

René Girard's Concept of Perverted Desire: the Root of Mankind's Violence and Method of Establishing and Maintaining Peace

Peter Wilks

Abstract: This paper explores the idea of René Girard which posits that mankind's tendency towards a 'scapegoat mechanism' is rooted in our history but can be transcended through spiritual revelation. The first part of the paper outlines René Girard's contribution to anthropology and the advancement of the concept of imitation, especially the imitation of desire. Next, Girard's term *acquisitive mimesis* is used to clarify and deepen understanding of imitation as a crucial factor in our human development and conflict management, specifically in the foundation of our religion and culture. The second part of the paper outlines the use of the scapegoat mechanism in the formulation of the *sacred* upon which religious culture is founded. Thirdly, I demonstrate how Girard considered the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as an anthropological event, that specifically exposed the inherent violent nature of mankind and its established violent method of containing this volatile tendency of perverted desire. Fourthly, I outline and expand on Girard's consideration of the future of mankind's method for maintaining peace in our social structures, in the aftermath of the exposition and redundancy of the scapegoat mechanism. This inquiry involves Girard's evaluation of the New Testament and considers his subsequent revelation and conversion to Christianity.

Key Words: Acquisitive Mimesis, Differentiation, Imitation, Sacrifice, Triangulation,

Introduction: The concept of imitation that Plato and Aristotle spoke of was limited to *representation*—to types of mimetic behaviour, manners, individual (or collective) habit, as well as words, phrases and ways of speaking that the child absorbs (Girard 2019, p.8). What is missing in Plato's account of imitation, says Girard, is any reference to types of behaviour involved in the specific appropriation of *desire* that continues throughout an adult life. A person may observe an aspirational leader, for instance, and then take on the same perceived desires that they hold to in the (perhaps mistaken) belief that it is what they want and need—I call this 'perverted desire.' It is evident that appropriation, or *acquisitive mimesis* of desire—the term Girard uses, is a substantial driver of human behaviour. A key implication of Girard's idea is that this has also led to historic human conflict, such as when two people desire the same object which happens to be in limited supply.

Girard proposes that as humans we do not know what to desire directly, and so we turn to others to make up our minds (Girard 2020, p.122). After birth, we watch our parents and watch other children, seeing what they do and how they navigate the world, and then we imitate them. It's how we learn to walk, speak and develop as humans. This imitation process was studied by neuroscientists Rizzolatti and Lacoboni who explained that: 'We are social beings. Our survival depends on our understanding the actions, intentions, and emotions of others. Mirror neurons allow us to understand other people's minds, not only through conceptual reasoning but through imitation. Feeling, not thinking' (Cerdan 2017). According to Girard, desire is the same, we see desire in someone else towards an object which is giving them pleasure in some way, and we then learn to desire the same object via triangulation. A person either consciously (or subliminally) wants that experience for themselves and seeks to obtain a specific mimicked object. In a playgroup, for instance, one toddler snatches a toy from another toddler who is innocently playing with it, ignoring pleasure in some way, and we then learn to desire the same object via triangulation. A person either consciously (or subliminally) wants that experience for themselves and seeks to obtain a specific mimicked object. In a playgroup, for instance, one toddler snatches a toy from another toddler who is innocently playing with it, ignoring the pile of toys lying around them. The second toddler sees the other toddler's fascination and enjoyment he is getting from playing with this specific toy, and desires that experience. This is more than just greed or envy, this is

mainly how human beings learn to socialise. Yet, this perverted desire leads to frustration because it (except perhaps temporarily) fails to fulfil the real needs and wants of the person and, in addition, leads to human conflict.

The Beginning of Culture

Ancient philosophers have pointed us towards a discussion of the so-called hominization process (meaning the process of becoming human, with a soul) as the genesis of culture. Although, as Girard notes, natural scientists are not too keen on this explanation since it is too philosophical and thus difficult to prove. Yet, both types of researcher discuss human culture(s), with an 'implicit assumption that the modern individual is the prototype of the primitive human being that produces and transmits culture' (Girard 2008, p.98). These social facts, as the sociologist Durkheim would have described them, provide us with evidence that some form of collective consciousness has developed that cannot be easily explained by our individual psychology alone (Durkheim 1957 [1912]). Indeed the function of the mirror neurones mentioned above implies that human empathy is a key aspect of social thought. The brain physiology also raises an important yet enigmatic question of the balance between innate human properties and nurture influencers i.e. to what extent does DNA, and existential properties at birth, pre-determine our thinking and hence individual/social behaviour and how much of our behaviour is driven by our real-life experiences?

In the animal kingdom, individual or collective behaviour is understood to primarily derive from the 'nature' of the species at birth and that this behaviour adapts according to learned experience. In this regard, the animal kingdom and people are similar, notwithstanding orthodox theological thought that assumes animals do not possess a soul. We know that animals think and feel but theologians suggest that only the human has a conscience, the specific part of their soul enabling them to sense right and wrong and critically evaluate their motivations. Yet, a dog can also feel guilty if it senses it has crossed an owners rules. Does this mean animals can have a conscience? Well, perhaps not quite. The essential difference between animal and human thought is probably that animals are unable to know the 'mind of God,' in other words they simply know the rules of 'others' but are not able to know the 'mind of God' whereas humans are. In this sense, even if animals do have a soul it does not require redemption i.e. this does not need to be subjected to spiritual renewal.

Be that as it may, I propose in the paper that given the collective consciousness inherent in human culture, study focus should be on the group rather than on individual development. So, how does culture change, once it is formed in the manner described above? Richard Dawkins proposes the concept of the 'meme' as means by which any behaviour or trend has the ability to transmit from person to person (Dawkins 2020). Although, for Girard, this does not fully take account of any negative appropriation from others, and Girard believed that humans mimic 'perverted' desire, leading to competitive rivalry (Girard 2018, p.100). Girard held the view that if 'non-differentiation' existed, i.e. a natural order where people shared the same socio-economic status as others and also lived in proximity, if prohibitions and the fear of sanction were ignored, and desired resources were scarce, then it was likely to lead to rivalry and violence.

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Religious Belief and Mimetic Behaviour

It is generally suggested that primitive man began 'sacrificing to the gods' as a means of appeasement—believing the gods were angry with them—when faced with unfavourable environmental threats and/or those from rival tribes. Frazer, for instance, describes the use of magic and religion (based on existing beliefs), where magic attempted to control events, and religion appealed for help from spiritual beings (Frazer 2011). Offering a sacrifice was a method to appeal for help by winning favour with the divine. But why has man always held these kind of beliefs in the sacred, and/or rites or prohibitions? Until now there has probably never been a society that did not believe in the supernatural. However, with the significant decline in religion in the West, ethnology scholars (instigated by enlightenment thinking) made religion into a scientific study and this has helped us understand some of the factors that lead to religious beliefs, despite their study not being able to resolve the fundamental questions raised by religion. Durkheim, for instance, psychologists like Freud or structuralists like Claude Levi-Strauss all sought such explanations. For some of these thinkers, people are prisoners of their beliefs and do little more than continually rearrange them. The implication is that humanity is unable to transcend particular meanings in order to inquire about man himself and his destiny. Yet, beliefs need to be understood better as Girard points out, 'there will be no true 'rehabilitation of primitive thought as long as the existence of religion, and therefore that of prohibitions, is not explained, religion is too much a part of these phenomena for this to be the case' (Girard 2019, p.10). Supernatural beliefs drove human societies to create prohibitions in order to curtail violence and other unwanted activity. In some

contexts rivalry was allowed, and/or even recognised for its eventual benefits for society's advancement. But, violence or disorder was not tolerated.

The Scapegoat Mechanism.

Girard gives an explanation of how primitive man found a way to deal with these violent tensions which enabled him to grow into larger social groups, and found cities and cultures —the 'scapegoat mechanism'. The idea is that when a tribal family or group focused their internal contagious rivalry, tension and conflict on a single person—a victim—someone to blame for the group's threatening violent crisis, something unexpected happened. In the aftermath of the lynching or banishment of a culprit, they discovered that a kind of 'magical peace' descended on the group and all internal tension dissipated. According to Girard, the idea of a 'human sacrifice,' became the means to deal with any rising social tensions and internal violence which threatened the harmony of the group.

The victim was probably arbitrarily chosen, but an important consideration was that their relations would not be able to retaliate. The victim may have offended someone, gathered too many resources to themselves, or be disabled or mentally afflicted in some way and ostracised to the fringe. In anger, the group believes that the particular person is to blame and then all of the tension, frustration and anger is unleashed onto the victim. In the school playground, for instance, with groups of boys or girls, if a child desires the position that one of the group has assumed, internal tension grows. They disburse this tension by picking on and excluding the youngest or weakest child, one who cannot fight back. This sense of peace and reconciliation enables the group to move forward in a greater sense of unity and grow into a new larger group.

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As mentioned above, Girard argued that acquisitive desire marked the hominization of the species, but he also felt that the power of the scapegoat mechanism, involving an innocent 'sacrifice,' cemented this. Since this was inherent in mankind, we are thus all complicit and *owe a debt to this original sin*—murder. Collectively, we have used scapegoats to maintain some measure of social harmony and to experience the sense of peace, and the pleasure that it creates, at the expense of the blood of many innocent victims.

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Maintaining the Peace.

Ancient man eventually realised that they could not always use human sacrificial victims as and when needed, to curb internal tensions. Gradually, rituals developed instead where ceremonies were held enacting the original 'murder' or the sacrifice that brought peace. Such rituals became, at least, annual commemorations, developing their own particular format. In Girard's view, this defined religion—use of the scapegoat mechanism to identify an outsider, to victimise and ostracise that person either by murdering (sacrificing) them or separating them from the group, to mitigate our tensions and violence. Simply creating the 'other' helps to identify the religious group. Girard sees this familiar pattern in all religions and cultures around the globe. These forms of scapegoating range from human sacrifice, to animal sacrifice, banishment or simply ostracising, imprisoning, those who don't follow the rules. Girard further noted that the initial scapegoating often became shrouded in sanitised myths serving to shield the religious from uncomfortable truths.

In Leviticus 16, we see the ritual of the atonement ceremony, where a goat is chosen and the 'sins of the people' are laid on the goat and it is banished into the wilderness. This is a concise picture of such religious ritual becoming more 'socially acceptable,' by replacing human sacrifice with animals, but still maintaining the principle that somebody has to pay the price for the chaos that threatens the social cohesion and harmony. Religion has found a way of containing our violence but also using our violence to continue the system.

Christianity.

Christianity reinforces the system and yet paradoxically undermines it. Girard later comes to examine Christianity as an atheist researcher, since it behoves him to approach the religion of his culture. Girard is staggered as he finds a religion that at one time, in the Old Testament, manifests everything he expects; the generative scapegoat mechanism and the ways that we systematise violence in order to maintain peace within the social fabric. But in the Christ story he discovers a narrative that undermines the entire premise of the scapegoat mechanism—which Girard calls a revelation and then leads to his conversion. In particular, Christ disassociates from the 'mob' that needs a scapegoat, but identifies with the victims who are demanded by a religion upholding the scapegoat mechanism.

Christianity is not supporting the significance of a scapegoat, it is actually building towards the point where God releases mankind from its need for an 'outsider.' Jesus in siding with the 'outsiders' is saying to religion "there are no longer any outsiders," as Jesus becomes the outsider upon whom all our violence is vented. As far as Christianity is concerned, it is not that Christ is a good sacrifice, or a better sacrifice, or even a perfect sacrifice to an angry God. It is that Christianity understands that God is speaking to our perceived need for a sacrifice and God does this to undermine it and thus free us from its effect.

Each human is born into a world system where to imitate others is the way we develop as humans, and we grow up imitating this scapegoat mechanism. Jesus Christ comes from outside the 'system', from outside the historical story of mankind's need for a scapegoat mechanism. He has no debt to any scapegoating, evil, violence, system or indeed debt to anything apart from the debt of gratitude to His Father for the ability to desire what His Father desired, and His Father's desire for him. Jesus triangulates His Father's desire, via the mediation of the Holy Spirit. In this Trinity relationship there is no scarcity, no rivalry, no competition, and the Father fulfils Jesus completely and continually. *Jesus thus manifests a pure mimetic desire* and we are advised to mimic Him in this respect. Jesus does not need to become entangled with a perverted mimetic desire and neither do we.

Jesus—the 'Whistle Blower' for Religion.

leader' by the people, but by including the 'outsiders', He specifically undermines the religious establishment responsible for upholding the fragile social order using the scapegoat mechanism—Jesus was the 'whistle blower' on religion. Eventually the crowds along with his disciples, albeit unwitting participants, along with the Roman and Jewish establishment caught up in the contagious tension of conflicting rivalries, look for someone to blame.

with the Roman and Jewish establishment caught up in the contagious tension of conflicting rivalries, look for someone to blame. Jesus as God-man was an 'outsider,' and so becomes their scapegoat. Jesus and God have continued to be convenient scapegoats on whom we are allowed to act out all our most violent fantasies and blame for our miseries—yet offering us a way out.

Girard realises that the gospel is doing something new and fundamental in the history of the human race. The crucifixion of Jesus, the innocent victim, once and for all exposes and reveals the fatal flaw in the 'worlds system' that it only works if you absolutely believe the victim—who is regarded as the source of the violence—is guilty. Conversely, Jesus as an innocent lamb is on the cross as mankind's victim, declaring that 'they do not know what they are doing.' He forgives us the guilt of murder. Jesus finally emphasises in the crucifixion, what writers of the Old Testament were heading towards but never completed, that God does not require, has *never required*, a sacrifice for mankind to have peace. The

peace of the Kingdom of God, was always a gift to be received. Such peace is of a wholly different quality and experience than we have ever realised.

What to Do?

Mankind is at a loss—he cannot any longer believe that scapegoat victims are guilty. Yet, once this is realised ‘blessed are eyes that see,’ Jesus said (Lk.10:23) and the scales will fall from our eyes like the veil in the temple, torn in two, and we see the world system for what it really is. Jesus thus saves us from that need for violence and the need to ‘justify’ ourselves by stepping on someone else. He saves us from the need to know who is right and who is wrong, who is spiritual and who is evil—who is my next scapegoat. Jesus came to provide and demonstrate the remedy instead.

The scapegoat mechanism that provided social cohesion is now fundamentally redundant. So, what do we do now as a society? Girard first envisions an intermediary period where our man-made systems begin to crumble and our violence goes unchecked, until we figure out how to create and maintain our social cohesion post-crucifixion. According to Girard, ‘intermediary periods’ first come to all societies and take shape when ‘*non-differentiation*,’ i.e. social inclusion, occurs across society and old hierarchical power structures transform into meritocratic ones. Today we do not use the sacrificial system of animal or human immolation to avert a crisis. There are all sorts of other ways that mankind has developed to continue the mechanism that provides us with a measure of peace. We still need our victims. Religious groups may, for example, believe they are ‘in’ and all those who don’t believe what they believe and follow their rules are ‘outsiders,’ or we scapegoat people in society via our criminal justice system if it becomes more retributive than rehabilitative. In this sense, criminals may become examples of all that is wrong in society, and we are only interested in incarceration, rather than seeking to rehabilitate and reintegrate these people back into society. God’s perspective may offer an entirely different penal system for us?

Different forms of scapegoating are perhaps more prevalent today due to the increase in communication technology but the peace is relatively short in its effect. We cannot believe anymore that our scapegoats are guilty. The growing support for victims, from all walks of life (such as the female ‘me too’ movement), highlights the unrecognised gradual effect the crucifixion has had on our culture. So, what happens when we cannot scapegoat people?

The Apocalypse

In a 2016 radio interview with CBS Girard claimed ‘if we are without sacrifice, we are either going to learn to love one another or we are going to die. We have no more protection against our own violence, therefore we are confronted with a choice, we are either going to learn to follow the values of the Kingdom of God, ‘to love one another as we love ourselves,’ or the situation is going to get infinitely worse’ (Girard 2020). Girard calls this the Apocalypse i.e., an unveiling or revelation. Girard is not referencing the biblical book of Revelation here although I posit that if we were to join a Girardian perspective of Christ as victim, with a hermeneutic of a God of Love, then we have a means to begin to grapple sensibly with the book of Revelation rather than sensationalising it. It could be that this unstable ‘interim period’ we are in is the one the writer or writers of the book of Revelation are seeking to represent. Not only does the book prophesy about such an ‘interim period’ immediately post crucifixion, but also proposes that the same catastrophic events will be replicated again in the future perhaps as the re-invented social structures and institutions that continue to maintain the scapegoat mechanism, will begin to be broken down again.

Bearing in mind as we approach the book, the imagery used by the writer is couched in the language of the Biblical intertestamental period, where Mesopotamian and Greek culture clashed and out of which melee Rome took advantage and asserted itself as the current dominant occupying dictatorship. We no longer have the culturally conventional mindset to fully interpret the imagery, the metaphors and idioms but, using what documentation and interpretive tools we have, we can

tentatively explore what the book seeks to announce. In Revelation chapter five, as a scroll is opened, a window on the world moves into view and we see the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Traditionally, we understood these riders to represent God's violence and anger being released upon humankind. When instead what we are seeing here could be more to do with the breakdown of the scapegoat mechanism in society, where such a tool is no longer able to exercise the peace it once brought. Within the context of the Roman empire the featuring of a horse and rider with a bow and arrow, could point towards the way in which the Roman army whilst enforcing the Pax Romana across Europe were defeated, hampering the soldiers method of keeping the peace.

The second apocalypse horse was given power to take peace from the world, so humans would slay one another. If our peace is based on the sacrificial scapegoat mechanism, and a political might which upholds this mechanism, when these forces are undermined peace will collapse. The solidity of the peace which we thought we had, was not real peace at all. The third horseman is a black horse and we see here famines breaking out, perhaps as a result of failing institutions we relied upon to bring peace.

The fourth horseman on a pale horse, brings with it disease, sickness and animal attacks. This is perhaps not pointing to a direct attack from God but instead confronts mankind with the question of the quality of the fabricated peace that the scapegoat mechanism brings? The philosopher Epictetus, who had extolled the accomplishments of the Pax Romana, later stated 'can he then at all provide us with peace from fever, ship wreck, from fire, from earthquake, from lightening, can he give us peace from love that's breaks down, from sorrow, from envy, he cannot, absolutely from non of these things' (Rolleston 2020). False peace, brought at the point of a sword, makes us vulnerable once it is removed.

The emergence of the rider on the white horse, towards the end of the book of Revelation, has traditionally been interpreted as Christ's' return in vengeance. Yet, the only weapon is the sword out of His mouth....His words, his identification with 'outsiders,' whose innocent blood has been spilt to maintain our peace. No battle scene is enacted here, but the Christ as the innocent victim of the violence of the scapegoat mechanism which he just exposes.

What the writers of Revelation are seeing is that it is not God afflicting the apocalypse onto humanity, but rather they are images of humanity beginning to recognise weakness in their own system. Revelation is written after the sacrifice of Christ, who exposes the scapegoat mechanism for what it is, a violent means to quell violence. When the system is no longer supported, the result (when initially understood) is chaotic until spiritual revelation comes. The wrath of the lamb, spoken of in this section could be the removal of the protection of the scapegoat mechanism? It is humanity suffering by its own un-contained violence. We begin to do our worst to each other, our environment and those around us. We may blame God for the wrath being delivered, but, what we call the 'wrath of God' is actually mankind experiencing as a whole what has been the experience for victims throughout history. Our predatory peace was never less violent than this, it is simply that the violence was directed towards 'another' who we did not see ourselves in. The violence was still there, we just did not see it for what it really was. The violence reveals the real depravity of historic humanity.

Conclusion

Girard's contribution to theology and secular anthropology, through his mimesis theory, is impressive. Just as a scroll in Revelation unveils a world after Christ's sacrifice, the menu bar of the crucifixion scrolls down the page of our history, exposing our flawed, violent and predatory peace—which mankind has gained through its scapegoat mechanism. Yet the disintegration of our factionalism that caused our violence has now been exposed. Those who are 'insiders' today will be

'outsiders' tomorrow. God never wanted mankind to suffer at the hands of fellow men to the extent they have. But unless mankind sees for himself his own violence, he will continue in it. Just as a human father cannot forcibly change the way a wayward son thinks, so God the Father cannot stop what we are doing to one another. He has exposed the cause and provided the remedy—the reconstitution of human culture and society in the light of the Kingdom of God. Without the offering of the Kingdom, mankind would have no recourse but his own annihilation. Thus the violence we see in the biblical narratives usually attributed to God, is not His violence, it's our violence we have 'scapegoated' on to Him. God has always been the 'lamb slain from the foundation of the world,' our scapegoat mechanism for peace. He has 'taken the fall' throughout history, then finally, as innocent human being, he brought this hidden perverted and violent mechanism to an end once and for all. Jesus paid the debt of guilt from our deception that we owed to the innocent victims we scapegoated, to make ourselves feel better about ourselves. He then lovingly announced "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing" and then declared "it (the scapegoat mechanism) is finished."

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