

## RENÉ GIRARD: THE SCAPEGOAT MECHANISM

1. First of all, something about RG himself. He was born in Avignon on Christmas day 1923. Studied medieval history in Paris got 1947 the degree of archiviste-paléographe with a thesis on the private life in Avignon in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Then he came to America, made his PH.D. in 1950 at Indiana University with a thesis American Opinion of France 1940 – 1943.

He stayed in America, married an American girl, went through severe American universities, is now professor of French language, literature and civilisation at Stanford, editor and co-operator of several periodicals in the literary field, lecturing on many occasions in various places, getting awards, friends and enemies.

He began publishing articles in 1953, the first book came 1961. From the first article on the very own character of Girard is present, deepening with the years. There are now 5 books and about 50 articles. The total amount of pages is not as big as that of many others. The content is tremendous. In any case for me.

Girard is now very well known in France, known in the States. In other countries it is beginning. There are adherents who try to deepen the theory, there are others who draw the lines further, in many fields. It is clear already that the theory gives very valuable possibilities in the fields of theology, psychotherapy, sociology, economics, peace-studies, anthropology, the studies of art and literature. Very much is happening in many directions. It is exciting. And naturally there are the enemies, who are fighting against or doing as if Girard does not exist. Especially the structuralists, Lévy-Strauss and his followers belong to the last group.

Of his books two are translated in American, as far as I know not very well:

Deceit, desire and the novel, the translation of *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*, violence and the sacred, the translation of *La violence et le sacré*. Then there is a collection of his essays, to double business bound, *Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology*, edited by Girard himself. All three are published by Hopkins.

2. In the exposition of the scapegoat-mechanisms I will use three of the books of Girard, which represent the three big steps, taken by him to build up his theory, in fact his central hypothesis. (The other two are a very fine book about Dostoiewski, of 1964, and his last, *Le bouc émissaire*, of 1982, in which he is fighting his enemies and in which he gives wonderful exerts of new testament text.

3. The first book appeared 1961, *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*, romantic lie and romanesk truth. It describes what Girard found, very exactly reading literature. Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoiewski, Proust.

In the introduction to the French pocket edition, the first sentence is: Man is not able to desire on his own. In fact this is the central thesis of the book, describing the consequences of this crucial fact.

3.1 Man can't desire out of his own. He always needs a model, on which he is moulding his desire. He is always mimetic. Plato already knew it. All learning processes are mimetic. The consequences however are much bigger as Plato realised or wished. The crucial point is the model. Who is the model? Very long times in history God was the model or the most important model. Having God as model, people are parallel, they don't meet each other. You can't fight with your model either. He is far away. And not only that. God can't be described. He has too many sides. Everybody in a sense has his own God. His own model. And in the same time so everybody is different.

Things are changing when the model is not any longer God, but a human being. That human being might be far away, a being of our fantasy, more or less, but nevertheless human. Don Quichotte has a human model, the hero of the romantic tales, Amadis de Gaule. Emma Bovary has as models the heroes of the romantic novels she is reading, women living in far away Paris. All the time both are thinking, are convinced that they are only following their own wishes. We know the destiny of both of them, not reaching their goals, only finding death. But this is still not the end of the way we are going as modern men. Our models, the models which are moulding our lives are not any longer far away. They are living people in our neighbourhood. We are not any longer living in the mediation externe, the mediator being outside of our world, we are living in the mediation interne, the mediator is among us, we are living in between our mediators, being mediator ourselves too. We are wishing what the other is wishing, because the other is wishing it, and only because he is wishing it; and the reverse: he is wishing what we are wishing, in fact his own old wish becomes stronger, because he is seeing that we are wishing...

There are already examples of this far away in our time. It becomes a theme in literature with the work of Stendhal. *Le rouge et le noir*, *The red and the black*, is the play of the wishes and of using that play to get at our goal. You wish to have this very man as the instructor of your children only because your neighbour too wishes him, or you get a woman, showing her that you are wishing very much yourself, she, mimetic, wishes you too... and she surrenders to you.

Here it happens still outside of the family. The family itself is still safe. It is mediation exogamique. Dostojewski describes in his novels, his last particularly, the next step. Mimetic behaviour is intruding the families. The mediation becomes endogamic... Every circle of our life has become the playground of mimetic behaviour, of rivalry.

3.2 In this modern world, losing the transcendence more or less, we are together, reciprocal models for each other, and so, in the same time each other's obstacles. We are wishing what the other has, he out of that reason wishing it more, or even for the first time, wishing to keep it, becoming stronger and stronger an obstacle for the fulfilment of our wish. And the reverse.

An example of what is going on is the eternal husband of Dostojewski. The hero of the novel can't love in fact his wife when he is not sure that she is desired by another, by a model who is worth to be imitated. And so he is doing his best that his wife, later on his future wife, will be unfaithful, to be sure that she is worth loving. So he is making himself and everybody miserable.

3.3 And this is not the end of the way. We all know: People who are quarrelling or fighting for or about something very soon forget about what they are fighting at all. The third dog is

running away with the bone. Very soon we are not fighting for an external issue. We are only fighting with each other.

We are only seeing each other, get fascinated by each other. In fact the fight is to possess the other, his being, his very being, to be yourself something, somebody.

Girard shows already in this first book that phenomenons which are puzzling us very much, sado- and masochism, homosexuality, pseudo homosexuality, suicide, are quite understandable as soon as you see them in the perspective of what is going on between us.

The book has a motto, which disappeared for reasons I don't know. In the American edition: L'homme possède un Dieu ou une idole. Man possesses a God or an idol. Modern literature is making clear how disastrously true these words are.

3.4 Modern culture means the fight of everybody against everybody, about everything or about nothing. More or less the same situation as in the beginning of culture itself. In the end we are erring at the beginning. I will come back upon that.

Romantic lie and romanesk truth. The romantic lie: We have wishes which are authentic our own. The world is divided in good and bad people. The world is seen in a manichaeic manner; there is the eternal fight between the good and the bad. The fighting is done by the good hero, fighting against the bad. He may win or lose, but he dies blind. An example: Victor Hugo.

Romanesk truth: We are all the same. There are no heroes. The world can't be divided in a good and a bad part. We are subjects and objects in the eternal play of desire. At best we die seeing, knowing what we did with our lives, as Don Quichotte, Julien Sorel.

4. From 1961 onwards Girard published several articles on literary questions. Among them, for the first time, some of Greek tragedies. Then, 1971, appears *La violence et le sacré*, violence and the sacred. It is clear that Girard covered in these years now fields of reading and study. Cultural anthropology in various directions a deeper understanding of psychoanalysis, the Greek tragedy. The problem at which Girard was aiming: How it is possible that human culture could come into existence at all?

5. Which is the problem? Man is mimetic, as are all animals. The big deference is, that animals are mimetic and in the same time inhibited when they are together with animals of their own kind. They are mimetic, they are rivalling. They don't kill each other. They have their possibilities to show each other, that they give up. It is clear who wins and nobody is killed or harmed further-more.

The big problems with human beings is, that we don't have these brakes. We are going on and on, killing each other, destroying the whole of the community. And nevertheless human culture came into existence. How was that possible?

A solution that is clear, only can be found within the existing conditions. That means within the situation of human mimetism in which every group of humans was living and with no other presupposition than that culture is not there, that it has to begin.

6. Out of his reading, thinking, intuition Girard came to the following hypotheses:

6.1 There are groups of human or pre-human beings, little groups wandering through the country. They are human, there is human mimesis. Hands of more male, going to one female, more hands going to one piece of food, quarrels about shelter, and so on. There is no stop of mimesis, no stop of mimetic violence. And not only that, because all is mimesis, it is contagious. Every now and then everybody is fighting everybody, until the end. It is like a pub quarrel.

6.2 It might be that in this manner many groups disappeared. They destroyed themselves. Others survived. Out of the total disorder of the total fighting must have come some order. Many doubles, persons fighting against each other in the whole of the fighting. We find these doubles in Greek tragedy, in mythology, in the big fears of primitive people for twin-brothers.

6.3 And then again there is a shift. Two of three are looking at fighting with one person of the group. Because of the mimetic processes nearly immediately everybody of the group stops fighting with each other, everybody is aiming at the one person. Because two are doing it, that is enough that all are doing it. He is not the one who began. All processes are circular, there is no beginning. He neither is particularly guilty, more guilty than the others. There only is a reason, a cause which distinguishes him from all the others. He is lame, or has one eye, or ..., all motives which can be found in myths and in Greek drama.

6.4 In this moment everybody is convinced: he is the "devil", the very bad man, the cause of all difficulties and atrocities. He has to be driven out. Don't touch him. He is dangerous. He has to die, driven over the cliffs, stoned. And so is done.

6.5 In the meantime something very important happened with the feelings of the members of the group. Before they found the scapegoat, all feelings went through each other. Nobody agreed with anybody. It was so to say hell. Now, after they found the cause of all difficulties, all disagreement disappeared miraculously. Everybody now agrees with everybody. All feelings are parallel, directed to the one who for sure is guilty, to the scapegoat. And when he disappears there is the very big, the awe-inspiring peace.

7. When I tell these things in such a hurry I agree immediately that you can ask yourself if things can be so simple. In a sense, yes. These things must have happened many, many times. Naturally always again in endless differentiated manners. But in the same time always in the same pattern. When we are reading the myths, studying the rites, when we are reading the bible, I come back to that, and in the same time when we are controlling our own experiences in life, we find this pattern or parts of this pattern.

8. And history is going on. The group that found peace so unexpectedly, has to make sure that it will not again try to destroy itself. What I will describe now in a very short time is in fact a very long way. The groups that experienced the mechanisms I told about did not have language. They got language, very slowly, out of what happened. They got words for happenings, got signs, experiences and words for them. They were learning experiences and processes. This too was a long process, about which we have intuitions and about which still very much has to be done, thought, studied.

9. In any case, within a slowly growing language, the group had to make sure that it would not again disappear in violence and death. The peace, so unexpected, the experiences which led to it, had to be used. So came myth, rite, prohibitions into existence.

10. But, first of all, the foundation of religion. The group that went through all the experiences was, of course, awfully frightened. There had been the violence, the awful violence, caused by the devil they drove out. In the same time it was a good violence. It gave peace. We think of Rudolf Otto: *Tremendum ac fascinatum*. The *sacrum*, the sacred, which is so dangerous, terrifying, and in the same time so alluring, the *sacrum*, bringing chaos and order, is violence; violence is the *sacrum*.

11. On this ground, the group has to keep the peace, the possibility to live.

11.1 The myths tell about the beginning, how society came into existence. There was the very bad man, or devil, or hero, or god, whatever, who caused all evil, and who in the same time came back to restore the world.

Society, it is clear, is built on violence, which gave and gives peace, and on a lie, about the scapegoat, a man or woman as you and I, made, during the victimizing process, the devil, and in the end the god of the group. The romantic lie. As long as the truth is hidden, about the innocence of the scapegoat, about the murder which was in the beginning, society runs. So, changing with the times, the myth is told and retold, keeping things in order.

11.2 Rites. When society is gliding into disorder, when it is feared that this will happen, or regularly, the group replays what once was bitter earnest: the chaos, the driving out of the scapegoat the coming back of peace. Here, as in the myths, there are endless changes in every direction, very often very astonishing, and in the same time, the old pattern always can be found back. In fact the rites are one of the very important roots of our now so differentiated culture.

11.3 The prohibitions. People are able to learn. The original groups learned that there are many situations in which the possibility of contagious violence arises. Only when we are different we can live together. So you have to take care that people are different, have different positions. When they are too alike, they are dangerous and so we don't wish to have twins in our group. No doubles! When two men wish to have the same woman, that means violence. So there are exogamic laws. Blood means violence. So we are afraid of menstruating women. And so on.

12. I suppose it is difficult to imagine that we are here at the cradle of our whole culture. The domestication of animals, the judicial system, our hierarchical systems, the kingship, and so on, all these and all other phenomena of our culture you can derive without misusing your thinking, staying within the context of the hypothesis.

The same applies to our sciences, from philosophy till all the modern sciences. They all work with the cause and effect system, once learnt in this primordial experience, they all are still driving out parts of reality to find so to say their peace, their results. Modern medicine is driving out at last the whole living person in order to cure him.

13. In violence and the sacred reading the analysis of the anthropological material, the tragedies, reading the discussion with the structuralists, with psycho-analysis, everything comes in his place and fits.

Until now for cultural anthropologists religion was something very curious, irrational, with which nothing could be done. The structuralists work with the myths, but handle them wholly anachronistic. Rites are for them more or less curious nonsense. Here for the first time the whole is seen as a whole, diachronic, everything coming in its place. Religion becomes what it always was, the foundation of the culture.

14. We are living in the last days of this system. We still deny our own violence, seeing only the violence of the others. We still are driving out scapegoats. We have our myths, our very obsolete rites. In a sense the old cultural system is coming to its perfection, with absolute violence, which have to bring absolute peace. That is our situation.

In the same time something other is coming. The romanesk truth about ourselves. And more.

15. In 1978 the third book is published, *Des choses caches puis la foundation du monde*, of the things hidden since the foundation of the world. The book will not be translated in American. Girard has the intention to rewrite it.

The book consists of three parts, fundamental anthropology, mainly a repetition of violence and the sacred, *L'écriture judéochrétienne*, the jewish-christian writing, and Interindividual psychology, in which the psychological consequences and possibilities are elaborated. This last part too is exciting reading. We will confine us to the second part, about the Bible.

16. The resemblance of the myths all over the world and the biblical myths is big. There are the same descriptions of the chaos, in which everything disappears, the *tohu webohu* in the very beginning, the tower of Bable, the deluge, Sodom and Gomorra, the plagues in Egypt.

There are the brothers, who are enemies, so very well known from Greek tragedy, Cain and Abel, Ezau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, signs of the violence at a very high pit.

It is very clear too, that culture is coming into being out of the sacrifice of the scapegoat. An example is the burning of towns by Cain.

So we can go further. And in the same time, there is a very big difference. In a myth it would have been told to us, that Abel was a very dangerous culprit, doing so much harm, that it meant salvation for the community to get rid of him. In the OT text it is very clear that he is simply murdered. Exactly the same is the case with Joseph. He is a scapegoat and the OT shows that. Even the viewpoint is changing. In the story of the deluge, everything is seen out of the position of the scapegoat, Noah. In the story of Sodom and Gomorra out of the viewpoint of Lot. And, very central, the story of the Hebrews as the scapegoat of the Egyptians is not only seen from their position, it is even told by them.

The whole Old Testament is the story, in which the religious experience, in which the city is built on violence, on murder of an innocent is more and more overcome by a total other vision of what happened and happens, in which the violence is , with the innocence of the victim of it. There are very many examples of this and there is a development, which becomes stronger and stronger and which find its end in the parts of Jesaia about the Ebed Jahwe.

17. In this situation they are when Jesus is born and working. Knowing and not knowing. Knowing through history, and through the experience of their faith, about the scapegoat and about violence. Every year there was the Pasha, in which they remembered the violence of the Egyptians and they themselves being the scapegoat. They lived with the songs of the Ebed Jahwe. And nevertheless they were scape-goating again, their own ancestors they say about them that they were bad, because they harmed the prophets. They themselves are good because they would never do such things.

Jesus knew, about the violence on which our culture is built. He knew of the wholly other possibility, which is showed by the OT: that we stop with all violence, that we love each other without any after-thought, so building a new life and a new culture. He knew too, that the time was full, that the Jewish people was gliding into its last chaos, repetition of the chaos out of which culture was born and that the old mechanisms would not do. Only the new way, already so clearly put forward in the OT, would give a future.

The first half of the gospels show in a sense the optimism of Jesus. Everything is clear! There is no other possibility to get out of the awful situation than the way of the sermon on the mount. Then there comes the disillusion. The Jewish people makes the choice to stay in the violence and to be destroyed by it. To destroy, first of all, him who shows them who they are, making a new scape-goat of him. Or, and here is the very big difference with all other scape-goats: trying to make him one in the hope that society could be built up again.

The second half of the gospels show the change which is taking place. Jesus knew now, that the destroying of the Jewish people could not be prevented and neither his. But the violence would only destroy him, it would never be able to make him a scape-goat. In fact, after his death no real scape-goat ever would be possible again. In his death it becomes clear for all eyes that the scapegoat is not the culprit of the myths, that he is only destroyed to give violence the possibility to leave the group.

18. In Jesus, and in what was done to him, not only the scape-goat mechanism, but too the religious foundations on which is built our culture, the culture in which we still are living, in fact comes to its conclusion. We are now, as is so often described in theology, between the times. The time of Jesus and the first catastrophe, that of the Jewish people on the one side, the time of our own catastrophe, now that our culture is crumbling down, all differences are disappearing, on the other.

One of the scientific problems is, how it was possible that the world could go on so long, not having any longer the possibilities of sacrifice in the real sense of the word. The economics are seeking answers. We, as Western world, the non-sacrificing world, had the possibility to export our violence to other people. We might have possibilities to go on in this manner still a long time. In the same time, moving the violence round and round, trying to give the responsibility of it to the other reserving the peace, this other side of violence, for one-self, the function of violence in culture becomes very clear. And with clearness, again, its possibilities are fading away. The big lie about violence in fact becomes the very big lie!

19. For us, as theologians, one of the big questions, naturally, is: who is he, Jesus? This question belongs to another, of at least the same importance: who is God?

One of the aspects of the work of Girard is to show that violence comes from men. I told you that in the scape-goat mechanism the group ascribes all violence to the scapegoat. He is the big devil bringing all evil. In the OT it becomes more and more clear that violence comes from men. They themselves are destroying each other and themselves with their own violence.

The struggle to get clearness is going on through the whole of the OT and full clearness is not reached. In the songs of the Ebed Jahwe there is still violence of God against him.

In the gospels it is clear that the violence is the violence of men. In God is not violence. God is love. He gives us the possibility and the task to love each other, to find all violence in our hearts and to stop it to lay it on others.

Jesus is the Son of God in doing His will, in knowing everything of Him, as we are his brothers and sisters, children, sons of God, doing as he was. I am sure much thinking has still to be done in this field. One of the big problems is that we have only the language of our culture, which is a sacrificial language. All we say is, if we know it or not, coloured by violence and by the consequences of it. We have in fact to find a new language to describe and to live in a new world. As long as we don't have that language, everything has to do with the mirror, of which Paul spoke, in which we only see indistinctly, not clearly.

20. The death of Jesus was no sacrifice and is never called a sacrifice in the gospels.

Christendom began to translate that what happened in sacrificial terms and so in fact in sacrificial realities. We see the whole process beginning very soon, theology working upon it since then until now.

The consequences are tremendous. Christendom became, as all religions, a sacrificial religion, violence being honoured as the fundament of our culture and our faith. Violence again being used to defend this culture in the old manner. Anti-semitism during the ages, became possible among Christians. Violence against other cultures, even in making them Christian, was and in fact is accepted.

The theory of Girard is, that, in becoming sacrificial, Christianity had the possibility to become world religion, a possibility which it possibly would not have had if it had stayed faithful to itself. But now, the circle is closed or nearly closed. Christendom is arriving at its own beginning, at chaos. The world is in the position of the jewish people 2000 years ago. About the Christian church Girard is not wholly consistent. In 1978 he writes that it has to disappear, should the gospel have a chance. I have the impression he is now not that sure. Maybe he sees other possibilities.

21. In any case, time and again Girard is putting forward: We, mankind of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have only two possibilities. We stick to our violence and it is clear what happens. The many, many very little circles of violence out of which once culture came into existence has become one very big, the whole world encompassing. When you don't break it, it will strangle the world.

Or you hear and do that other possibility, given in the jewish-christian tradition, given in the gospel, in Jesus.

22. This is not the place, to go deeper into the marvellous exegetical work, Girard is doing in this book and in the next, published in 1982, *Le Bouc Emissaire*, *The scape-goat*. Neither to repeat what he is writing about the differences between the Greek and the johanneic Logos, between philosophy and the gospel. Between in fact, violence and love.

A point of interest is the place of this hypothesis of the scape-goat in the scientific work of Girard and the place of the work of Girard in the progressing of human sciences.



Girard now and then affirms, that he found his theory of the scapegoat-mechanism and about the foundations of human culture without taking into account the Jewish-Christian scriptures. In the same order as I told you this afternoon he went his scientific way. It is true that he realized much earlier that there were very important things to learn from the Bible. In fact he hints already to it at the end of *Deceit and Desire*, in 1961. In 1974, in an interview, he comes back upon it.

Nevertheless he wished to write *Violence and the Sacred* without mentioning the Bible. He wished to make clear that in culture itself the big lie about culture can be found, the lie about violence and about the innocence of the victim.

And, with the years, the sacrificial system crumbling, the answer can be found. It is Girard's conviction that if he had not found what I told you this afternoon, very sure another, scientist or not, would have found it in a short time. The circle is closing. The times are, once again, fulfilled. It was for him tremendously exciting to find his hypothesis. I spoke with him about that. And in the same time only that could be found.

As for Girard's own way: he was born a Catholic, was during many years a nihilist and Nietzschean, became a Christian doing his scientific work.

23. How to react on his work from a theological viewpoint? I said already that his exegetical work is astounding.

He solves too the problem of the relationship between religion or religions and the faith. In doing that he subverts the old Roman-Catholic dogma of nature and super-nature. Nearly three weeks ago he said during a lecture not to recognize any difference between them.

Only two possibilities remain: This world, with its violence, its religions, with Christendom as historical institution, or the Gospel, the God of Love, who is there with us, when we are doing his will, in fact for me as well the God of Moses as the God and Father of Jesus Christ. There is, as a by-product, real ecumenical theology.

24. The hypothesis of Girard is a beginning, a challenge to all scientists and to the whole of our life. I try to mention some points:

24.1. Exegetically very much has to be done. Girard himself is busy here. Old-Testament scholars in Germany are working upon it. Very much has to be found to differentiate the image we have, to deepen our insights.

24.2. There are big discussions about some central points. Is the death of Jesus in no single respect a sacrifice? What about eucharistics? It belongs to these questions if the God Girard found is really the God of the Gospels. Is he love, only love? And is all violence only human? I think so, but ...

24.3. The analysis of our culture has to go on. Girard himself is working on a book on Shakespeare. Our culture, other cultures, they all have to be searched, to deepen the insights and eventually to find other possibilities, new hypotheses.

24.4. There are questions of philosophers, about the scientific method, about results. There are questions to philosophers: How you can contribute? Levinas. Plessner. Others?

24.5. Girard always said: I give my hypothesis immediately for another which can better cope with everything we know. But even if this hypothesis can't be found, the task for every

science to integrate this hypothesis, this knowledge, is enormous and on many places people are already working on it.

24.6. And we, living in this world? There were big discussions, which peace-people held with Girard. He can't give straight ways. It might be that all straight ways have to do with violence, driving out the devil with the devil. I often have the impression, seeing how peace people are working.

In any case, in this field too, by far the most important of all, how we live, have to live, in this time, at the turning of age, very much must be done, by our heads, by our hands, by our hearts.

Hengelo, 26/27.6.83

R Kaptein