'plays' a strange game with sacrificial logic. It neither reveals nor destroys the expulsion mechanism: it diverts it

from its habitual use and puts it to better ends; as if it were less important for men to know the mechanism than to know how to 'trick' it.

This impression, based solely on Chapter 5 of Matthew, is confirmed by a reading of Chapter 18. The Evangelist has Jesus pronounce once again the words we have quoted, but in another context. Christ has just counselled His disciples to become like children and to be sure not to 'scandalize' them. Then, without our being able right away to grasp clearly why,<sup>31</sup> He recounts for His disciples the allegory of the 'stray sheep', which is constructed on a model that for once we can with justice call radically non-sacrificial.<sup>32</sup> And since the reference to hell fire or Gehenna evokes human sacrifice and even, more precisely, the sacrifice of children,<sup>33</sup> all the elements necessary for a 'revelation' in the Girardian sense of the term are thus united. All the more so as Jesus adds in conclusion: 'Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.'<sup>34</sup> But, oddly enough, the revelation does not take place. One finds in particular no allusion in this text to collective murder.

However, the theme of collective violence figures in many another passage, and notably in the pages preceding the story of the Passion: the parable of the murderous husbandmen,<sup>35</sup> the parable of the wedding of the king's son,<sup>36</sup> the malediction of the scribes and the Pharisees.<sup>37</sup> Are we to believe that the Evangelist has clumsily scattered themes which Jesus, for His part, had closely associated? Or on the contrary that he is proceeding with a revelation step by step, or rather a secret initiation that follows a learned gradation culminating in the story of the Passion?

The mere fact that one may hesitate between these divergent interpretations is enough to shake Girard's thesis.

But that is not all – let us reread the celebrated curses hurled against the Pharisees:

Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.<sup>38</sup>

Such are the words Matthew attributes to Jesus. And Luke spells out the rest:

That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation; From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation.<sup>39</sup>

All the crimes of humanity concentrated in a single generation – all the vices of society concentrated in a single social class, Marx will say – with the salvation of humanity hinging on that condition: how can one fail to recognize here the selfsame illusion that is the product of the victimage mechanism and the cause of its efficacy? All Girard's talent is needed to persuade us for a few moments – but only a few moments – that Jesus, far from setting up the scribes and the Pharisees as scapegoats, is actually revealing to them the founding murder.<sup>40</sup> Even if we know that it is Christ who is going to die and not the scribes and Pharisees, we cannot hide from ourselves the fact that the words here imputed to Jesus are strangely consonant with persecution texts of our acquaintance.

### III ' . . . the end of divine violence . . . '

But let us not belabour this point. Suppose Christ is describing here the viewpoint of the persecutors, as His mission requires, without Himself adopting this viewpoint. Grant that the 'damnation of hell' is here only another name for the violent mechanism that is going to end up turning automatically against the persecutors. Can one say, for all that, that violence in the gospels is a purely human affair? That the New Testament bids a firm farewell to the old theology of divine wrath and does not impute the least act of violence to God Himself?

This is the cardinal point, the one that must in the last instance determine the sacrificial or non-sacrificial character of a text. Neither the victim's consent – contrary to what Girard had at first believed<sup>41</sup> – nor even the victim's innocence<sup>42</sup> can guarantee that a text does not belong to the sacrificial corpus; only the absolute innocence of God in a situation of violent unanimity can furnish the proof.

Now, asserts Girard, 'the idea of divine violence has no place in evangelical inspiration'.<sup>43</sup>

In evangelical inspiration, perhaps not; but in the evangelical text, it certainly has.

Consider, first of all, the parable of the murderous husbandmen, the three versions of which Girard compares rapidly.<sup>44</sup> In Mark and in Luke, it is Jesus Himself who maintains that the lord of the

vineyard – that is to say God – will destroy the faithless husbandmen and put others in their place. But in Matthew it is Jesus' audience that attributes to God a desire for reprisals, or at least that responds in such a way to Jesus' question:

When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.<sup>45</sup>

We readily concede to Girard that it is proper to compare the three accounts of this parable, and we would well like to suppose along with him that 'the text of Matthew is to be preferred'. It is still necessary, in order to test this hypothesis, to place the parable of the husbandmen in the entirety of its original context, which means comparing it to all other parables in the vicinity that manifestly treat the same subject. Now oddly enough, while Girard does not fail to point out a brief passage of the parable of the talents<sup>46</sup> that corroborates his interpretation of the parable of the husbandmen, he is silent on the parable of the wedding of the king's son,<sup>47</sup> which is not compatible with his interpretation even though it is closely tied to the parable of the husbandmen which it immediately follows. The two texts have the same structure, but this time, in the view of Jesus Himself, it is the king – that is to say God – who in His wrath sends forth His armies to kill the murderers and to burn their city.<sup>48</sup> And just for good measure, the king next banishes into outer darkness the unfortunate guest who is not wearing a wedding garment.<sup>49</sup>

Thus everything transpires as if in the view of Jesus Himself, and not only that of His disciples, the kingdom of heaven and the happiness of the chosen could be established only upon the exclusion of the reprobates and the unhappiness of the outcasts. All the parables agree on this point, including the parable of the talents which ends on the same violent note as the parable of the wedding.

In *Le Bouc émissaire* René Girard seems to concede this himself. 'Paraballo', he remarks, 'means to toss something as fodder to the crowd to appease its appetite for violence.'<sup>50</sup> Therefore the parable would be a metaphorical discourse, still bearing the stamp of violence because destined for those who are violent. And Jesus could speak to us in parables without prejudice for the revelation, since in such a case He never fails to warn us Himself that he is speaking to us in parables. Very well. But, aside from the fact that Jesus did not express Himself in Greek,<sup>51</sup> what becomes here of the idea of a

wholly transparent revelation, of a text to which it would suffice to abandon oneself without searching for hidden dimensions?<sup>52</sup> Is it not, on the contrary, throwing the door open to any and all interpretations?

However that may be, let us move on now to the death of Judas. It is true that the theme of Judas does not occupy a place in the account of the Passion sufficient to make the latter a simple variant of those folk tales in which the hero, at first the victim of a traitor, ends up triumphing over him, while the traitor receives a just punishment.<sup>53</sup> Girard is probably right on this score, but is it, for all that, an episode of no importance? And is not the author of *Des Choses cachées* hoping to prove too much when he maintains that the punishment of the traitor is missing from the gospels?<sup>54</sup> It is accurate to state that in the gospels, in the strict sense of the term, the fate of Judas is not properly speaking punishment, but rather suicide:<sup>55</sup> another proof, says René Girard, 'that men are never condemned by God: they condemn themselves by their own conduct'.<sup>56</sup> Let us admit that the text of Matthew may accommodate such a simple interpretation. It is astonishing all the same, as Thomas Stern emphasizes,<sup>57</sup> that our author breathes not a word of the fashion in which Peter reports Judas' death in the very beginning of the Acts of the Apostles:

Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood.<sup>58</sup>

Here again the writer does not speak precisely of a divine punishment, but the meaning of the passage is hardly in doubt. Ought we to lay this 'violent mythology' to the sole account of the apostles, who would thereby have already fallen back into the sacrificial rut in which historical Christianity is going to settle? But where then will we find authentic Christianity?

To finish with this subject, let us proceed to the story of the Passion. For lack of space we will limit ourselves to bringing out two essential points, which are closely connected and which Girard in his commentary curiously omits: the relationship of the death of Jesus to the Jewish celebration of Passover, and the institution of the eucharistic ritual which the Synoptic gospels seem to present as a transformation of the Paschal rite. Doubtless John sets himself apart

from the Synoptic account: he does not have Jesus pronounce the sacramental words in the course of the Last Supper. On the other hand, though, he develops at length the theme of Christ as the 'bread of life' whose 'flesh and blood' men must consume.<sup>59</sup> What is more, one finds in John the theme of the 'Lamb of God',<sup>60</sup> which evokes the sacrifice of Isaac as well as the Paschal rite: the lamb whose blood permits men to make white their robes when they prepare to appear before the throne of God.<sup>61</sup> As for Paul, we know that he openly assimilates Christ to the Passover lamb: 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed'.<sup>62</sup> But since the theme of the Passover lamb has perhaps lost its evocative power for the majority of our contemporaries, we advise the reader to reread Chapter 12 of Exodus to be able to evaluate these associations.

Is the rite of the Eucharist nothing, then, but a banal 'totemic meal', as Frazer, Freud and company would have it? No, we will be told, for there are at least two important differences between them. In the foundation narratives of sacrifices in the classic mode, the communal meal follows quite naturally the immolation of the victim; whereas in the story of the Passion the meal takes place before the death of Jesus. Furthermore, the eucharistic rite lays the accent on memory and not on repetition – it is less a question of reproducing the Last Supper than of taking the occasion to recall the life and the death of Christ: 'Do this in memory of me'; while in sacrifice in Girard's sense, it is important to repeat the original murder instead of remembering it.

It is true that all the disciples commune together with Jesus before He is put to death, but the presence of Judas at the Last Supper is in itself enough to rule out our seeing in that meal a peaceful ritual that would be completely foreign to sacrificial logic. Also, if that communal meal is indissociable from the Passion; if the death of Christ is to be related to the Jewish Passover, as the Synoptics suggest and as Paul declares explicitly; if Christ is indeed the lamb of God who takes away – who *takes away* and not who *reveals* – the sin of the world, as John says;<sup>63</sup> then the crucifixion is a sacrifice, doubtless a sacrifice *sui generis* as the Epistle to the Hebrews affirms, but a sacrifice all the same.<sup>64</sup> 'The doctrine of the efficacy of the cross', Girard asserts, 'has nothing to do with sacrifice.'<sup>65</sup> However, sacrifice is first and above all the requirement of a human or animal victim to obtain a benefit from a divinity who by this very fact runs the risk of being considered 'violent'. Now the salvation of humanity assuredly requires, for a Christian, the death of Jesus on the cross

and the reactualization (not the repetition)<sup>66</sup> in the eucharistic ritual of what must therefore be called, whether we like it or not, a sacrifice. To maintain the opposite is to set oneself up in contradiction not only with the Epistle to the Hebrews but with the spirit and the letter of the New Testament in its entirety.

The truth is that if Girard wished to carry the logic of his thesis through to the end, instead of confining himself to ignoring the eucharistic rite, he ought to follow those commentators who believe they have found in John the justification for replacing it with the rite of the washing of the feet: a rite indeed devoid of any sacrificial character and rigorously symmetrical, where everything takes place between men who are equal and interdependent.<sup>67</sup> But apart from the difficulties which this interpretation of John raises,<sup>68</sup> it is clear that it would take us out of the traditional Christianity to which Girard remains attached, if not out of religion itself.

Let us sum up. Supposing the historical Jesus had wanted to challenge the old notion of divine wrath, to abolish sacrifice and to reveal the victimage mechanism, it is probably not demonstrable and is in any event not what Girard wanted to demonstrate. On the other hand, it is scarcely possible to doubt that our author has no basis for attributing to the Christ of the gospels the designs he does; for even if we have not demonstrated this, we believe we have shown the demonstration to be possible.

Interesting as it may be, therefore, the Girardian interpretation is not compatible with the text as a whole: he too often demands more of it than is there while totally neglecting certain of its most fundamental aspects. It is false to say that the victimage mechanism is revealed for the first time in Scripture and that it suffices to read the Judæo-Christian text to be able to read all other texts afterwards. In reality it is not the New Testament that allows us to understand primitive religion; it is Girardian anthropology that enriches our understanding of Christianity.

The Christianity of Girard is therefore not that of the gospels. But is it at least fully compatible with our author's religious anthropology? The question might seem paradoxical, but we are going to see that it is worth while to ask it.

Whereas in *Violence and the Sacred* he showed the positive effects of religious rites and beliefs, in *Des Choses cachées* Girard seems to outline a Christianity stripped of all sacredness and of all ritual. In theory only the violent sacred and violent rites are excluded, but the

economy of the Girardian system makes it exceedingly hard to conceive of alternatives that would not in their turn be touched by violence.

Our author affirms the transcendence of God and rejects humanist interpretations of religion, but nothing truly indicates that the 'revelation' would require God to intervene in history, so that Christ could be mistaken for a sage come to teach men that they have always been alone with their violence and that they must hasten towards reconciliation one with the other to avoid all being destroyed one by the other.

By devaluing traditional religion in the name of true piety Girard revives in his manner, despite his denials, the traditional gesture of the philosophers who, from the dawn of Greek philosophy, have condemned 'superstition' in the name of 'reason'. To be sure, if Christianity is the true religion it doubtless has to distinguish itself from all other religions; but if it no longer has anything in common with other religions, is it still a religion?

In effect, liberated from its sacrificial matrix and indifferent to all ritual, Girardian Christianity bears a great resemblance to the 'Christianity' of Spinoza,<sup>69</sup> but it runs the risk of floating in the void, whereas the latter is solidly anchored in a robust theological-political system. For if the Dutch philosopher refuses, in principle, any form of 'outward worship' (while observing for his part too, be it noted, that ceremonies and rites reinforce the power of society<sup>70</sup>), he well knows that only a few men may attain bliss by the royal road of intellectual love for God, and that the greatest number will have to resign themselves to obtaining salvation by the ordinary route of obedience to rites or to political authorities.<sup>71</sup> Whereas men in Girard's vision, apparently deprived of any ritual or institutional aid, are left with no choice but all to follow Jesus Christ together or all to plunge together into the final Apocalypse.

The comparison with Epicurus is still more interesting for, apart from the fact that the philosopher of the Garden obviously owes nothing to the Bible,<sup>72</sup> the non-violent God of *Des Choses cachées* bears a greater resemblance to the Epicurean divinities, outside the whirl of worldly events, than to Spinoza's God, where human violence still manifests its sovereign power. For Girard, as for Epicurus, religion reduces itself to ethics and up to a certain point to the same ethics: for is renouncing 'unnatural and unnecessary desires' anything other than evading mimetic desire and all occasions for 'scandal'? It is true that Epicurean wisdom does not coincide, for all

that, with Christian charity, but here again the comparison turns to the advantage of philosophy. For supposing Girardian anthropology to be valid, if men do not live in hiding, if they do not disperse themselves in small circles of friends, if everyone does not retreat into his garden, how will they avoid the worst, once they are deprived of the sacrificial mechanisms suited to checking their violence? It is true that such a return to the 'state of nature' is perfectly illusory,<sup>73</sup> but it is the only solution compatible with the postulates of Girardian anthropology, whereas the road that by our author's account Christ would offer is not in accord with these same postulates.

'The Kingdom', he declares, 'is perfect reciprocity, nothing more, nothing less. As long as men settle scores with each other, there is not good reciprocity; there is no good reciprocity except at the price of a total renunciation of violence.'<sup>74</sup>

Very well. But if all social contract theories must be rejected as naïve,<sup>75</sup> if the pretensions of humanism must be challenged, if the illusion of autonomy must be guarded against, it is hard to see how a good reciprocity could emerge, develop and extend itself to the whole human race, starting out from the terrifying face-off to which the people of an entirely desacralized world would be reduced. Unless they benefit from some divine grace, they will inevitably descend anew into violence. Now of such grace our author breathes not a word, for his Christianity, as Pierre Manent observes, is rigorously 'Pelagian' in the sense that once the revelation is accomplished, 'everything takes place between men'.<sup>76</sup>

But if everything takes place between men, their reconciliation is at once necessary and impossible. In effect, if the victimage mechanism is not only the source but also the foundation of all institutions of human society past and present, and if the misrecognition of this mechanism is the *sine qua non* of its efficacy, the Christian 'revelation' limits itself to stripping man of his ritual protections to yield him up naked to his own violence. How, then, can we not adopt the point of view that Girard imputes to the persecutors of Jesus;<sup>77</sup> how can we not join Machiavelli in denouncing the unintended consequences of a Christianity whose non-violent purposes are in danger of setting the whole world ablaze at any moment?<sup>78</sup>

No doubt about it: if Christ came digging up the graves and exhuming the cadavers around which men have long since made their peace, and if this 'revelation' sufficed to destabilize every

society, He would be abruptly destroying the work of civilization, which has little by little replaced the earliest bloody rites with more and more peaceable rituals and has slowly eroded human violence, to the point of making it appear more and more odious wherever it still retains a remnant of primitive vigour.

It is therefore permissible to believe that Jesus, far from reopening men's wounds, came to dress their injuries, to calm their memory and to teach them oblivion and forgiveness. And it is equally permissible to believe that the 'revelation' is not enough in itself to shake the walls of the human community to the point of provoking their fall; otherwise, unless it had suddenly changed its way of existence, the human race should have disappeared long ago.

But it is only now, we will be told, that humanity runs the risk of disappearing, for if the violent unanimity against Christ was able to postpone the disaster one last time, it is now that the revelation, having long been underground, emerges into daylight and approaches its goal.

Doubtless the worst is not impossible, but this is true in our opinion for another reason: what threatens to do man in is not the discovery of the violent origins of his rites, but rather the baleful illusion that he could and even should 'free himself' of all ritual.

Let us go back, in fact, to the results established in *Violence and the Sacred*. What Girard showed in this work was the violent *origin* of the earliest cultural forms, and first of all of religious ceremonies, but not the latter's intrinsically violent *nature*. As a consequence, from the fact that religion is at the source of all institutions and the victimage mechanism at the source of all rites, we cannot conclude that this mechanism is the unique foundation – apart from Christianity – of all societies past and present. Both logic and observation make us loath to go along with this.

Logic first: for the victimage mechanism, which converts reciprocal violence into unanimous violence, could well be at the origin of all rites and all institutions without, however, being the complete cause of them. Or, to put things a little more technically, it could be the 'efficient cause' of the first social structures and of the emergence of the cultural order without being, for all that, their 'formal cause'.<sup>79</sup>

Observation equally: for, looking at things closely, it would seem that religious rites were progressively transformed into other religious rites – or into political or judicial rites – that were further and further removed from their sacrificial origin and more and more

autonomous. This is manifestly true of money, whose ritual origins have long been clearly established;<sup>80</sup> it is also true of monarchy, as demonstrated by the convergent and complementary analyses of Frazer, Hocart and Girard,<sup>81</sup> and one could easily show that democracy itself works on procedures that could with justice be qualified as ritual but no longer as sacrificial.<sup>82</sup>

More generally – and without reducing human history to a unilinear and determinist process – one notices a global tendency towards a lesser violence, as much in sacrificial rites as in the parasacrificial or extra-sacrificial institutions born of them. One observes neither the rupture that Christianity should have provoked nor the uninterrupted rise of violence implied by the thesis of an ever-falling (whether gradually or sharply) degree of a supposed protective ‘misrecognition’ (*méconnaissance*). Whether before or after the birth of Christ, we see an approximately regular diminution of violence, at least in the Western world, from the Orphics and Heraclitus who denounce sacrifice as an abominable stain, down to the recent abandonment of the death penalty, perceived as a kind of legal crime.<sup>83</sup>

As Kant might have said, therefore, ritual has not only civilized men, it has moralized them.<sup>84</sup> For it busies itself not only with deferring violence and with hiding it more and more successfully,<sup>85</sup> or even with containing it more and more effectively; it also succeeds in rendering it detestable. That, as we must reiterate, is why accusing ritual, revealing its bloody origins and exposing the real or symbolic violence it would like to dissimulate, amounts in reality to stirring the last embers of an ancient violence now covered by a thick layer of cinders, and it would be suicidal if it could be effective. But, thank God, it cannot: ritual is generally more powerful than its detractors and more shrewd than its demystifiers.

Indeed, it is not knowledge that destroys the victimage mechanism, it is the series of rites born of this mechanism that, as they free themselves from it, take us out from under its hold at the same time as they make possible our knowledge of it. Girard himself seems to acknowledge this:

Violence in primitive societies is never conceived as we conceive of it ourselves. For us, violence possesses a conceptual autonomy, a specificity of which primitive societies lack the idea . . . What permits us to abstract the act of violence intellectually, to see in it an isolated crime, is the effectiveness of judicial institutions that transcend all the antagonists.<sup>86</sup>

The fact is all the more remarkable in that judicial institutions derive from a transformation of religious rituals anterior and exterior to the Christian ‘revelation’; but Girard does not appear to see what profit could be drawn from this observation.

Whatever may be made of this particular point, it is at the very least doubtful that the efficacy of a rite should be in direct proportion to the ‘misrecognition’ of its nature and, *a fortiori*, of its origin. Even in the case of the victimage mechanism strictly construed, everything seems to indicate that one can at once know it and succumb to it. Scapegoat phenomena continue to be triggered spontaneously after the Christian ‘revelation’, apparently with a frequency and efficacy neither greater nor lesser than before it. That is why one can, like Machiavelli in Chapter 7 of *The Prince*, teach men the way to operate the mechanism, giving them, as it were, authentic ‘how to’ instructions.

As far as rites go, one would almost be tempted to reverse the Girardian postulate: far from destroying ritual, the ‘revelation’ of its origin could even contribute, under certain circumstances, to reinforcing it. Indeed, in the course of initiation ceremonies, the adults show the young people the masks of divinities with which they had terrorized them when they were younger. Now, as a commentator of Hopi customs notes,

This ceremony of demystification and this recantation inflicted on the belief in the Katchina are going to be the institutional foundation of the new belief in the Katchina that constitutes the essential part of Hopi religion . . . Now, they tell the children, you know that the *real* Katchina no longer come dancing as *before* in the pueblos. They no longer come but in invisible fashion, and they inhabit the masks on dance days in mystical fashion.<sup>87</sup>

‘A Hopi Voltaire’, the same commentator adds, ‘would say that since he was fooled once, he wouldn’t be fooled again. But the Hopi distinguish, in order to contrast them, the mystification with which one fools children from the mystical truth into which one initiates them.’<sup>88</sup>

And it is of course the Voltairean attitude which would be naïve, and a supposed ‘radical demystification’ which would be the height of mystification. ‘You know now’, the pedagogues say, ‘how human beings make babies.’ A paltry revelation: for humans do not know, have never known, and perhaps never will know how babies are made in them. That is why there is more truth in the Platonic myths of the *Banquet* than in all the treatises of sex education.

And so it goes probably for all ritual. In vain might Girard object that all the Hopi, whether children or adults, equally misrecognize the nature of their rites. For in a certain sense there is always misrecognition, or more exactly partial recognition, and as Pascal has shown, it is the so-called exhaustive knowledge of the 'half-clever' that is misrecognition's most extreme form.

In fact we may note, 'last but not least',\* the likelihood that God Himself could not reveal to men the ultimate nature of things, for men would not understand this revelation. Such is in any case, it seems to us, the fundamental postulate of all religious thought. The idea finds support in the Spinozist sage himself, who can, to be sure, accede to complete knowledge of two attributes of the divine Substance, but of two attributes only, when altogether there are an infinite number. As if, even by the admission of the greatest rationalists, man could not escape some form of 'misrecognition'.

In sum, then, what *Violence and the Sacred* shows is not how men bestowed humanity on themselves, but by what mechanisms they arrived at their humanity – mechanisms which they set in motion without, however, creating them. And, as a consequence, the 'revelation' could hardly ask men to undo what they did not do and could not have done. What religious thought does teach man is rather the danger to which he would expose himself if he thought he could emancipate himself from every form of exteriority. Whence the prudence of Epicurus who, it seems, suspected ritual of being wiser than human reason. For far from avoiding religious observances, he took part in all public ceremonies.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, he did much more: in the very interior of the Garden, if he stopped short of instituting a sort of private worship, he at least preserved and elaborated the custom of celebrating with ritual banquets the birth and death of friends and relations.<sup>90</sup> As if no society could subsist without rites.

Supposing, then, that Jesus had attempted to abolish ritual, his disciples could but reinvent it. For, as Alfred Loisy wrote:

Religions are historically neither theories, nor sentiments, nor mystical aspirations, but traditions of social life guaranteed by the consecration of ritual. A spirit animates these institutions; but it is the institutions which give consistency to the spirit and keep up its action in the world. It is often said that the religion of the prophets was materialized, narrowed and lowered in the form of the Law. Strictly speaking, there never exists a religion of prophets – no more than there was a religion of Jesus – but an immense effort to raise the devotion of Israel towards an ideal more

\* Translator's note: in English in the original.

and more perfect as regards religious belief, moral conscience and social justice. In so far as this effort tended to disengage itself from any institution, it was lost and could but lose itself in the void. In so far as it was able to embody itself in institutions, it lived and acted. Jeremiah represents the pure spirit of prophetic Yahwism. It is the written Law, which he disdained, that saved that part of his generous dream that the times could use.<sup>91</sup>

And what holds true for Jeremiah holds true also, as Loisy says, for Jesus. To be sure, the first Christian communities might have lived without rite or myth, because they believed themselves to be at the end of time. But having perceived their mistake, they had no choice but to disappear or to elaborate what was going to become historical Christianity. The relapse into the sacrificial was not only inevitable, it was indispensable, and to it Christianity owes its survival. Without it the figure of Jesus would be more enigmatic still than that of Orpheus, supposing – and even this is not certain – that scraps of a 'Christian literature', as disparate and scattered as the 'Orphic literature', preserved for us the sole memory of his name.

But, we will be told, what seems thus to obscure or to delay the revelation is the very thing that realizes it. It is only in appearance that sacrifice survives and eludes the effects of revelation, for the mechanism is definitively compromised, mortally injured, sapped from within. In reality, the past two thousand years have seen the slow but irresistible accomplishment of a labour which the biblical text made possible and which in turn illuminates the biblical text and renders it more and more transparent, at the same time as it keeps men henceforth from attempting in vain to flee their own violence in sacrificial rites. Girard's writings would be only the final moment, or at least one of the last effects of this long movement – the fulfilment and the self-awareness of the revelation, the revelation that the revelation is now completed or that it is coming to a conclusion.

This hypothesis is not lacking in appeal, and doubtless there is some truth to it. But it is difficult to believe, like the first disciples of Jesus, that we are at the end of time, when the odds are that we are the victims of the same illusion as our predecessors. To be sure, it is possible that we find ourselves at the end of a world: for the survival of a Christianity stripped of all ritual, in accord with the curious wish of certain Christians, is at the very least doubtful. To 'return to the time of the first communities' is to return to the age when Christianity was not yet a religion and when, for this reason, it could have

disappeared without leaving the slightest trace. But the decline of Christianity does not necessarily mean the end of religion, and Christians' abandonment of their rites is not perforce the augury of an entirely deritualized world.

In conclusion, apart from the fact that it reads too much into the text, the interpretation of Christianity that Girard proposes presents two major drawbacks.

In the first place, it is difficult to reconcile with the most solid parts of his fundamental anthropology. For, let us repeat, it is probably not knowledge which destroys the victimage mechanism; it is rather ritual itself which, in proportion as it distances itself from its origins, renders little by little its oldest forms obsolete and makes it easier and easier to know the mechanism which gave rise to it.

In the second place, it fits in poorly with Girard's concern to rehabilitate religious thought. For the religious way of thinking is a humble one that cannot accommodate either the desire to be liberated of all ritual, or the pretension of tracing man's humanity back to an ultimate basis in the victimage mechanism. Just as universal gravitation could not, as Newton realized, express the final essence of things, no more could sacrificial logic, which we may permit ourselves to compare with it, contain the secret of humanity.

But we will not pretend any longer to believe that René Girard is unaware of all this. All those who have had the opportunity to converse with him have been able to appreciate his extreme modesty and know that he never fails to point out the partial and lacunary character of his research and his results. 'There is reason to believe', he writes at the end of *Des Choses cachées*, 'that very important aspects elude us which will one day be brought to light.'<sup>92</sup> That is very likely; but is it not more appropriate, in that case, to number the victimage mechanism among the ranks of the revisable hypotheses of science rather than of the revealed truths of theology?

## Towards a Poetics of the Scapegoat

MASAO YAMAGUCHI

(Translated by James Valentine)

The word 'scapegoat' has recently been attracting the attention of more and more people. It is well known that this word derives from the Old Testament, and René Girard has devoted two books to this topic: *Les Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (1978) and *Le Bouc émissaire* (1982). I too have approached this subject in my article 'La Structure mythico-théâtrale de la royauté au Japon traditionnel'.<sup>1</sup> I have been able to show that this phenomenon of the scapegoat constitutes a mechanism which assures culture of its basic vitality. Indeed, this phenomenon opens up a profound perspective that is not limited to the realm of superficial morals: it concerns not only the superficial level of emotion but also the deeper level of human experience and of imagination. It breathes vitality into cultural domains as varied as individual mentality, politics, morals, the history of ideas and aesthetics. That is why taking up discussion of the scapegoat again is in effect seeking the sources of the dynamics of culture.

### I The Genealogy of the Theory of the Scapegoat

The theory of the scapegoat has its origins before the present century. However, ethnology, which along with religious studies is particularly concerned with this subject, has for a long time shown no interest in it.

It was James Frazer who introduced the problem of the scapegoat into ethnology.<sup>2</sup> Frazer, however, has fallen into neglect because of his method of naive comparison. Nevertheless, if we now examine his work from a certain distance, we can recognize in it the starting point of today's symbolic anthropology. Frazer's main thesis is that of *regicide*: in a system of divine royalty the universe, identified with the body of the king, is renewed by his ritual murder. Even though Frazer has been neglected by ethnologists, they are generally in agreement with this theory.