

FOR GOD AND... OURSELVES ALONE?

RENE GIRARD ON VIOLENCE, CONFLICT AND CULTURE

Any academic work, which seeks to enrich our understanding of violence and conflict, is important for us in Ireland. It is perhaps in this light that the work of Rene Girard, Professor of French Literature in Stanford University ² has caught most attention. Many people have found his work profoundly important for their understanding of human relationships and culture. It will be my task here to try and draw out some of these implications.

Mimesis and the origins of violent conflict.

We are not autonomous persons, living unaffected by others on independent islands. Indeed everything we learn, we learn from one another and our surroundings. In the work of Girard, the learning process is shown to be a matter of the imitation of models. We are 'in mimesis' with one another, copying, learning, changing. Most importantly, this mimesis is part and parcel of our condition even when we are not aware of it. As a child learns from his or her mother before any conceptualizing or rational understanding takes place, so mimesis is the learning process in which we find ourselves. Our minds 'catch up', if ever, with our lives. We are mimetic first, then we rationalise it.

In this sense Girard reverses the Cartesian tradition. Descartes portrayed thought as the central element in the individual experience. In Girard, each mind is itself the creation of the mimetic relationships of the human person concerned who in mimesis with others contributes to their development; "I am human therefore I think." The centrality of human relationships is thus established. In this sense it is no longer 'philosophy', 'thinking' or 'ideas', which are central. We can also begin to realize why 'Jesus' and not his ideas or thinking is 'The Way, the Truth and the Life'.

Mimesis ensures the continuity of each personality and of culture and structures from art forms to marriage. When mimesis is working most effectively this process is hidden from view. Aristotle recognized the importance of mimesis in aesthetic and political life. Plato too was concerned with mimesis though he also saw within it a great danger to the community. Neither the nature of this threat nor its origins are uncovered Plato.

Girard firmly shifts mimesis from the sphere of philosophy and aesthetics to its origins in human relationships. In so doing Girard extends the scope of mimesis between us to include imitation of the desires of others, the mimesis of desire. Thus we are in mimesis with the desires of others to have to appropriate, to get. In identifying this mimesis of desire he exposed the immense implications of mimesis for both continuity and destruction in human life. It is the mimesis of desire, which threatens the existence of the community unless it is channeled or changed.

I do what you do because you do it. I wish what you wish because you wish it. Because I want it you want it more. You are a person who for some reason is important for me. You might be a parent, a teacher, a film star, a saint or whatever. You are my model. It is clear already that if two people want the same object, the result can only be conflict. This conflict is the result of the mimesis of desire to have something, to appropriate something, to get something. The 'something', the object of our desires can be anything; a man, a woman, a

personality, a toy, a house, a car, a job, a reputation, a position, a characteristic or whatever. Our models who gave us our desires become our rivals. Our models might be impossible to overcome but they might nevertheless obsess us. In this case they have become total obstacles to us.

One of the most interesting implications for Social Science arising from Girard's work is that no object has an intrinsic, absolute value except that many people desire it. Even though it may not be clear or even immediately important all the rivalries are about power.

In a sense, all social theories which postulate the absolute value of one particular object, whether it be sexual as in the case of Freud or material as in the case of Marx and the capitalists are obsolete. Ideologies which claim that particular human experiences are absolutely paramount are also undermined. Thus ideologies which promote gender experience, class experience, national experience or race experience as the central human problem are the product of particular mimetic rivalries in which these issues have been part of the power struggle. Paradoxically, theories which claim that particular issues are primary may increase the scale of the antagonism through mimesis thus increasing the possibilities of violence and oppression around these questions.

Advertising has long known that products sell if they can be given a desirable 'image'. Products are differentiated as objects of desire not so much by their intrinsic qualities as by their associations with desirable people, lifestyles or situations. In a sense, the task of the advertisers is to increase the mimetic desirability of the product. Increasingly politics appears to be becoming a matter of the presentation of desirable images or at least of portraying the opposition as undesirable. This has been particularly controversial during the 1988 US Presidential Campaign.

There are numerous examples of mimetic desire and its implications. At the 1988 Olympics, desire for a Gold medal and the god-like status it endows (not to mention the money) led a number of athletes to risk drug-taking. Austrian wine producers tried to increase the value of their wine by sweetening less desirable wine with antifreeze. In Switzerland, the success of the Green Party has produced a mimetic rival in the form of the 'Car Party'. Shortages of a particular produce increases its desirability; during petrol shortages in the USA one man was shot by another customer. Rumors of shortages induce shortages as people panic-buy.

These are but small examples of the principle of mimetic desire in practice. The implications of unlimited mimetic desire and the conflicts which result are hence enormous because the violence which must result is unlimited. The result of more people wanting the same object can only result in that object becoming more desirable and conflict resulting.

If this mimesis of desire is so dangerous how then has culture survived and developed over the centuries?

Culture and Violence

In Girard's work, the dangers of mimetic desire are clear. Indeed it is the dangers of mimetic desire which culture hides and controls. The violence of disorder, the unlimited mimesis of desire, is so dangerous that the life of the community is threatened as are, ultimately, the lives of all the persons in the community.

David Stevens has summarized Girard's theory or the origins of Culture very clearly. The original humanoid communities falling into mimetic conflict resolved their conflict when they identified who was to blame. The victim may emerge because of some difference between him and the rest – a cleft foot, a large nose, a skin discoloration, whatever. The rest unite by directing all their violence at him.

“The expelling of the scapegoat transforms relationships within the community. The change from discord to harmony is not attributed to its actual cause – the unifying mimesis of collective violence – but to the victim himself.”³

This is the “Scapegoat Mechanism”. For a group whose mimesis of one another has resulted in the violence of chaos, order and tranquility are restored when the scapegoat is expelled. The violence is now against one, facing in one direction, unanimous.

Because peace is restored between those remaining, the guilt of the scapegoat is held to be proven. The devil who was expelled has also brought peace. The scapegoat is thus held to be both a devil and a god capable of causing chaos and bringing peace. The scapegoat is thus held to be a devil and a god. The whole process is sacred.

Here we have the origin of religion, as the origin of culture. In future when the community faces a mimetic crisis this expulsion is repeated using a surrogate victim, focusing the community once more on the scapegoat and restoring order and peace. This is the origin of rites. Ritual is the attempt to re-enact the process which brought peace.

The story of the devil-god who had to be driven out is retold. It is always told from the perspective of those who did the driving out. These stories tell of the special nature of the devil – god and his whims. This is myth.

At the same time, the structure which emerges out of the expulsion is held to be sacred. Cultures lived with rules which prohibit certain forms of behaviour or limit it to certain people and certain times. They took great care to ensure that people were given difference places, each with its own obligations and duties. Mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, kings and commoners, women and men each had their own rights and duties. By ensuring that people were different, the possibilities of mimesis between them were reduced. The rules became laws prohibiting forms of behaviour which might lead to chaos through desiring. The Ten commandments can be seen as laws to prevent mimetic desiring.

As long as the cultures worked, as long as the myths, rites, structures and laws are accepted, people scapegoated with a clear conscience. For them the scapegoats were objectively guilty. Within cultural order everything takes place in this manner. The scapegoats bear the cost of the peace of the community.

Cultural Order in crisis

The structure of culture is repeated everywhere. The attempt to found society on firm foundations by blaming one group or another {‘immigrants’, ‘the English’, ‘the IRA’, ‘the Protestants’, ‘the permissive society’, ‘the Jews’, ‘the Unions’ etc.) is everywhere. Nevertheless there is no longer unanimity as to who finally is the cause, who is to blame. Many times we hear the cry that people are being victimized or being picked out as scapegoats. During the Child Abuse investigations in Cleveland, England, the Social

Workers were accused of victimizing the families of children.⁴ The Social workers themselves later accused the Local Authority of seeking to make scapegoats of them. After a recent BBC TV Programme, Architects accused Prince Charles of making them scapegoats.⁵

We still have the sense that the one causing the chaos must be found and driven out. One of the most notable features of war from an outside enemy is internal unity. Many people in Britain look back on wartime as a time of national unity of purpose, particularly during crucial moments, 'the spirit of the blitz'. In the same ways communities not dragged into chaos by natural disasters may repeat this pattern. After last years hurricanes in England people recalled the spirit of the blitz. Argentina attacked the Falkland islands at least in part to create national unity in the face of internal chaos. In a sense it is the same religious/cultural process.

Terrorism too brings a response of demands for more 'law and order', to drive out what is seen as the evil force. This process can be seen with the IRA in Northern Ireland. Political parties often work by scapegoating the opposition to create internal unity. The roots of modern medicine are in exorcism and surgery is a clear attempt to isolate the offending part. Drugs are used to attack microbes and drive them out.

As long as there is transcendence in the community unanimous scapegoating works with the result that life is possible for those in the community. This is the greatest achievement of culture, rescuing us from unlimited mimesis of desire. In culture self-defence is separable from attack, the criminal can be identified and good violence can be separated from bad. If however then transcendence disappears and there is less and less agreement about who is to blame the lines become much more blurred ultimately disappearing back into mimetic chaos. The scapegoat mechanism fails to create unity.

In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard shows that modern society is protected from escalating cycles of revenge by the justice system. Everyone seeking their own justice is mimetic chaos. Through a functioning court system order is maintained. The system acts to isolate violence as soon as it begins. Individual trouble-makers are identified and made responsible. In stable circumstances, the community unites behind the courts or at least accepts the court's right to judge. A perpetrator found guilty is a criminal. The courts take revenge for everyone and revenge is not possible for the criminal. The revenge cycle of mimetic desire is broken. The criminal is driven out through humiliation, incarceration and death and society feels safer. Justice has been done.

Frank Wright has shown that in certain circumstances, for example where two distinct groups are competing for the same territory, the justice system breaks down.⁶ In Northern Ireland the justice system is not viewed uniformly. For many nationalists the conviction of Irish men by British courts can never be justice. Even if the person committed a certain act his reasons were acceptable. For the IRA justice consists in opposing the British system. Northern Irish justice fails to break the revenge cycle. When the justice system is not seen as just, shooting a policeman becomes legitimate for some people and a policeman acting in self defence becomes a murderer. This is the situation which cultural order seeks to prevent.

Violence, Culture, the Gospels

Culture always ensured that people were different. Our modern erosion of differences on the basis that they are institutions of violence is in a sense accurate. Nevertheless, Girard's

assertion that structural order is based on murder of scapegoats cannot be understood in isolation. This scapegoating process is at one and the same time the only means by which we have escaped mimetic chaos and total destruction. The achievements of culture are not irrelevant. We are all scapegoaters, living by scapegoating and victimizing others. We are also here as inheritors of successful scapegoating by our ancestors. It may be that as long as there is some structure it is a major task to ensure that order does not disintegrate into chaos.

In Girard's work the disintegration of the cultural order and the recognition that it is based on violence is seen as the slow working through of the gospel through history. As scapegoating is recognized, so the dangers that it will be replaced by unlimited mimetic desire and apocalyptic violence grows as rivalry goes unchecked. The erosion of cultural difference on the basis that they are violent must be accompanied by a belated recognition that without difference the violence is worse. The purpose of cultural structure was to prevent violence. Thus left and right are both paradoxically correct.

This is the outline of much political debate today. The left identifies with scapegoats but tends to respond by uniting to scapegoat others. The right fears chaos and demands increased protection from violence, thus increasing the violence and confirming the views of the left that their scapegoats are really to blame. The left responds, more certain than ever about who is to blame reinforcing the views of the right. Everyone develops ethics, philosophy and a concept of justice according to their place in the mimetic struggle. Only with transcendence can these discussions have meaning for everyone.

The only way out of this process is to recognize the scapegoat mechanism operating through us, identify our own scapegoats and stop it. For Girard the scapegoat mechanism is exposed once and for all in the crucifixion of Christ. By refusing to return violence with violence he became the odd man out, the scapegoat of everybody and exposed human violence.

The Gospels do not attempt to undermine desire by denying its reality or its centrality to human experience. There is no blunt repression. Instead the Gospels recognize the mimetic nature of human beings. Central to Jesus' teaching is following, which is not the same as 'being like' Jesus as piety has always taught. That too is to make a model-obstacle out of Jesus. It is about who is to be our mimetic model? Jesus is the man outside desire, doing what he sees his Father doing, in mimesis with him. By being with him we are in mimesis with the man outside desire and are free. The promise of the Kingdom is the discovery that as we follow Jesus we let go of our desires for other objects, of our false models which in mimesis we once thought to be essential for our lives. Freed of desire we are free to see what is given to us and to live life in all its abundance.

In the bible, idolatry is the worship of false gods who lead us into desiring. Satan is the figure who tempts and leads us to stumble. While we follow these idols we are in mimesis with them, desiring what they desire, devoting more of our lives to gain them and rivaling with others in pursuit. Ultimately our idols become our rivals with its inevitable violence or total obstacles for us against which we can only lose. The importance of the person of Jesus as our model is again clear, the Way, the Truth, the Life.

Central to Girard's work is the assertion that Jesus' death was not a sacrifice. It was, in contrast a murder which exposed the whole process of sacrifice as the violent basis of human culture. It was not a sacrifice which atoned for human sin to satisfy the demands of justice nor was it the demand of a blood-lusting god. By exposing the violence of the human

mimesis of desire the crucifixion underlines also the absolute difference between the gods of the scapegoaters and God, the Father of Jesus Christ in whom there is no violence.

Christianity became a cultural system which scapegoated like all the rest. Christians too have divided between the good people and the bad people and continue to do so. The evidence is immense; the Crusades, inquisition, reformation wars, guilt induction etc., etc.

It may lie behind the present unwillingness of academics to treat the gospels as scientifically important. Nevertheless, in so doing, the Church carried the gospels through 2,000 years of history all the time being subject to being worn away by its own secret.

Essence and Nature

In one sense or another, the recognition of the mimesis between us dispenses with all simple or moralistic ideas of 'essence', or of an essential permanent nature. But it does so not but abolishing the insights of such an approach but by offering a different understanding. Mimesis is not a simple matter of human nature. We learn through deep imitation, mimesis. It is integral to the human condition therefore. We live our lives in mimetic relationships with others; teaching, learning, following, changing. Our characters and our personalities are depend on these relationships and experiences and their strength.

When we are born, or even before we enter mimesis. We are possibility. The actual shape of our lives depends on the mimetic relationships we encounter. In mimesis with Jesus who is outside desire and free of it, we are free. As children enter relationships with parents or teachers they do so in mimesis. Parents filled with desire teach their offspring to desire, so they learn how to operate in culture, how to rival and all the tricks of desire.

Freedom and slavery

Freedom in Girard's work is freedom from the mimesis of desire, which enslaves us. We are always in need of freedom from desire. Even when we have experienced moments of freedom, most of the time we fall back into rivalry, desiring once more. Nevertheless, now and again we may enter mimesis with Jesus and we may be free of the mimesis of desire. Paradoxically we might never consciously know it.

Notes

1. I am grateful to David Stevens (Irish Council of Churches), Derick Wilson (University of Ulster), Frank Wright (QUB) and John Morrow (Corrymeela Community) for their helpful comments and suggestions in writing this paper. The thinking was also stimulated by reading Gerry O'Hanlon's article in the Autumn 1988 issue of 'Studies', see note 3.
2. Girard's main works are now all available in English:
 - 'Deceit, Desire and the Novel', John Hopkins University Press (JHUP), Baltimore and London, 1965.
 - 'Violence and the Sacred', JHUP, 1977
 - 'To Double Business Bound', JHUP, 1978
 - 'The Scapegoat', JHUP, 1982
 - 'Things hidden since the foundation of the World', Athlone Press, London, 1987
 - 'Job, Scapegoat of his people', Athlone, 1987
3. David Stevens, 'Unmasking the Gods of Violence: the work of Rene Girard', Studies, Autumn 1988
 - see also in the same volume Gerry O'Hanlon, 'The Gods of Violence, a response'
4. Sunday Times Magazine, 1/5/88 contains a horrifying account by a family caught up in the Cleveland Affair.
5. BBC TV, 'Omnibus', 28/10/88
6. Frank Wright, 'Northern Ireland, a comparative analysis', Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1987