

## An Appraisal of the Atonement Theology of René Girard

*Ronald Goetz, Ph.D.*

*Few thinkers in the twentieth century have impacted atonement theory as profoundly as has French literary critic and cultural anthropologist, René Girard. Theologians from widely differing perspectives and traditions—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Mennonite, Evangelical—have drawn conceptual resources from Girard’s mimetic theory of violence in proposing their own “nonviolent” theories of the atonement. In this article, Goetz provides an overview of Girard’s mimetic theory, particularly as it is presented in his book, Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World, and contrasts it with elements of his own theory. Goetz argues that even on its own terms Girard’s non-sacrificial reading of the cross is untenable. Even more implausible are Girard’s claims that “God has nothing to do with violence,” and that blame for Christ’s cross belongs to “all mankind, and mankind alone.” For in ignoring the primordial biological and structural violence that is anterior to human violence, violence in which human beings have been ensnared apart from and even against their wills from their first appearance on earth, Girard fails to confront the primordial responsibility of the God who created the violent world humans inhabit. Thus, Girard—and by implication nonviolent atonement theories rooted in his thought—cannot satisfactorily explain how human beings created in the image of a nonviolent God could have degenerated into universal violence. “Violence,” Goetz concludes, “will not cease because we have demystified it. It would appear to be God’s strange instrument in God’s creative evolution of the universe—and hence God’s terrible responsibility.”*

The most interesting, comprehensive, and certainly the most original of what have been called “nonviolent atonement” theories is that of the French thinker, René Girard. Girard denies, categorically, God’s involvement in violence. Yet, paradoxically, he sees the God-ordained crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the very turning point of human history. Humanity’s perpetuation of violence would continue endlessly apart from the revelation of God in the violent death of Jesus Christ. I will argue, *pace* Girard, that it is impossible consistently to maintain God’s total nonviolence while affirming that Christ’s violent death is indispensable in God’s world-changing revelation to humanity. Indeed, it would seem that no one who finds the cross to be redemptive can truly be said to advocate consistently a nonviolent atonement.

Girard does not regard himself to be a theologian *per se*; rather, he is an anthropologist and a literary critic. From these dual perspectives he believes he has been able to discover “scientifically” the universal origin of the phenomenon of religion. His theory of “mimetic rivalry” is simple and all-inclusive. Its reductive simplicity, indeed, in a certain sense its obviousness, is its great strength or (depending upon the perspective of the critic) its great weakness.

At the heart of Girard's theory is his contention that "there is nothing, or next to nothing, in human behavior that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation."<sup>1</sup> However, contemporary social scientists with whom Girard is conversant have turned a blind eye to the basic fact of imitation—or as Girard prefers to call imitation, "mimesis."

The belief is that insisting on the role of imitation would unduly emphasize the gregarious aspects of humanity, all that transforms us into herds. There is a fear of minimizing the importance of everything that tends toward division, alienation, and conflict. If we give a leading role to imitation, perhaps we will make ourselves accomplices of the forces of subjection and uniformity.<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary tendency to ignore the full implications of imitation has its roots, Girard believes, in Plato, who limited his understanding of imitation to "representation," which leads to more passive "types of behavior, manners, individual or collective habit, as well as words, phrases, and ways of speaking."<sup>3</sup> What Plato ignored was the role that imitation plays in "appropriation," and its potential for aggressive violence. Thus, Western thought operates with the inaccurate and "mythical" assumption that imitation has only "gregarious and pacifying effects."<sup>4</sup>

As the cliché has it, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. However, lurking behind our desire to copy those whom we admire is the potential for a more "acquisitive and conflictual mimesis." In imitating others, humans come to desire to possess or appropriate that which the object of imitation has and is. "Place a certain number of identical toys in a room with the same number of children; there is every chance that the toys will not be distributed without quarrels."<sup>5</sup> To be sure, adults generally behave less crudely. Although driven by the same mimetic rivalries, adults have learned to "fear and repress" crude and obvious forms of possessive mimesis.<sup>6</sup> For possessive mimesis must of necessity lead to violence, which not only endangers individuals but threatens to undo the social cohesion of the group.

It is the societal function of religion, all religion, to curtail, if not eliminate, the potential for violence inherent in possessive mimesis. In doing this, it functions to

---

<sup>1</sup> *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* [hereafter: *THSFW*], trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *THSFW*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *THSFW*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *THSFW*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

hinder or resolve the “mimetic crisis” in which violence flares. At root, all taboos and rituals can be traced back to the containment of mimetic conflict. “Religion is nothing other than this immense effort to keep the peace.”<sup>7</sup>

The great paradox of religion is that it resorts to scapegoating violence in order to keep the peace. Girard believes that religion first emerges out of those dangerous environments in primitive culture in which conflict born of acquisitive mimesis inevitably draws more and more members of the community into the contest. As those involved in the conflict grow in number and intensity, interest in the original object disappears as the community is driven by “mimetic frenzy,” which takes on a life of its own. Out of this situation arises “conflictual mimesis”:

[I]t is inevitable that at one moment the entire community will find itself unified against a single individual. Conflictual mimesis therefore creates a *de facto* allegiance against a common enemy, such that this conclusion of the crisis is nothing other than the reconciliation of the community. . . .

The community satisfies its rage against an arbitrary victim in the unshakable conviction that it has found the one and only cause of its trouble.<sup>8</sup>

Once the mimetic frenzy has abated, the community attributes its “calmer state” to the victim. The community perceives the victim as both the cause and the resolution of the mimetic crisis. The community sees itself as the passive instrument of the victim’s deeds. The victim is perceived as the sole “active and responsible” agent, the cause not only of the initiating disorder but also of the renewed state of calm. Indeed, the community comes to believe that the victim “brought about its own death.” It is thereby accorded the status of “the sacred.”<sup>9</sup>

In contradistinction to the sacred which fuels humanity’s religious impulse, Girard is thoroughly atheistic. There is almost a Barthian ring to Girard’s radically exclusivist monotheism. There is only one true God: the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the God who bids humanity to give up the violence perpetrated by mimetic sacrifices to the sacred, the God who gives the lie to the alleged reality of the sacred, the lie to all religion, and to every metaphysical system created to justify the violent order of society. “There is an absolute separation between the only true deity and all the deities of violence, who have been radically demystified by the Gospels alone.”<sup>10</sup> Yet in a manner

---

<sup>7</sup> THSFW, 32.

<sup>8</sup> THSFW, 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> THSFW, 27.

<sup>10</sup> THSFW, 401.

that would no doubt perplex Karl Barth, Girard insists that his atheistic denial of the sacred, as well as his discovery of the uniqueness of the Christian scriptures, is a matter of objective, rational, indeed *scientific* inquiry.<sup>11</sup>

One does not have to accept Girard's thesis *in toto* to be impressed by the coherent way in which he integrates and explains each aspect of the religious phenomenon. Girard seamlessly weaves together his mimetic interpretation of sacrifice, the sacred, and taboo. Sacrifice solves mimetic conflict within the community by focusing all rage upon the victim, the scapegoat, who in the religious mind proves to be both the source of the problem and its redemptive solution, and who thus is seen to accomplish what only the uncanny, the sacred, can accomplish. Taboo as such is the religious precaution against the reintroduction of mimetic rivalry. Taboo regulations achieve social stability by banning imitation and competition as violations of the sacred. Paradoxically, religion thus permanently enshrines "sacred" violence as the absolute, the guarantor of the peace.

Girard contends that the only way out of the endless cycle of violence lies in the revelation of Jesus in the Gospels. The non-sacrificial, non-retaliatory death of Jesus reveals that the *true* God is *agape*, thus unmasking, demystifying, and desacralizing the violent order of the sacred. In the light of Jesus' revelation, we come to see that what Jesus accomplishes in his non-resistant, non-sacrificial death is "a calling that belongs to all mankind."

So Jesus is the only man who achieves the goal God had set for all mankind, the only man who has nothing to do with violence and its works. The epithet 'Son of Man' also corresponds, quite clearly, to the fact that Jesus alone has fulfilled a calling that belongs to all mankind.

If the fulfillment, on earth, passes inevitably through the death of Jesus, this is not because the Father demands this death, for strange sacrificial motives. Neither the son nor the Father should be questioned about the cause of the event, but all mankind, and mankind alone.<sup>12</sup>

In Girard's view, the murder of Jesus, the supremely innocent, nonviolent human being, by a violent, sacrificially-oriented humanity, reveals and unmasks, (presumably by the very outrageousness of its injustice) the truth about religion, sacrifice, and the sacred. The truth is that these things are manifestations of a self-perpetuating, scapegoating, violent order and as such, in their claim to bring peace, they are all lies. For on such

---

<sup>11</sup> THSFW, 37.

<sup>12</sup> THSFW, 213.

terms there can never be true peace; there can be only an endless series of truces, soon to be broken by new outbreaks of mimetic violence.

Girard does not adopt the “hypothesis” of Christ’s divinity because it is an authoritative deliverance of historic Christian orthodoxy. On the contrary, he argues that it is Christ’s accomplishment in overcoming violence that furnishes proof of his divinity. It is for this reason alone that the “hypothesis” of Christ’s divinity is to be deemed orthodox. It is worth quoting Girard at some length in this matter:

To recognize Christ as God is to recognize him as the only being capable of rising above the violence that had, up to that point, absolutely transcended mankind. Violence is the controlling agent in every form of mythic or cultural structure, and Christ is the only agent who is capable of escaping from these structures and freeing us from their dominance. This is the only hypothesis that enables us to account for the revelation in the Gospel of what violence does to us and the accompanying power of that revelation to deconstruct the whole range of cultural texts, without exception. We do not have to adopt the hypothesis of Christ’s divinity because it has always been accepted by orthodox Christians. Instead, this hypothesis is orthodox because in the first years of Christianity there existed a rigorous (though not yet explicit) intuition of the logic determining the gospel [sic] text.

A nonviolent deity can only signal his existence to mankind by having himself driven out by violence—by demonstrating that he is not able to establish himself in the Kingdom of Violence.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to Christ’s coming, humanity was so completely in the grip of violence and death that no mere human being could have broken free and exposed the truth about violence and the sacred. Therefore, Christ’s divinity is demonstrated by virtue of his nonviolent acceptance of death rather than participating in violence—even the violence of self-defense. From this, it would seem to follow that to be a Christian in the “non-sacrificial” sense, one must be an absolute pacifist. “He who agrees to lose his life will keep it for eternal life, for he alone is not a killer, he alone knows the fullness of love.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Girard believes that all this is implicit in the Gospels, he is fully cognizant that much of historic Christianity has not escaped the grip of violent theism, the grip of the sacred. Although he seeks mightily to demonstrate (at least to his own

---

<sup>13</sup> *THSFW*, 219.

<sup>14</sup> *THSFW*, 215.

satisfaction) that the Gospel texts are non-sacrificial in intent, he acknowledges that problematic texts exist. Thus, for example, in describing Jesus' "work of desacralization," "the Gospels are always telling us that Christ must triumph" over the "powers of heaven." This militaristic imagery apparently derives from the Gospels having been written so early after Christ's death and resurrection. The New Testament comes

. . . from a period when this work of desacralization had, quite obviously, a long way to go. This is why the authors of the Gospels cannot stop themselves from reverting, in describing these powers, to expressions contaminated by the symbolism of violence, even when they are really announcing the complete and full destruction of violence.<sup>15</sup>

While Girard does not advance a doctrine of progressive revelation, he does believe that humanity progressively recognizes the revelation of God in Christ. Thus, the full import of the Gospels unfolds only with the discovery of the reality of mimetic violence and its unmasking by the nonviolence of Jesus Christ. He believes that liberal secular appeals to nonviolence and pacifism, even when advanced by anti-Christian humanists, are evidence of a gradual recognition of the unmasking of violence accomplished by Jesus Christ. Even though secular humanism does not recognize its ultimate wellspring, in truth it is Christ who is the ultimate, if unrecognized, source of liberalism's pacifistic impulse.

Girard attributes some secular hostility to Christianity to secularists' repulsion toward the "sacrificial reading" of Christianity still prevalent within Christendom. However, the self-same secularists fail to realize that in their violent attacks on sacrificial Christianity, they reveal that their own perspectives remain rooted in violence.<sup>16</sup>

Girard's response to this situation is characterized by an attitude of tolerance and hope, which seems quite consistent with his pacifism. He understands that entirely to condemn sacrificial Christianity would be to repeat "the very error to which sacrificial Christianity itself succumbed." He is reminded of how "the abominable history of anti-Semitism" was rooted in theological aggressiveness. He refuses to repeat the error of theological aggressiveness even if it is marshaled to defend Christianity itself.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, given the still violent state of humanity at the coming of Christ, sacrificial

---

<sup>15</sup> *THSFW*, 190-191.

<sup>16</sup> *THSFW*, 226f., 254ff.

<sup>17</sup> *THSFW*, 245.

Christianity was an inevitable stage toward the eschatological fulfillment of Christ's work. It is in this way that Girard can account for the historical fact that "the Christian text is able to found something that in principle it ought never to have founded: a culture."<sup>18</sup> And indeed a civilization that has been as "splendid" as it has been "necessary" as a means toward the full inclusion of the whole world.

[T]he role of historical Christianity becomes necessary within an eschatological process that is governed by the Gospels—a history directed toward revealing the universal truth of human violence. But the process requires an almost limitless patience: many centuries must elapse before the subversive and shattering truth contained in the Gospels can be understood world-wide.<sup>19</sup>

There is much in this that is attractive, if nothing other than Girard's refusal to acquiesce submissively in the oft-repeated accusation that historic Christianity has been largely an unmitigated moral disaster.<sup>20</sup>

Girard realizes that it is difficult to argue, on the one hand, that Jesus Christ has truly revealed "the universal truth of human violence," and on the other hand, that Christianity's influence upon humanity has been a cultural catastrophe. Thus, he points to the positive cultural impact of Christianity in the face of the undeniable reality that Christianity has at times trafficked in the very evils that Jesus Christ unmasked. How are these betrayals to be explained? Girard argues that mimetic violence is so ingrained in the human consciousness that even Christians can embrace and embody only gradually the implications of Jesus' unmasking of the sacred.

There is something unsatisfying in Girard's contention that the evidence which would falsify his thesis is explicable by the thesis having insufficient time to prove itself. Nevertheless, there is something rhetorically brilliant in Girard's dealing with Christianity's critics, as he seeks to find evidence in their very denunciations that they have been touched by Christ's revelation, even if they do not recognize it as such. If it were the case that Christianity has been a historical disaster, then this would call into question its claim that Jesus Christ is the only true revelation to the world of the God who is love. Still, Girard does not dogmatically defend Christianity by itemizing its many excellencies while comparing all other religions and civilizations to it unfavorably. He is content to suggest the possibility that in this-or-that cultural

---

<sup>18</sup> *THSFW*, 249.

<sup>19</sup> *THSFW*, 249, 252.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, these denunciations arise not only from secular critics of Christianity, but also from many liberationist thinkers within the Christian theological circle.

development even now there are signs—for those who have the eyes to see—of the unfolding of the “subversive and shattering truth contained in the Gospels,” the truth about violence.<sup>21</sup>

Girard might well agree that the most astonishing thing about the human response to the appearance of Jesus Christ, trapped as humanity is in the age-old labyrinth of violence, is not that it has relapsed into a violent rendering of Christ’s ministry, but that it was able to find the person and work of Jesus Christ appealing in the least.

Nor is he naïve concerning the often one-sided ideological onslaught marshaled against Christianity by secular critics who, ironically, fancy themselves apostles of tolerant openness and inclusivity. Girard writes in this deeply prejudiced climate with a remarkably subtle tolerance, openness and inclusivity. He even flirts with the possibility that in the secular world’s desire for the “substitution of love for prohibitions and rituals,” one can see the gradual unfolding of the Kingdom of God in world history.<sup>22</sup>

In his commentary on Jesus’ appearance to his two benighted disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), Girard puts this conviction with poetic power:

Western Culture as a whole, whether Christian or post-Christian, is under the illusion that it is moving further and further away from Christ, like the Emmaus disciples, while it retains a false, sacrificial conception of him. It is struggling to rid itself of Christ for good. But at the very point when it is under the impression of moving in quite a different direction, Christ is to be found beside it, as he has been for a long time, ‘opening the Scriptures.’<sup>23</sup>

Nor can it be denied that there is considerable insight in Girard’s essentially atheistic, mimetic philosophy of religion. It is doubtful that it tells the whole story. And, of course, its critics argue that it carries with it a strong Christian bias, particularly in Girard’s contention that only the God-man Jesus Christ could have revealed the truth of things. But Girard claims that it is a “scientific” discovery notwithstanding.

Augustine of Hippo, in his famous prayer, “Our heart is restless until it rests in you,” was working with a philosophy of religion which presupposed an innate yearning in all of us for God. Augustine believed that sin so blinds us to the presence of the true God that we cannot find our way back to God except by grace. However, since

---

<sup>21</sup> *THSFW*, 252.

<sup>22</sup> *THSFW*, 196.

<sup>23</sup> *THSFW*, 278.



we are created to worship our creator, if we cannot find or have not been found by the true God, we will inevitably worship something, if not God, then God's creative works, which our misguided worship turns into idols. Although Augustine, the radical monotheist, would never grant to idolatry the status of truth, he would at least grant that the idolater's worship is rooted in a legitimate sense of the human need to praise and worship.

Girard, by contrast, sees in natural religion, and in its object the non-existent sacred, no connection whatsoever—not even a negative connection—to the true God. The “good” done by all religions and all ideologies save for Christianity is the fleeting, dubious peace created through the slaughter of the scapegoat. In contrast, the true, demystifying God makes himself known very late in the history of Homo sapiens as the hitherto utterly unknown God of love and peace.

On the face of it, this might sound very much like ancient Marcionism.<sup>24</sup> However, in contradistinction to Marcion, Girard affirms that the God of love revealed in Jesus Christ is also the Maker of heaven and earth.

And it is precisely on this consideration that Girard's theory of mimetic rivalry as the root of all violence loses credibility as an all-inclusive explanation of the human predicament. For, as Girard affirms that the God who is love is the creator of heaven and earth, his theory of the mimetic roots of violence is inundated in a flood of very pressing questions—questions that Girard leaves unanswered. For example, even if, for the sake of argument, one grants to Girard that mimetic rivalry and its inescapable potential for violence is the root of all human religion and the source of humanity's sense of the sacred, the question remains: How is it that human beings created by the God who is love were so primordially jealous and acquisitive that they resorted to violence? To affirm creation is to be confronted by the problem of evil.

Girard fails to grapple with this point because his provocative account of mimetic conflict is thoroughly anthropocentric; that is, it ignores the primordial cosmic and biological violence that sets the controlling conditions of human life prior to its

---

<sup>24</sup> Marcion, the great second-century arch heretic, concluded that the violent order of nature was such that a God of love could have nothing to do with the origin of the material world. He therefore posited a second God distinct from the Old Testament God. This God, the God of Jesus Christ, came as a bolt from the blue—without precedent in the religious experience of gentile or Jew—to rescue the redeemed from the malign creator God. Girard, of course, does not share Marcion's theological anti-Semitism. However, the curious parallel to Marcion is found in Girard's sense that the true revelation of God came without precedent, and indeed, in absolute contradiction to all human concern for the sacred.

appearance on the evolutionary chain. This makes Girard's theory of human violence irrelevant to the problem of violence as it relates to creation. Girard denies that God has anything to do with violence. However, if Girard's theory is coherently to absolve God of responsibility for human violence, one must presuppose that humanity evolved with the capacity for blameless imitation, that is, with a primordial capacity to live nonviolently. Human beings must then have catastrophically elected to go down the path of envy, scapegoating, violence, and the sacred. Girard does not adopt such a line. Instead, Girard observes that animals reveal a mimetic tendency, and the more intelligent the animal, the greater the tendency to behave mimetically. One wonders how he could fail to acknowledge that by the time the first human beings evolved they were already trapped in the very mimetic mechanisms which enthrall humanity to this day; that violence is therefore a primordial given; and that, as such, violence is inescapably the creator's responsibility.

Thus, in the most basic sense, human beings did not initiate mimetic violence; rather, since violent animal competition is the biological precondition of human life, mimetic violence victimizes human beings. If biological existence as described by Darwin has from the first spark of life been universally characterized by a violent struggle for survival, then how can Girard claim of God, the God of creation:

God is not violent, the true God has nothing to do with violence . . . .<sup>25</sup>

If the God who declared through his prophet, "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord who does all these things" (Isa. 45:6b-7, RSV) is in truth the ultimate source of the same world that science describes, then it would appear that far from having "nothing to do with violence," God has everything to do with violence.<sup>26</sup>

Yet even if one ignores Girard's indifference to the problem of evil which is entailed in the doctrine of creation, it is hard to see how he can exempt God from violence when he insists that the violent death of the nonviolent Son of God is the only act by which the unmasking of the sacred could have been achieved. As we earlier

---

<sup>25</sup> *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 189.

<sup>26</sup> It is important to underscore in this context Girard's recognition that violence all but defines what it is to be human (at least in humanity's condition pre-Christ). He therefore recognizes, in concert with the towering ideologies of the twentieth century, that however diverse are the specifics of human life and culture, we are all, in our individual lives and in our cultures, inescapably implicated in violence. Whether one celebrates violence with Nietzsche or whether one seeks to ameliorate it in a more humanistic manner, we are beings of violence.

quoted Girard: “A non-violent deity can only signal his existence to mankind by having himself driven out by violence—by demonstrating that he is not able to establish himself in the Kingdom of Violence.”<sup>27</sup> This is an act of radical self-sacrifice on God’s part *despite* Girard’s rejection of all religious sacrifice. In Girard’s schema, the God-man could demystify the scapegoating violence of religion only by nonviolently subjecting himself to death at the hands of the violent orders of society. In so doing, he reveals that religion is an illusory solution to the phenomenon of social violence.

But none of this would have been possible had not the Son of God, fully knowing the outcome, become incarnate and offered himself up to the violence of the world in order to unmask it. Girard’s denials notwithstanding, this is a redemptive act of self-sacrifice. Girard inadvertently demonstrates the obvious: any suggestion that the death of Jesus is salvific cannot avoid the sacrificial character of that death. There can be differences of emphasis as to what Christ’s saving work accomplished—the forgiveness of sin, victory over the powers of darkness, a demonstration of God’s self-giving love, the nonviolent unmasking of the sacred, etc. But none of these benefits would accrue to humanity if Jesus Christ had not sacrificed his life for the sake of humanity.

Girard is right in arguing that only one who is both human and divine could demystify the sacred, that is, the idol which required scapegoat after scapegoat to keep human violence in check. However, the moment he makes the Christological claim that “a nonviolent deity can only signal his existence to mankind by having himself driven out by violence,” Girard, like it or not, has moved into a sacrificial understanding of Christ’s atoning work. For the Son of God can, in no other way than by enduring the sacrifice of his own life, demonstrate how completely God has pointed humanity beyond the scapegoating of religious sacrifices to his ultimate purpose, the love of others as themselves.

Despite the prominent place given to animal sacrifice by the Torah, the prophets of Israel and the psalmists severely criticized such scapegoating sacrifice, but could see a life of meekness, humility and contrition as an acceptable form of sacrifice. “For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:16-17).

Jesus raised the stakes on such meekness and self-denial—teaching that we are to love fellow humans irrespective of the cost to ourselves. Jesus said, “Do not resist an evildoer . . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:39a, 44-45).

---

<sup>27</sup> THSFW, 219.

Jesus was not unaware of the cost of obedience to such a teaching. “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39). And Jesus did not privilege himself: “[T]he Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

How could Jesus be speaking of anything other than a life of self-sacrifice which he knew must end in a death as a sacrificial ransom? However, if the motive for self-sacrifice is not love, then Girard is right in his aversion to a sacrificial reading of Christ’s death. That is, when Christ’s sacrifice is seen as a propitiatory requirement in which God is portrayed as demanding that the blood of the innocent be shed for the sin of the guilty, or when it is imagined that God’s honor is tied up in his extracting due punishment for sin, Girard’s protest is right on target. Such conceptions of sacrifice are indeed religious reversions to scapegoating designed to placate the sacred.

Finally, despite its frequent remarkable insights, it is difficult to assess just how Girard’s all-inclusive theory actually succeeds in its ambitious goal of accounting for the driving force of all human life and civilization. Girard calls his theory scientific. Yet how can it be verified—or, for that matter, falsified? These are rather important questions for a ‘scientific’ hypothesis. Girard tells us that “Everything is perfectly transparent. Nothing is less problematic or easier than the reading we will offer.” But in the next sentence he paradoxically acknowledges that the only transparency is the transparency that all is not transparent: “The true mystery, therefore, as far as this reading is concerned, is its absence among us.”<sup>28</sup> Girard contends that the truth of his mimetic theory is the self-evident consequence of his study of religion and of his reading of many of the great texts of world literature. Yet he also insists that his theory is validated and certified by the unmasking revelation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. And what is the evidence of his being the Son of God? It is the manner in which he unmasks the sacrificial scapegoating of religion. Only God is capable of nonviolently “demonstrating that he is not able to establish himself in the Kingdom of Violence.”<sup>29</sup> Is this a mere tautology or the recognition that the revelation of God is self-authenticating?

Medieval Christianity conceived of seven deadly sins: pride, lust, greed, anger, envy, sloth and vanity. Many thinkers have singled out one or another of these human tendencies as the chief source of human alienation, woe, corruption, neurosis, violence, etc. Augustine and Niebuhr believed it to be pride. Marx saw it as greed. Freud saw it as lust. Barth saw it as sloth. Both Nietzsche and Girard would see it as envy, although they nuance this rather differently. For Nietzsche, it is the envy of the strong and the

---

<sup>28</sup> *THSFW*, 138.

<sup>29</sup> *THSFW*, 219.

weak. For Girard, it is the envy of the “doubles,” individuals who mirror one another in their mutual desire to have what belongs to the others.

It may well be that the attempt to find the root of pathology in a single human drive serves finally to obscure rather than to illuminate the human situation. Insights that some people find liberating are to others the source of their imprisonment. Thus, feminist critics rejected Niebuhr’s re-priming of the Augustinian notion that pride is the root of all evil. Niebuhr had used this Augustinian insight to good effect in arguing against the Promethean pretenses of modern totalitarianism and utopianism. Yet feminists rejected it as a tool of patriarchal oppression. Pride, they argued, is a male failing. To apply this Augustinian-Niebuhrian ideology to women served only to squelch their legitimate aspirations.

Perhaps the medieval catalogue of the seven deadly sins might themselves be too confining, but at least they stand in recognition that human grief and human venality have a multitude of sources. When Jesus asked the demoniac, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion;” for many demons had entered him” (Luke 8:30).

Girard, in ignoring the primordial roots of human violence, in placing its origins in human mimesis, in failing to grasp its grounding roots in creation itself, fails also to recognize that the barrier to reconciliation between human beings caused by human jealousy and covetousness does not tell the whole story. Nor can his theory explain the barriers to reconciliation between human beings and God. As Girard describes the emergence of violence, it is all the fault of human beings. Yet quite beyond human sin and violence, there remains the question of God’s having created the violent world we inhabit. What is God’s relationship to the primordial violence that has become so apparent in our time, and what, if anything, is God doing about it? On what basis can we come to believe that God wills a nonviolent human response to a creation “groaning in travail,” “red in tooth and claw”? In the last analysis, and despite his insightfulness, Girard can be of only partial help to us in addressing these matters, for in an effort to screen God from primal responsibility, in blaming humanity alone for violence and evil, he underestimates the foundational and persistent character of violence. Violence will not cease because we have demystified it. It would appear to be God’s strange instrument in God’s creative evolution of the universe—and hence God’s terrible responsibility.