

Violence: how it forms us and how we can be self-critical about it

(Talk given by James Alison at Bethlehem University on Thursday 3rd May 2018¹)

1) Girard's insight

Over the last fifty years until his death in 2015 René Girard 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

¹ The first half of the talk is taken, in edited form, from my article for Concilium 2013/4 entitled “We didn’t invent sacrifice; sacrifice invented us”. Parts of the second half derive from a talk I gave, alongside Duncan Morrow, in Trinity Wall Street, in December 2016 on the topic “Beyond Us and Them”.

collectively riveted on the killed or expelled one, simultaneously modifying everyone's way of being present to each other. Thus, there 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 hyper-imitative behaviours which put the group at risk of another all-against-all. And eventually, as language developed from the ritualized songs, 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.

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 arbitrarily 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 of the victim, or the arbitrary nature of the victim's selection, 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 scepticism 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) *Correcting some misapprehensions about Girard's thought*

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 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, following on from innate starting points for language and memory, 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 into its account of the

advent of symbolic thought – no *ex abrupto* 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 hominization 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 – indeed, it’s how we learn just about anything; 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 17th 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.

3) An anthropology of self-criticism

I hope that it is evident from the description that I have given of Girard's thought that it is essentially an anthropology of self-criticism. It opens up to us the possibility of how any of us, in any culture, and within any religious or ideological matrix, may discover that we are wrong. And therefore, be able to reimagine ways forward that we were unable to consider while locked into certain ways of being with others whether as perpetrators or as victims.

With this in mind, I'd like to bring out four dimensions of the anthropology of self-criticism, four "moments" if you like, of a single shift in understanding, leading perhaps to different forms of action. Although I am giving them in what I take to be some sort of order, I take it for granted that in real life, we work through these elements in a more or less jumbled-together way. I would also like to recognize publicly how absurd it would be for me to be offering you anything like concrete advice on how to deal with your own world with the forms of violence within which you live. I have neither the right to do, nor the pretension of doing, any such thing. In as far as I have allowed what I am saying here to be at all incarnated in the real world, it is in interaction with my experience growing up as a gay child within a hateful religious ambiance, and then, as an adult, my experience as an openly gay priest facing a very frightened, homophobic, and closeted clerical structure within the Church which I love. All of which is but the merest inconvenience compared to what some of you face day in and day out in Bethlehem and the West Bank.

a) Heartbreak

I take it that heartbreak is associated with the discovery of the sameness of the other. One of the things our violent ways of being held-together do is to form our eyes so that we perceive the other as different. And very often we inherit, or help to manufacture, a whole variety of justifications for why the other is different. However, if Girard is right, and I think he is, the so-called difference of the other is an illusion. The real shock is the discovery of the similarity of the other. There is a whole modern discourse surrounding the need to respect and tolerate difference and diversity, as though the best model of human life was one in which well-defined groups of apparently "different" people learn peaceful cohabitation. During the brutal civil war in the former Yugoslavia, it was constantly claimed that the reasons for the conflict were centuries-old cultural differences and resentments between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Kosovars, as though this explained anything. Eventually, someone pointed out that almost all those involved in the fighting were related to each

other, intermarried, cousins. In other words, it was the similarity between people, in the absence of a controlling structure after Marshal Tito's death, that made the conflict particularly bloody, with people trying to resurrect ancient identities as a way of creating "others".

On a micro level, it is the same with any one of us: I am most likely to react with particular violence to someone who is particularly like me. And I will be entirely blind to this. My friends will see it straight away, and point it out to me, and I will reject their advice, for I will see the faults in the other person, and my friends will know that I am looking in a mirror, and not liking what I see. I suspect that something similar is going on now with the various violent nationalist movements around us, symbolized by Brexit, Trump, Catalan secessionism, Hungarian xenophobia. We are all becoming more alike, and we have less and less of a firm identity. This is experienced by some as a huge loss, and it is scarcely surprising that faced with the threat of similarity, these try to create fake "others" over against whom they can feel good. You can divide Israel from Palestine with a wall, but you can't undo the long-term realization that there is no difference between Jewish and Palestinian DNA.

The moment of heartbreak which I am describing is the one where the perception of the similarity of the other no longer knee-jerks me into a frightened need to protect myself from the mirror, but where I am actually able to sense how much time and energy I have spent avoiding that regard, and so let go of a certain grasped identity. Whenever that identity was in some way narrated to myself, or by my group, as that of victim, or hero, I was still stuck in some form of violent construction of who I am over against another. But ultimately, I am neither, I am only a heartbroken brother looking into a sibling's eyes.

b) Truthfulness

Part of what Girard opens up for us is the need to go back and re-think the anthropology of truthfulness. We live in the time of "fake news" – but what that means is that we live in a time when it is assumed that there are only partisan truths, which is to say: lies. And this means that "truthfulness" is just a disguise for the opinion of the most powerful. Girard, however, makes possible a very interesting case for real truthfulness as something possible, but very difficult.

Let me explain: As apes who stumbled into symbolicity and language, we didn't suddenly leave a world of blind stupidity to become truth tellers. Rather we learnt that something can stand for something else, for that is what the quantum leap into symbolicity is. This means that a simulacrum, something as something else, would always run the risk of being a lie, be available to becoming a form

of protection, evasion, interest, rather than a simple object. Hence the account which René Girard gives of our hominization, where the all-against-one of a group killing leads to the cadaver giving sense to the group as that which has brought them all together. So, the one stands in for all, and gives the all its meaning. But what it can no longer be, for the longest time, is simply an arbitrarily killed cadaver.

But from then on, all our forms of socialisation, of togetherness proceed by means of lies, of cover-ups, called diplomacy, delicacy, culture and politics. The veiling of mysteries, the avoidance of direct confrontations, the exchange of gifts and so on. All of these know that while bodies are truthful (pain is felt, wounds show, adrenalin invigorates), those whose bodies became human found their own and each other's bodies to be entangled in various forms of mendacity.

The ability of our species to take advantage of the fortuitous feedback loops by which our endless imitation and repetition, our circular and pointless rituals, just occasionally bumped into something true about tools and plants and other animals, such that we could kill and build and eventually sow and fertilize and domesticate, all of these things were not linear increases in rational perception. Rather they were moments in which we stumbled unawares into things that were true about stones and plants and animals in such a way that we, who had become problems to ourselves since the crisis of becoming human, were able to become self-questioning. We were not truth-tellers who occasionally became liars for this or that reason of convenience. We were bodies whose truthfulness was more often than not lost to us, as we found ourselves unmoored from instinct, and dependent upon our togetherness with others as unmoored as ourselves for working out what was going on.

It is as just such dwellers in mendacity, but ones who do not know who we are, and are therefore vulnerable to questioning, that we found ourselves stumbling into things that were true. We now take for granted that humans are capable of objectivity. But we are surely wrong to take it for granted. Objectivity – the ability to point to something that just is there, and see it for what it is, not as in some way a reflection of us and a function of our interests, – is a huge and extraordinary achievement. One it seems we are always on the point of losing again. That, for instance, scientific knowledge regarding climate change, or what we have learned concerning gender or sexual orientation, can be so easily regarded as the fruit of partisan ideology suggests that the long hard path towards what we now call the scientific method may have to be retraced. That method rested on monastic learning, on the habits of ecclesiastical and civil law, and then on scholastic method as practised for several hundreds of years before such careful habits of thought yielded its fruit in modern science. It was ways of being together that led to ways of thinking together, not the other way round.

Wherever we have learnt to perceive the truth and to be truth-tellers, it has been by overcoming our own tendencies to mendacity. Tendencies which form our groups, and which are in us as our ways of belonging. Objectivity is not innate, nor rationality stable. It is a certain form of self-criticism that enables objectivity and truthfulness to be born. And for that self-criticism to be allowed to emerge, a certain peaceableness, a way of being together in which mistakes are not liable to immediate vengeance, has to be cultivated. One in which, as a matter of course, people are given the preparation necessary to be able to stand up for what is true, assuming that it will initially be unpopular, and strange, and that what is true will adjust us to it, after a time, and our bodies will know it is true even where the weight of our group think, our idolatry, would never have allowed those bodies to breathe the truth freely.

So, can we become unhooked from the remnants of our fragile rationalism, a rationalism which ignores its complicity in violence? If so, it will be as we begin to work out ways of being together such that the project of truthfulness, the anthropological task of an arduously shared overcoming of our mendacity, is able to be lived out in the midst of the new forms of communication, the new forms of belonging and failing to belong, the new moments of violence, physical and spiritual, in which we are immersed.

c) Meaning

Of all the areas of self-criticism, this one is, for me at least, the most difficult to talk about. Because meaning is both constitutive of us and apparently evanescent, and the loss of it is one of the most difficult and dangerous parts of becoming self-critical about violence. It is quite astounding how strong is the hunger and thirst for meaning, wherever in the world you are. It is astounding how all attempts to give rigorously socio-economic analyses of the causes of violence, or of the taking of positions in so-called cultural wars, are constantly missing the mark. One of the weirdest things about us is that the deprivation of meaning – ennui, boredom, anomie, depression – seems to be felt as a far greater deprivation than poverty. The young second-or-third generation Britons who have joined Daesh were not fleeing grinding poverty to go and live in opulence in Syria. Someone had managed to give them a sense of purpose, of excitement, a narrative within which they might be like people they had heard of, and so become someone. They were rushing from boredom into meaning.

And this is for me is an insufficiently considered part of the understanding of violence in our time: the dangerousness of the good. We are addicted to the good, and unaware how dangerous our own goodness is. This can take the form of almost any narrative you can think of; and an underlying narrative, whether reflected on or not, is always part of this dangerous good. It could be “Make

America Great Again” or “A strong and united Europe helps maintain a stable world”. It can be “A safe homeland for a race which has suffered pogroms, expulsions and finally the holocaust for over a millennium”, or “a Visible and united Umma, a dar-al-Islam in which people live under divine law, free from the interference of the infidel”. All of these things give meaning. All are exciting. All inspire passion (even the EU can inspire passion – sometimes). For some people the passion of meaning is so strong that it can lead to murder, or heroic self-abnegation to the point of death.

From the point of view of those opposed to each of these forces in a global culture war, those who are wedded to such things are deluded: they seem to be possessed, irrationally, and against their own best interests, by something that is obviously bad. Yet that is never what it seems like on the inside. From the inside, we are talking about something that is good. And there is little more difficult than being weaned from an addiction to our good. In the old days this addiction to a good was called idolatry, and that is of course exactly what it is: desire bound up in a group projection which ignores, is indifferent to, or callously calls sacrifice, those it dispossesses, whether of their own goodness, their home, their livelihood, or their life. But to those who are bound up in it, which means all of us, in some degree or other, losing that meaning, and discovering that what we called good, and felt as good, because it sustained us and gave us passion, was not good, feels very painful indeed. Even being “bad” – joining the other side, for instance – feels better than losing meaning – but realising that your good was partial, and so was not good, and that in honesty you must let go of the joys and excitements of this sort of goodness, this is a terrifying demand. Which of us can wait in the wilderness while a meaning which does not depend on hiding over, fleeing from, mischaracterizing or contrasting ourselves with, an “other” slowly comes upon us?

So, one of the things that comes together with the broken-heartedness of seeing myself as the same, with the slow determination to allow what is true to break through my mendacity, is this capacity to inhabit a sort of “nothing” while hoping that we may be given a meaning bigger than any of us can grasp.

d) Imagining a new “we”

This, finally, is perhaps the most fragile element, because one of the first victims of violence is imagination. Only when our imagination is no longer darkened by the evil that has been done to it, the same evil by which we may have found ourselves possessed as we succumbed to vengeance can we begin to imagine freely. And this too is not easy. For if the “other” is no longer really an “other”, then this means that the strong “we” which we used to have by contrast with them is no longer the “we” that we thought it was; it means that we are in fact losing our identity, at the same time as we lose our meaning, and discover that

we have been involved in mendacity. Furthermore, we are discovering that the “we” who we are becoming is not an identity of which we are in charge. We are actually allowing what used to be a hidden, or a despised, or an ignored “other” to be one of the factors giving us an identity, not by comparison “over against” as before, but by discovering a shared participation within a newer and more tentative togetherness, a new we. One which will not, I hope as easily be tempted as all of our groups have been, to find a new “other” over against whom to give ourselves a strong identity. But one which will be able to take time to allow imagination to become unbound from fake difference, fake news, fake meaning and start to rejoice peacefully in the true and gentle given-ness of the other-who-gives-me-me.

It is the cultivation of this sort of imagination that is, surely central to the life of a University in a place of deep and abiding conflict.

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