



Interview with René Girard: Comments on Christianity, Scapegoating, and Sacrifice

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On May 25, 1996, James Williams conducted a lengthy interview with René Girard. The transcription of the full interview appears as 'The Anthropology of the Cross: A Conversation with René Girard' in *The Girard Reader*. James G. Williams (ed.) (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), pp. 262–88. These excerpts, taken from pages 262–4, 272–4, 279–80, 282–3, are relevant to the question of Christianity as a sacrificial or nonsacrificial religion. They are published here with the kind permission of the publisher and Professor Girard. © 1997 Academic Press Limited

James Williams As you look back over your career, what has been the most satisfying thing to you in your work?

René Girard The most satisfying thing has been the actual experience of discovery. I would say that there have been three great moments in the process of my thinking and writing.

First was mimetic desire and rivalry, when I realized that it accounted for so much. The second was the discovery of the scapegoat mechanism. This basically completed the mimetic theory. I felt it gave a highly plausible interpretation of myth and ritual in archaic cultures. From that time on I was convinced that archaic cultures, far from being simply lost in superstition or having no constancy or stability, represented a great human achievement.

The third great moment of discovery for me was when I began to see the uniqueness of the Bible, especially the Christian text, from the standpoint of the scapegoat theory. The mimetic representation of scapegoating in the Passion was the solution to the relationship of the Gospels and archaic cultures. In the Gospels we have the revelation of the mechanism that dominates culture unconsciously.

It seemed to me, as I experienced these moments, that a great deal of evidence was piling up, an avalanche, to support them. I naively thought that everyone would agree with my theory immediately, because I saw it as so obvious and overpowering.

JW Concerning the relation of the New Testament to the full development of the mimetic scapegoat theory, already in your first book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* you recognize the importance of the Gospels. But are you saying it took a number of years for the full extent of the Passion as revelation of the scapegoat mechanism to occur to you?

RG Sure. I recognized the importance of the Gospels in the individual experiences of the novelists who came to grips with mimetic desire and came to a knowledge of mimetic desire. In fact, they have a kind of conversion experience, and this conversion is of the same nature as the shift from mythology to the Gospels. Of course, I didn't fully understand that at the time.

This is the most difficult thing for people to understand about my theory—that scapegoating does not play an essential role in the Gospels, whereas it has an enormous

role in myths since it generates them. Many observers think that because scapegoating becomes more and more visible in them, the Gospels must approve of it, they must advocate some kind of scapegoat religion. But to use a modern analogy from the history of France, this would be like saying the pro-Dreyfus people were really the scapegoaters of Dreyfus. This is the mistake so many theologians and biblical scholars have made regarding the mimetic scapegoat theory. They simply do not understand the enormous difference that the representation of scapegoating makes. They think only in terms of themes rather than a hidden, generative mechanism which cannot appear in what it generates.

JW If the Gospels could be understood by analogy to the pro-Dreyfus party, give another similar historical instance of scapegoating.

RG An example which I have been working on a little bit is Joan of Arc. The people who put her on trial divinized her, or 'demonized' her, in the sense of regarding her as a witch. She was avowed to have supernatural powers and turned into a witch, whereas her canonization by the church acknowledges another form of relationship to the supernatural which is different from the demonized-divinized scapegoat. Now there is a form of divinization reported in the Gospels, which is magical and mythical, for instance Herod Antipas' belief in the resurrection of John the Baptist, and the divinization of Christ, which is just the opposite. The Gospels seem so close to myth in a way, and yet they are poles apart.

This is a difficult problem because certain forms of monotheism move God so far away from any involvement in the scapegoat mechanism that they view with suspicion any contact with it in religious thought and symbolism. But I think the power and truth of Christianity is that it completes the great forms of monotheism, as in Judaism and Islam, by witnessing to the God who reveals himself to be the *arch*-scapegoat in order to liberate humankind.

JW Does the analogy of Joan of Arc imply that the scapegoating of Jesus may have occurred even among his own followers?

RG Yes, and the conception of Jesus as some kind of primitive God. You find a recognition of that in Mark and Matthew especially. Peter, James, and John expect him to be a kind of divine potentate when he comes into his full honour and glory. Herod Antipas believes that Jesus is John the Baptist resurrected. This divinizing of John is a kind of mythical genesis. I think this is why there is a fairly long description of the murder, which is an analog of the Passion. But not only an analog of the Passion, for there were many such murders—mythical, nonmythical, prophetic—in which a crowd united against a victim.

In the Herod story the dancing of Herod's stepdaughter was important in the ritual aspects of the action of the crowd.

JW The dancing is a textual signal of scapegoating?

RG Yes. The story of the beheading of John is one of the reasons why the synoptic Gospels are so incredibly valuable for understanding the anthropology of revelation.

JW The Gospel of Luke omits the banquet and dancing episode.

RG Yes, but Luke has another scene in which Herod and Pilate become friends when Pilate sends Jesus to Herod for questioning after he is arrested. This shows that Luke is aware of the pacifying effect of scapegoating. This is the communion of the scapegoaters as opposed to the Christian communion. So if you put this scene with the beheading of John in Mark and Matthew, you can see how the Gospels complement each other in dealing with the mythical tendencies of scapegoating.

JW ‘. . . [S]ome people ask, in effect, ‘How could a sacrificial reading be dominant for 2,000 years—if it has been dominant—and then all of a sudden Girard discovers the true nonsacrificial reading’. How do you reply to this implied accusation of *hubris*?

RG I have come to be more positive about the word ‘sacrificial’, so I would like first of all to make a distinction between sacrifice as murder and sacrifice as renunciation. The latter is a movement toward freedom from mimesis as potentially rivalrous acquisition and rivalry.

Well, I think a nonsacrificial reading, or a sacrificial one expressing genuine renunciation, is found in many passages in the writings of the church fathers. It is not the only one, to be sure. And then this reading is not mine first of all, it is Nietzsche’s. Nietzsche was the first thinker to see clearly that the singularity of Judeo-Christianity was that it rehabilitates victims myths would regard as justly immolated. Of course for Nietzsche this was a dreadful mistake that first Judaism, then Christianity had inflicted on the world. Nietzsche chose violence rather than peace, he chose the texts that mistook the victim for a culprit. What he could not see was the scapegoat mechanism.

JW Is there any indication in any of Nietzsche’s writings that he understands Jesus as culpable in some way, thus responsible for his fate?

RG No. In his book entitled *The Antichrist* it is clear that he considered Jesus honest and sincere. Nietzsche thought it was wrong for Christianity to speak of the innocence of the victim, not because sacrificial victims are really guilty, but because societies need sacrifice. He saw the central religious issue as no one else did. He understood that the gods and heroes immolated in pagan mythology were similar in form to the killing of Christ. But he thought Christianity’s witness to the innocence of Christ was socially harmful and that the world needs the sacrifice of the victim as part of life’s eternal return, which includes destruction.

Nietzsche was the first to see this problem clearly, but he was perverse in choosing the violent lie instead of the peaceful truth of the victim.

JW Isn’t it ironic that he is a real scriptural source for many academics upholding ‘political correctness?’

RG Yes, the upholders of PC can find a strange kind of support in his writings. He was entranced with violent differentiation. You know, in his own time he lashed out at

those who were among the first to embrace PC. He confused PC with authentic Christianity.

JW Back to the question about the nonsacrificial reading of Christianity: to what other evidence do you point? Are there other persons and texts between the fathers and Nietzsche who understand the nonsacrificial approach?

RG All those who have tried to follow the way of Christ and the Kingdom of God, living as nonviolently as possible, have understood, though not necessarily intellectually.

JW But on the other hand, you have stated a number of times and in a number of ways that institutional Christianity and the majority of Christians have turned the Cross into a sacrificial instrument used to punish and eliminate minorities and enemies. It has been turned against the Jews, which has become a crucial matter since the Holocaust.

RG This is true, but I do not single out historical Christianity as the sole culprit, as many Christians seem to believe. I am just repeating what Paul says about all of us being guilty so that God can save us all. Concerning the Jews, the complexity of the New Testament texts is never recognized either by hatemongers and persecutors or by critics and theologians caught up in the cult of PC. We have already noted that Peter says to the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem, 'And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers' (Acts 3:17). The Jews are implicated no more than the minions of Caesar or lynchers all over the world. Therefore one cannot say that all the Jews in Jerusalem were innocent of Jesus's death while the Romans were guilty. If to implicate some of the Jews also in Jesus's death makes the New Testament anti-Semitic, well it would make just as much sense to hold that it is anti-British to condemn the burning of Joan of Arc. Because no one, no, not one, can escape implication in the death of the one who died for all. And then all lynchings are alike as well, whether they take place in Palestine during the Roman Empire or in the American South after the civil war.

Even Euripides will tell you in *The Bacchae* that Dionysus was right and Pentheus the victim was wrong to rebel against the god. Or take the myth of Purusha in the Vedas: he was killed by a great crowd of sacrificers, and out of this sacrifice the three great castes of India appeared. The parts of the body were divided, with the head as the higher caste, then the chest as the middle, warrior caste, and finally the legs as the lowest caste. Now the myth does not tell you Purusha was guilty, but it doesn't tell you he was innocent either—and this is what the Gospels alone tell you, that Jesus was innocent. 'We were wrong', says the New Testament community, 'to the extent that we were involved in that'.

JW The picture of the Servant in Isaiah 53 also includes the confession of the people. Those speaking confess they were wrong about the Servant, and that he was innocent.

RG Yes, you are right. Isaiah 53 is a key revelatory text. There is already a foreshadowing of the Servant in the story of Joseph and his brothers when Judah offers himself in place of his younger brother.

JW Is this the gospel?

RG Yes, this is already the gospel.

JW [You have been approaching the Christian doctrine of incarnation.] So far you have talked about Jesus the man as God. But you could go the other way, could you not, and talk about God as becoming a human being?

RG Yes, no human is able to reveal the scapegoat mechanism. The number one proof of this is the denial of Peter. It could be interpreted psychologically as the weakness of Peter. The number one disciple should be able to imitate Christ and stand up for him.

But as soon as he is immersed in a mob of scapegoaters, he surrenders to the mimetic pressure and joins them. This is the true revelation of a weakness which is ours as well as Peter's.

And by all accounts, in myths from all societies, the embodiment of mimetic rivalry and accusation, Satan, should so distort Jesus's mission and message that he is viewed as the guilty hero or god. In fact, Jesus has already called Peter 'Satan' because Peter did not understand nonrivalrous love and innocent suffering, and so tried to obstruct Jesus.

So the question becomes one of the transformation of the disciples, how they become able to advocate the truth of Christ and the Kingdom of God. This has to occur through the power of grace alone. So Jesus says 'it is better that I go', because then the Spirit will be sent. Because Christ did what he did, grace filled the hearts of the disciples. One person did something for all the others, like Judah to save Benjamin in the Joseph story. Jesus alone acts as God would like all human beings to act. Jesus never yields an inch to mimetic pressure.

I now accept calling this *sacrifice* in a special sense. Because one person did it, God the Father pardons all, in effect. I had avoided the word scapegoat for Jesus, but now I agree with Raymund Schwager that he is scapegoat for all—except now in reverse fashion, for theologically considered the initiative comes from God rather than simply from the human beings with their scapegoat mechanism. I think the Gospels understand Jesus basically that way, and also Paul, when he speaks of God making Christ to be sin, but also our wisdom and righteousness. He is the scapegoat for all.

In the common human pattern his death should have been transfigured in a mythical way, but it was not. So the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 is revelation, to be sure, but in the Gospels the revelation is more complete.

JW You have already presented an atonement theory, in effect. Would you care to say more about it?

RG The word atonement is unique to English as far as I know. Atonement is what the French, I believe, would call *expiation*. Atonement is 'at-one-ment', becoming reconciled with God, and this is the work of Christ.

JW The doctrine that has dominated Christian thought, certainly since Anselm, is the satisfaction theory. According to it, the justice of God and God's honour are satisfied by the one who dies, who is allowed to be scapegoated for the sake of all.

RG What you can say, in my view, is that the Father is working on a sort of historical schedule. Christ comes at the right time, at the right hour. [Regarding the book by]

Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*. . . , I think the title, 'God without being', could be translated as 'God without the sacred'—God without sacred violence, God without scapegoating.

JW This reminds me of Levinas, one of whose books is *Autrement qu'être* (Otherwise than being). Levinas's main target, of course, is Heidegger, whom he associates with the concept of being.

RG I would say that 'being' in this case is the wrong being. One should not prescribe a general elimination of the word being or any concept of being from our vocabulary, although I acknowledge that Levinas's and Marion's concerns are commendable.

Perhaps people like Thomas Aquinas, who live in a Christian period, tend to minimize evil. But the danger now is probably the opposite, that is minimizing the idea of God as a source of peace and being under the sway of Heidegger's thought and our general ontological impoverishment. We must not retrospectively foist this alien idea of God upon Thomas and Augustine. Both Levinas and Marion are too unconditionally Heideggerian in their conception of being. Heidegger's conception of being is insightful with regard to our age, but should not be indiscriminately projected back onto the past, even if we do not necessarily agree with Thomas and Augustine on everything. Heidegger's being, I think, is the sacred, the violent sacred. His *Introduction to Metaphysics* shows this clearly, but that set of lectures in 1935 was not simply an anomaly. You can find similar things in *Being and Time* and in the 'later', mythopoetic Heidegger.

Some novelists reveal Heidegger's being as idolatrous desire. All the desire of Proust is disclosed retrospectively as mimesis of the violent sacred. In Proust, desire is redeemed by the fact that it is no longer desire, it has become a serene recollection. This transformation is insufficient to make Proust into a Christian, but as pure recollection, his former desire is emptied of mimetic rivalry and it is represented more truthfully than it can be when still transfigured through mimetic rivalry. This peaceful representation gives us a glimpse of true being, formerly pushed aside by the sacred transfiguration of mimetic desire. Sacred transfiguration of desire is why time has been *perdu*, wasted away.