

## Girard's breakthrough

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A series of coincidences in early 1985 led me to René Girard's *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. As I staggered through its third part I found myself being read like an open book, feeling like the woman at the well of Samaria, as she returned to her compatriots to say: "Come and meet someone who has told me everything I ever did". Eleven years on, I am still struggling to put into words the fecundity of what continues to be a completely unexpected and extraordinary access to Christ that is absolutely concentric with, and illuminating of, the central tenets of the Catholic faith.

Girard has recently retired from his professorship at Stanford University. His thought might be described as being a particular understanding of the nature of human desire, and of the relationship between that desire and human violence. Briefly stated, Professor Girard has made what he takes to be an authentic anthropological discovery (something true independently of its discoverer), to wit: that human desire is *triangular* and *mimetic*. It is mimetic in that it is to do with imitation; it is triangular in that the transaction is three-cornered: the source (model) which stimulates the desire, the respondent (disciple) in whom the desire is implanted, and the thing (object) then desired.

This means that each of us learns to desire *according* to the desire of an individual or social other, and thus that desire is prior to, and what makes possible, the coming into being of the "self of any one of us. So desire is not linear and object-directed in itself (as in much individual psychology, which depends on there being a desiring 'self' with its own desires), but is called into being by other people's desires: if an advertiser wants to sell me a pair of jeans he shows me someone else enjoying them. Nor is it essentially reactive (meaning that the 'self' is essentially formed in reaction to, or over against, the desires of others), following Hegel's thesis, antithesis model of development.

It sounds too grandiose to say so, but with the one stroke contained in the word *according* (desire *according* to the desire of the other), Girard has set us free from both Freud and Hegel, and given us access to an anthropology that is simultaneously pre-modern, and quite outside postmodern nihilism. For desire to be according to the desire of the other means that, in principle, human desire can be, and often is, a pacific and non-rivalistic desire. That is to say that human desire is in principle, and essentially, a good thing.

Readers with theological antennae will quickly grasp the significance of this: the possibility of an anthropology which is, at last, compatible with the Catholic faith. If human desire is in principle a good thing, however distorted and inflected it may become by differing sorts of violence in practice, then at last we begin to be able to make *anthropological* sense of the Church's teaching on Original Sin – that the Fall did not make us essentially corrupt in such a way that there is no possible reasonable link at all between our ways and God's ways, God's action and our action. However, there is nothing rose-tinted about Professor Girard's understanding of desire (in fact,

he is usually accused by those who read him too fast of far too grim a view of human desire). Professor Girard is well aware that human culture since its inception has been lived out with human desire distorted into rivalry and violence leading to and flowing from death.

What he is able to show (exhaustively) is the relationship between that distorted human desire and the foundational mechanism of what he calls surrogate victimage (more popularly called 'The Scapegoat Mechanism'). That is to say, human desire, as we live it (and thus the formation from within of our 'self' and our consciousness) derives, as a cultural fact, from desire becoming distorted by rivalry, until there is a point where there is so much group violence that unanimity (and thus peace and the avoidance of the collapse of the group) can only be restored when, apparently mysteriously, all become fixated on someone who can be held responsible for the collapse of unity and order within the group and then expelled, permitting the establishment of a new social unity over against the expelled one.

That is to say, an act of collective fratricide against a victim is foundational to all human cultures, with its being absolutely vital for the cultures so founded that they believe in the culpability of the rejected one (or group), and continue to bolster up this belief by forging prohibitions, myths and rituals.

Professor Girard had assumed that the Jewish and Christian sacred texts would show exactly the same thing as all other ancient texts and myths – the threat of collapsing social unity leading to violence and the emergence of a new peace around the cadaver of the victim. To his amazement he found that although they did exactly that – they really are structured around sacralised violence – there was a unique and astonishing difference: the Jewish texts, starting with Cain and Abel – gradually dissociate the divinity from participation in the violence until, in the New Testament, God is entirely set free from participation in our violence – the victim is entirely innocent, and hated without cause – and indeed God is revealed not as the one who expels us, but the One whom we expel, and who allowed himself to be expelled so as to make of his expulsion a revelation of what he is really like, and of what we really, typically do to each other, so that we can begin to learn to get beyond this.

Professor Girard followed through the logic of his own thought, returning to the Church of his baptism, from which he had lapsed at the age of 11, and has become increasingly, and publicly, vociferous in his insistence on the extraordinary fact of this overcoming from within of human violence which he sees as the real, but hidden ferment behind the 2,000 years since this radically Jewish discovery went international.

Professor Girard is not a theologian. He started as a historian, moved into literary criticism, from there into anthropology and ethnology, but has never moved away from what he considers his real task – that of a certain sort of textual criticism, questioning what makes that sort of textual criticism possible. He has often been criticised by somewhat lazy theological readers for not having a doctrine of this or that (of Creation, or an ecclesiology for instance) – as though it were not the task of theologians to work out the consequences of an embryonic anthropology of grace and of redemption fully and consistently themselves. Some have accused him of having developed a huge general system – yet another totalitarian thought package – when in

fact his very small understanding of the triangular and imitative nature of desire, which can never properly be understood except in as far as the student allows him or herself to be chewed over by it, is something far more like St Thérèse's "Little Way" than yet another straitjacket.

These perceptions – that this is a new totalitarian thought package, that Girard's understanding of human desire is too negative (ironically), and that Girard doesn't have the requisite doctrine of this or that fully worked out have led to his being either dismissed *a priori* by some reviewers, or damned with faint praise by others. He has been cautiously but well received in Britain by Rowan Williams, Fergus Kerr and Stephen Sykes, among others. However the generally favourable, but ultimately damning misreading of his thought by John Milbank in his influential *Theology and Social Theory* has led some readers to think that here is another foreign thinker they need not bother reading. A further factor in his slight reception in Britain has been the difficulty of obtaining his works – it is difficult to know where to place such an interdisciplinary author, and the prices charged for the poorly distributed and minimally publicised hardbacks of his works are a serious deterrent.

This has not been the case elsewhere. Very early on, Raymund Schwager, a Swiss Jesuit teaching at Innsbruck, and others there realised the potential of his thought for a wonderfully fresh intelligence of the Catholic faith and started working on it – with striking published results (scarcely any of which are available in English). Theologians in Spain, France, Italy and Latin America have begun to take his thought increasingly seriously, in part as a way beyond the impasse of the failed wedding of neo-Rahnerian individualism and Althusserian sociology which underlay so much liberation theology (and was so well described by Milbank in his book).

More recently, a number of biblical scholars in the United States and elsewhere (Brazil for instance) have seen the fecundity of his thought for a fresh biblical hermeneutic taking us quite beyond the squabbles between liberal Protestant interpretations and dogmatic interventions. A large international body (the Colloquium on Religion and Violence) has been set up with meetings every year in a different country to try to work out more fully the implications of the triangular mimetic understanding of desire in different disciplines.

More interesting even than the sheer interdisciplinary nature of these meetings, bringing together economists, psychologists, theologians, literary critics, philosophers, political scientists and others, is the increasing presence of "hands on" groups who are seeking to practise the insights derived from this thought in various forms of conflict resolution, work in prisons, with young offenders, with street violence. One of the most revealing contributions in this area has been the application of the mimetic glimpse at how human violence works in Northern Ireland, with much input from Roel Kaptein, a greatly loved Dutch pastor who died recently.

In Britain, the impact that Professor Girard's thought is beginning to make on contemporary theology and beyond is still a well-hidden secret.

Professor Girard has given us an understanding of desire and of human violence which correspond to each other exactly as a theology of grace does to the understanding of the incarnation, passion and resurrection of Jesus, and enables us to

rediscover an anthropology which neither runs the risk of being too categorical and structured (as in neo-Aristotelian theology) nor too individualistic and wild (as in post-Augustinian theology): this is surely very close to the heart of making Christian orthodoxy fresh and liveable.

Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journals*: "Old Christian dogmatic terminology is like an enchanted castle where the most beautiful princes and princesses rest in a deep sleep – it only needs to be awakened, brought to life, in order to stand in its full glory". Watch the Girardian space!