

# We didn't invent sacrifice, sacrifice invented us: unpacking Girard's insight

*James' Contribution to the International Theological Journal "Concilium" 2013(4)  
on the Ambivalence of Sacrifice.*

## 1. The insight

Over the last fifty years René Girard has developed a single anthropological insight, through rigorous engagement with a multitude of disciplines, into a long argument about the origin of culture.

The single insight, sometimes called Mimetic Theory, has two dimensions, which appear to be distinct, but are in fact inseparably intertwined. The first of these is the mimetic, or imitative nature of desire. Human desire, far from flowing from a subject to an object, is the borrowed desire of the creature who does not know what it wants. A mediator or model sparks off in me a desire for an object which the mediator wittingly or unwittingly designates as desirable. Desire according to the desire of the other, which we access by imitation, is co-terminous with our human condition.

The second is a description of how humans survive the potentially catastrophic consequence of having turned into especially imitative apes: ones no longer constrained in our rivalry by instinct or the dominance patterns we see in our nearest simian relatives. This is the mechanism of the aleatory victim, sometimes referred to as the "Scapegoat mechanism". According to this, what structures our existence as culture is the way in which a group's all-against-all, rivalrous imitation run amok, sometimes found itself able to be resolved into an all-against-one, when the group joined together in fury against a particular member, treated as having caused the problem in the first place. When the frenzy is not so resolved, the rivalrous group destroys itself. When it is so resolved, the group survives at the expense of an excluded other to whom it mistakenly attributes responsibility for both the frenzy and the peace that follows the unanimous expulsion.

Girard postulates that this mechanism must have come into play innumerable times, over millennia, as hyper-imitative apes became humans. And the result of this mechanism having worked (for work it

does, at least temporarily, as we all know from experience) is that out of entirely naturalistic and pre-existent animal elements, something new and unique was gradually born: the unanimity of all-against-one produced a moment of peace in which attention was collectively riveted on the killed or expelled one, simultaneously modifying everyone's way of being present to each other. Thus begins a way of being together in which something biological is stretched into the beginning of culture and starts to modify the ways in which the group will be structured in future, and thus who their members will come to be.

The hyper-imitative nature of the proto-humans continued as the moment of peace, and togetherness was repeated by frequent imitation of the behaviour which led to it in the first place, the beginnings of ritual. So it is by imitation that ritual embeds culture into our biology. The horde repeats the all-against-all until it yields an all-against-one, thus appreciating with wonderment the way in which one held to be a troublemaker (hence thrown out) is also held to be immensely powerful (hence beneficent in having produced peace in the wake of its expulsion). A symbolic system begins to emerge in which all the cultural binaries – not us/us, out/in, bad/good, dead/living flow from this single genetic starting point. There also emerge, again over millennia, transcendence, the notion of ambivalent gods, doubles, monsters and the full panoply of figures familiar to us from the survivals of archaic cultures.

Eventually, the group is able to move from repeating the violence of the all-against-all where the one is randomly designated in the midst of violence, to a more deliberate choosing of a substitute for that one before the violence becomes too dangerous. It is this second substitution, according to Girard, which marks the beginning of sacrifice: when we have become sufficiently adept at imitating our own imitative resolution of our own imitative violence, we are also able to ritualize it by substituting what we might now call a victim, whether human, or later, animal.

From this generative “moment” (one endlessly repeated over millennia) humans “domesticated” themselves, then enfolding other beasts into our ritual survival system. So some beasts, finding themselves treated as quasi-humans for sacrificial purposes, were eventually domesticated, and systems of sacrificial exchange became systems of agricultural development and survival.

Over time, the three pillars of archaic culture formed us: ritual gave us

peaceful space for repetition, learning, and thus technology and development. Prohibitions marked out as dangerous the hyperimitative behaviours which put the group at risk of another all-against-all. And eventually, as language developed from the ritualized sounds and gestures flowing from the emerging symbol, myths began to tell the story of the group's wonderful beginnings and survival in the midst of the bizarre deaths of trickster gods<sup>1</sup>.

There is a third dimension to Girard's insight which is of particular interest to theologians. The mechanism described is omnipresent in human society, and depends, in order to work, on those involved not knowing that their blamed one is in fact aleatorily chosen, or innocent. What is it, then that has enabled anyone to face up to the true state of affairs, to recognize ourselves as beneficiaries of a culture which is built on lies and murder, and to want to move beyond living like this? Girard's answer lies in observation of the progressive un-covering of the innocence, or aleatory nature, of the victim which is effected in unique ways in and by the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, culminating in the Passion Narratives of the New Testament. These texts make clearly visible something which is present in myths, but as an unexamined structure, rather than a conscious, deliberate theme or purpose. This putting into evidence the innocence of the victim has been simultaneously transmitted and betrayed by historic Christianity: properly Christian skepticism about collusion with persecution, combined with moral scandal, have led to a gradual loss of belief in the efficacy not only of this or that sacrifice, but of sacrifice altogether. And functional incredulity concerning sacrifice has social effects such that our patterns of desire have become simultaneously freer, and more dangerous, as time goes on.

## **2. What it is and what it isn't**

Girard has often been read partially, or misunderstood. So, to clarify what his hypothesis *is* and what it *is not*:

- it is an *hypothesis*, in that it postulates, in the normal scientific way, something which cannot be seen directly, but only in its effects; and then provokes those who entertain it to study those effects that can be seen directly in order to assess whether the hypothesis is useful as a way of

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account, I would recommend *Evolution and Conversion* (London and New York, Continuum 2008) in which Girard allows Antonello and de Castro Rocha to draw out from him the breadth of his hypothesis.

providing a more convincing interpretation than other available hypotheses of what we can find out about humans;

- it is in principle *falsifiable* should we find elements that make it impossible to hold it to be true. For instance, the discovery of mirror neurons in the late 1990's tended to confirm that it is through imitation that the "social other" sparks each one of us into gesture, language, memory and thus receiving a sense of "self". Had neuroscience discovered imitation to be developmentally late behaviour, starting from some pre-existing motor, this would have been devastating for Girard's insight; As with all such paradigm shifts, it would be more likely for the hypothesis to be falsified by the eventual emergence of an even simpler, more elegant and unitary account of the available material;

- it is *naturalistic*, giving an account both of the continuity and of the rupture between pre-human and human culture, one that is dependent on an interrelation of biology and culture of which there are surviving hints in other species. It does not introduce any *ex machina* elements – no immaculately conceived arrival of human cognition from a divine or enlightenment source;

- it is not an hypothesis about that part of human culture which we moderns call "religion"; rather the reverse, it is an hypothesis concerning the religious matrix of all human culture;

- it is not a comparative study of sacrifice claiming that all sacrifices are variants of human sacrifice; it is an hypothesis concerning how hominisation was enabled by what we now call sacrifice as the violent way in which our ancestors found themselves containing their own violence. This enabled them to survive, and us to be born, in cultures structured from within by sacrifice. So it is not true that human cultures, after learning how to be human, decided to invent sacrifices, but it is true that there is no human culture whose institutions are not sacrificial;

- it does not presuppose that humans are ontologically, or innately violent, or that all human culture is simply evil; it presupposes that all humans are innately and ontologically imitative, which is in itself, and in principle, a good thing; and that owing to the way in which sacrifice brought this hyper-imitative ape into being human, all of us are brought into being pre-formed from within by a violent human culture, so we are disposed to violence without being condemned to it. Thus, revenge seems natural, but it is not. Revenge is a much easier form of reciprocity than

forgiveness, but we are not entirely enclosed by it;

- it is not a theological hypothesis, but an anthropological one. Girard is not a theologian, but a theoretician of violence and desire. The truth-value of his postulate at the anthropological level is properly to be explored at that level and is relatively independent of theology;

- Girard does not derive his understanding of the “scapegoat mechanism” from the Levitical account of the goat sent out to Azazel, which he sees as one among many examples of human culture working out from its sacrificial origins. He privileges, rather, the modern usage of the term “scapegoat”, to mean a person or group that is falsely held to be guilty of something, when it is in fact innocent, or no more guilty than its accusers, and whose expulsion is effective in bringing the group together. This pejorative usage is a cultural acquisition since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century;

- Girard makes no claim to be an expert in everything. His explorations have taken him into many fields in which he is not an expert, and in some of which he has got things straightforwardly wrong. For instance, he recognized in 1993 that his initial reading of the Epistle to the Hebrews, from 1978, was mistaken, and happily explored the reasons for his error. This modesty is intrinsic to his project, since his hope is always that genuine experts in the fields in question will take his comparatively simple hypothesis, and work out the consequences much more rigorously in their own field.

It is worth pointing out that Girard’s hypothesis produced something of an allergic reaction when it was first fully set out in the late 1970’s, in part owing to the perception that it was too Christian to be taken seriously, in part owing to the enlightenment prejudices of the French theological establishment at the time, and in part owing to the fact that it has been too easy for thinkers to take some part of the argument, concede its limited usefulness, and then reject the rest (usually without reading it), turning Girard into a useful straw man to shoot down while in fact ignoring what his hypothesis really says.

However, in recent years, much has moved in the direction of Girard’s insight, whether or not those involved have any awareness of Mimetic Theory. For instance mentalist and cognitivist approaches to human thought have become much more problematic than they used to be, and Girard’s decidedly pre-cognitivist understanding has gained in plausibility; mirror neurons have moved imitation back into the centre of

human self-understanding after a long absence; archaeologists, anthropologists and classicists have become much less squeamish about the abundance of evidence of human sacrifice than those of a previous generation; economists have become much more aware of the patterns of imitative desire and violence underlying what liberal economic theory regarded as rational choices; and biblical studies are much more deeply aware than previously of how Jesus' interaction with the presence of the Temple, its cult, the language of priesthood, and the images and hopes surrounding them, were formative of the New Testament.

### **3. Not so ambivalent after all...**

Sacrifice is often described as ambivalent, and Girard's thought gives an exact account of this ambiguity. After all, the same actions under some circumstances are called "murder" and under others "sacrifice". When Romulus killed Remus and founded Rome, the gods praised his foundation and called the act a sacrifice; when Cain killed Abel, God called it a murder, and the culture founded was off to a questionable start. In the latter account, the murderous dynamic that is at work in the former is shown up for what it is, which renders myth making less effective. People don't like to be told that their founding glory was a murder.

From such beginnings, Girard's hypothesis enables an understanding of Christ's death in which it becomes exactly clear how we can apply the words "murder" and "sacrifice" without involving God in violence. In the obvious cultural sense, Jesus' death was quite simply a murder – following the well-worn path of half-political, half-religious lynch deaths which pepper human history. In this sense, Caiaphas' convenient lie, attempting to create a sacrifice out of a murder, is shown to be no more than that: a convenient lie. However, as John's Gospel points out<sup>2</sup>, Caiaphas was in fact saying something true, despite himself, when he prophesied that Jesus' death would bring all people together. And the truth was this: that in deliberately allowing himself, as innocent, to occupy the place of the victim in the midst of a sadly typical outworking of the mechanism of human violence with a view to showing up what was going on, Jesus was very exactly subverting from within the whole notion of Sacrifice, thus opening up the possibility for humans to live together without ever sacrificing again. The single act can be quite correctly referred to as *not a sacrifice at all* (but a murder) and *the one true sacrifice* (since a new reality which shows up the basis in falsity of

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<sup>2</sup> John 11, 50-52

all other so-called sacrifices).

In fact, the word “sacrifice” can only properly be used of Christ’s death with fear and trembling. Following the Lateran Council’s insistence concerning such analogies, we must remember that there is a greater dissimilarity between the One True Sacrifice and all other sacrifices than there is a similarity. Girard himself, for some time, balked at the use of the word “sacrifice” as referring to both the foundational cultural reality, and Christ’s death. This was because he was well aware of the tendency to emotional blackmail and masochism which cloaks so much Christian discourse concerning self-sacrifice. However, following persuasion by Fr Raymond Schwager, the Innsbruck Jesuit who was such a fecund conversation partner with Girard until Schwager’s death in 2004, Girard recognized that, given where our humanity comes from, we do not have another starting point from which to describe a wholly non-violent, non-masochistic, generous form of self-giving into the midst of violence so as to bring it to an end than the same word as describes the mendacious putting of someone else in that place for reasons of convenience.

Girard highlights the case of Solomon’s judgment concerning the two women, one of whose infants had died. One was prepared to sacrifice the remaining child by having it cut in half, and the other was prepared to sacrifice her claim on the living child so that it would live. We only have the one word “sacrifice” to describe the two reactions, but in fact the second reaction is a subversion from within of the world of the meaning of the first, bringing into play a reality of which the first world of meaning is entirely ignorant.

If we wish, then, we can use the language of Jesus offering himself as a perfect sacrifice to the Father, just so long as we remember that this is a way of describing not some private sacrificial intention of Jesus towards a Father who needed satisfying, but the whole obedient acting out by which Jesus came to occupy an all-too-humanly constituted place of shame, violence and death, and not hold it against us. There is an angry deity in this equation, and it is us, in whose midst God, quite without violence, manifests the depth of his forgiving love by plumbing the depths of, and thus defanging our violence.

#### **4. Liturgy and Life**

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus confronts us with an

improper “other”, a Samaritan, who is moved by God’s viscera to stretch towards a half-dead victim, thus bringing him back to life. This is what it looks like to inherit eternal life, and Jesus contrasts it with two properly appointed “people like us” who, in order to keep themselves pure for the service of “the living God” through liturgical victims side-step the real-life victim.

Here is where Girard’s understanding proves very helpful. For it enables us to see that Sacrifice is not principally a liturgical matter, but a constitutively anthropological, and thus ethical, matter. So the one true priest, Jesus, performed the one true sacrifice (which was not cultic), thus effecting a change in who we are at the anthropological level. From the moment that the Crucified and Risen one stood among his frightened disciples on Easter Day, the way of being human that had been forged over-against-victims was altered from within, and it began to be possible to constitute a new way of being human together by extending the forgiveness which flows from the divine and self-giving victim.

What this means in practice is that the whole of Christian living can be described as a movement away from the world of idols and sacrifice by which we make ourselves good and safe by the exclusion of others, and towards a world in which we share in Jesus’ un-frightened self-giving up for others, confident that we are in the process of being forgiven by the one True Victim. Or, in other words, when Paul refers to “the sacrifice and offering of your faith” of the Philippians<sup>3</sup>, it was not a particular liturgy, but their whole life that he had in mind. He conceived his forthcoming execution, which was not liturgical, as a libation offering poured in the midst of a living liturgy.

So, by baptism, having agreed to undergo a lynch death in advance, and by being stretched into being penitent former persecutors, and now reconcilers, all Christians share in the one priesthood of the one who gave himself. This is the shape of our practical daily life, our life as sign of a reconciled humanity. In the midst of this life, which is the living liturgy, we are also nourished by a sign of the heavenly completion of that living liturgy making itself present for us, and involving us in it. That is the aspect of our life which we usually call the Divine Liturgy, and it should of course be the case that there is an uninterrupted flow between our adoration and reception of the one true victim who makes himself present to us at Mass, and our being stretched towards the contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2, 17

victims who are illuminated for us by that Victim.

So there is a proper sense in which ordained presbyters are empowered to make visible the sign in our midst of the foundation of the new humanity to which we are called. And it is perfectly reasonable that what we find ourselves doing, in the Mass, is, by praise and thanksgiving, entering into a certain real participation in the one true sacrifice, such that our ability to live it out in our daily life is strengthened.

Where I find Girard particularly helpful is that, thanks to his insight, not only is a positive understanding of “sacrifice” made possible, but at least as important, he develops a very rich understanding of the anthropological criteria by which something can be seen as sacrificial in the sense of tending to cover-up, mendacity, and murder, and how that is the reverse of the One true Sacrifice. Girard’s insight keeps alive for us a constant sense that among the effects of Jesus going to his death as he did was the subversion from within of the very roots of human culture. And furthermore, that he is in our midst as a presence constantly pushing us to be self-critical, so that we, as humans and as Church can be forgiven from, let loose from, all our victimary distortions and so come to be the new humanity which is our vocation.

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