

SPECIAL ISSUE: RENÉ GIRARD'S MIMETIC THEORY AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

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This special issue of the “Journal of Religion and Violence” is dedicated to René Girard’s mimetic theory and its contribution to the complex field of religion and violence. Girard is a trained historian who became a literary critic and cultural anthropologist after he emigrated from his native country of France to the United States in 1947 at the age of 24 years. He taught at several universities on the East Coast of the United States before he went to Stanford University in 1981; he became a professor emeritus there in 1995. Throughout years of teaching and researching, he developed his mimetic theory, one of the most fruitful approaches for understanding the complex relationship between religion and violence. Girard’s mimetic theory essentially consists of three main pillars.¹

The first pillar is his anthropological insight—gained by a careful reading of great European novelists like Cervantes, Flaubert, Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, and Proust—that human beings are mimetic beings. This means that people tend to imitate the desires of others. Mimetic desire, however, is not automatically prone to conflict and violence (according to Girard, it is intrinsically good) but can easily take a negative turn if the most desirable objects cannot easily be shared or enjoyed with others. Mimetic rivalries endanger human relationships and need strong cultural antidotes to prevent them from becoming self-destructive.

A second pillar of Girard’s mimetic theory is his cultural theory, which explains how archaic cultures used religion to prevent their own self-destruction from mimetic rivalries. According to Girard, a violent crisis rooted in internal rivalries that endangered early human communities without a juridical order was solved by the so-called scapegoat mechanism, the non-conscious and collective expulsion or killing of a single victim. Because the expelled or slain scapegoat was seen by the lynchers as absolutely evil for causing the crisis yet also absolutely good for bringing peace after his or her expulsion, she or he was sacralized; that is, she or he was first demonized and then deified. A religiously legitimated cultural order closely linked to a

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foundational murder helped to keep violence under control by using sacrificial rites as a conscious re-enactment of the original mechanism.

A third pillar of Girard's mimetic theory unfolds into a theory of religion. According to Girard, the archaic intertwining of violence and religion was slowly overcome because of the influence of the Judeo-Christian revelation. Whereas archaic religions sided with the persecuting mob concealing the suffering of the relatively innocent victim, the Judeo-Christian revelation brought a radically new perspective into our world. Like archaic myths, the Bible narrates collective violence against single victims in many passages. But contrary to myths it does not identify with the violent mob but with the scapegoats.

Through this exposure of the scapegoat mechanism, sacrifice in the archaic sense has no longer been able to sustain peace among human beings. This has led to the apocalyptic stage of our world that comprises the best and the worst at the same time. Our modern world is characterized by a sensitivity for victimizations that surpasses all past traditions and cultures. At the same time, however, we also face a world that can no longer rely on traditional sacrifices as a means to keep mimetic rivalries in check. Therefore our modern world is also a world challenged by the human capability for self-destruction. For at least half a century human beings have been living with the capability of destroying all human life on Earth.

Girard's basic insight triggered a variety of different interpretations and applications in the field of religion and violence. Since 1991 there has existed an international and interdisciplinary group of scholars—the "Colloquium on Violence & Religion"—who have dedicated their work to the study, critique, and application of Girard's mimetic theory.ⁱⁱ

The following collection of essays tries, on the one hand, to introduce the basic insights of Girard's mimetic theory with respect to the field of religion and violence while, on the other, pointing to some of its more recent applications and developments. Most of the contributors come from Innsbruck, where, influenced by Raymund Schwager, a Swiss Jesuit who taught dogmatics at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Innsbruck, a school in systematic theology called dramatic theology has emerged that is deeply connected with Girard's anthropology.

In this issue of the journal, *Nikolaus Wandinger*, who, like Schwager, is a professor of dogmatics, introduces Girard's understanding of religion and violence in a way closely connected with Schwager's dramatic theology. *Matthias Moosbrugger*, a historian and theologian who has just finished his dissertation on the important correspondence between Girard and Schwager, summarizes some of the basic insights of his work.

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Whereas Schwager's primary field was dogmatics, theologians in other fields were also influenced by his approach.

Included in this issue are contributions by *Wilhelm Guggenberger* and *Wolfgang Palaver*, both of whom write on theological ethics and unfold Girard's mimetic theory in this arena. Guggenberger's article focuses on the functional meaning of religion in societies and possible equivalents regarding the containment of violence. Palaver tries to foster a better understanding of suicide terrorism by applying the mimetic approach to this terrifying phenomenon. A crucial point in this context is his critical discussion of the Abrahamic concern for the victims that becomes highly problematic if it is disconnected from forgiveness.

Jodok Troy is an Innsbruck-based scholar in political science whose contribution illustrates that dramatic theology has already started to influence fields outside the theological faculty. He confronts the realist tradition in political theory with Girard's approach to analyze the influence of religion on international conflicts.

Finally, *Stephen Gardner's* contribution opens the field to other approaches inside the Colloquium on Violence & Religion. He is an expert in political philosophy who teaches at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma. His article reflects the apocalyptic dimension of Girard's thought and tries to re-interpret the term "end of history." Gardner's understanding of Girard differs somewhat from the scholars in Innsbruck. The most obvious difference can be seen with regard to how Girard's mimetic theory is applied to Islam. Whereas Palaver and other contributors to this issue understand Islam, for instance, as part of an Abrahamic tradition that shares basic insights with Judaism and Christianity, Gardner follows some later remarks by Girard that see Islam as closer to archaic religions. These different approaches toward Islam represent an ongoing discussion inside the Colloquium on Violence & Religion.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, trans. Gabriel Borrud, Studies in violence, mimesis, and culture (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

ⁱⁱ James G. Williams, *Girardians: The Colloquium on Violence and Religion, 1990–2010*, Beiträge zur mimetischen Theorie (Vienna: LIT, 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Williams, *Girardians*, 214–223; Wilhelm Guggenberger and Wolfgang Palaver, eds., *Im Wettstreit um das Gute. Annäherungen an den Islam aus der Sicht der mimetischen Theorie*, Beiträge zur mimetischen Theorie (Vienna: LIT, 2009).