

Introduction

The origins and background of this slim volume call for a few words of explanation. My title will surprise or puzzle a number of readers, not least in the reference made to a French-American thinker, influential in Europe and across the Atlantic, who died quite recently without, as yet, having become well-read, well-understood or well-accepted in this country. Among these necessary preliminaries, I would wish to accommodate some important thanks and acknowledgements.

This book began life as a series of four Lenten lectures given at Coventry Cathedral (St Michael's House) in 2016. The invitation came from Coventry's (then) Canon for Reconciliation, Rev Dr Sarah Hills, who knew something of the – otherwise little known – part played by Girard's thinking in the Northern Ireland peace process.

I am grateful for her prompt understanding that the cause of Reconciliation needed all the help it could get; and for her discernment in suspecting that, in Girard, it just might come to discover a framing theory capable of bringing new light, momentum and direction to Coventry's long-standing and established Ministry of Reconciliation.

'Theory' of any kind, tends, at first sight, to appear discouraging or dislikeable to British instincts of empirical sense-making and pragmatic muddling through; and, certainly, the precedents of 'French Theory' or 'Critical Theory' illustrated in the latter third of the twentieth century are – as Girard himself vigorously argued – not always inviting or impressive. However, the point about a 'theory' is that, well done, it can simplify and unify cogently complex aspects of reality. It brings difficult and obscure phenomena into manageable focus so that they become amenable to human thought and action. That is a highly desirable asset in the field of reconciliation.

Sarah Hills could not, at that time of her invitation, have known that the death of René Girard (intervening as we spoke in November 2015) would trigger, in Europe and the United States of America, a series of ‘after René Girard’ books, together with a rediscovery of this thinker’s often neglected writings on religion. My thanks to Sarah are all the warmer for her unknowing. Without her generous and far-seeing invitation to a retired professor of French, recently dropped into Coventry Diocese from St Andrews in Scotland, this book would have found no occasion to exist; it might not have come to be.

In one sense, however, the book of the lectures is indeed a function of what was *not* then known. It echoes, at a more modest level, such works of recapitulation, review and re-evaluation as Grant Kaplan’s indispensable *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist: Mimetic Theory and Fundamental Theology* (2016) and Bernard Perret’s admirable *Penser la foi chrétienne après René Girard* (2018).¹ It offers, in other words, to mediate for British readers, at a more introductory level, the job done by these works in, respectively, the United States and France.

It is not always the case, of course, that public lectures can (or should) survive their oral presentation. In this case, they did and have; with a quarter (or so) of new material added, while still conserving something – I hope – of the immediacy and freshness of the original face-to-face occasion.

The reason for their surviving is not far to seek. The intellectual electricity generated transcended that original context and continues to do so. How can one begin to address, let alone resolve, problems that have not been adequately explored and understood? And who, then, will decipher for us the seemingly bottomless enigma of ‘violence and the sacred’? That question had particular resonance in 2016, in the context created by the alarming brutalities of so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and elsewhere; but it was – and it remains – a question pertinent to the modern world as a whole; it was and remains everybody’s problem.

I had by the time of that invitation become convinced that René Girard, the Stanford-based, French-American, fundamental anthropologist and culture theorist, had the lion’s share of the available research-based insight and the best overview (or ‘theory’) – the theory best capable of accommodating and interacting with other ‘best insights’ of all sorts and from many quarters.

1. Details of this and other such works are given in Cited Texts and Further Reading at the end of this volume.

It had not always been so. When I read, in French, his first groundbreaking essay in cultural anthropology of 1972, *Violence and the Sacred*, I found it too novel, too disconcerting, and insufficiently 'resolved' in its strangeness. I was deeply suspicious, also – along with most other British readers at the time – of the foundational idea that human culture, including religion, had developed out of, and as a protection against, human violence.

Fifteen years later, I returned to Girard, feverishly turning the pages of his Socratic dialogue and intellectual thriller, *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*. Only then did 'the penny drop'. This moment of illumination happened, as I recall, under canvas, as the skies above our family tent opened and my children, cooped up within that fragile refuge on the Languedoc coast, ran amok, all unheeded, around me . . . and my wife despaired of masculine-kind!

I went on to do what precious few of Girard's English critics have since done: namely, read all his other writings and understand his way of thinking. I discovered a rich and unknown country of the mind. Here was the 'one that got away', certainly, from the enclosure of minds within the Mind and from endless self-referentiality;² but here, too, was the French theorist who was no longer just French; who wrote and thought against the grain of all other 'French theory' (which is far better known in this country); and, yet, this alternative theorist had actually enabled all their reputations to develop. It was Girard who, in 1966, co-hosted an international conference on 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man', attended by all the stars of post-structuralism and of deconstruction: Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Goldmann, Paul de Man and Derrida (invited when Lévi-Strauss declined) et al. This much-remarked conference at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, introduced 'French Theory' to a transatlantic English-speaking public – thereby provoking turbulent and heated debate and a spectacular turmoil over teaching programmes within many American universities. In later life, Girard was known to 'confess' – with a mischievous twinkle – to having 'brought the plague from Europe to America.'³

As far as our own English-speaking country is concerned, Girard's reputation never really surmounted the influential accident which

2. 'Mimetic desire is a realist theory which shows why human beings are incapable of realism' (Girard, *VR [La voix méconnue du réel]* 2001:207).

3. For the avoidance of doubt, 'plague', like 'flood', is, in Girard's thought, a significant metaphor for the contagion of violent strife, which is the direct referent of this remark.

meant that, commuting between his native France and his adoptive professional home of America, he regularly bypassed London, flying over or travelling around it.

Along with leading French philosopher Paul Ricœur, and other luminaries in many humanities disciplines, René Girard was, however, invited to the University of St Andrews as part of a public lecture and seminar series marking the bi-millennium (since published by Routledge under the title *2000 Years and Beyond* [Gifford et al. 2003]). It was one of only two or three such invitations he ever received to visit the UK. Eminent figures such as Paul Ricœur and Jürgen Moltmann, predictably drew to that particular event, from all over Scotland, huge audiences, whom they by no means disappointed; but it was a brilliant Girard, then at the height of his powers, who truly dazzled and fascinated his somewhat smaller ones. ‘The best performance I have heard in over 30 years at St Andrews’, said the then Berry Professor of English of the two-hour seminar, which followed on, a day later, from Girard’s public lecture, and which I had the privilege of chairing.

Our acquaintance developed; and in 2007 I was invited to work with Girard, then emeritus Professor at Stanford, as Invited Scholar in his own Department of French and Italian. Having myself retired in the interval, and presented Girard for an honorary degree at St Andrews (with support from the Schools of Divinity, of Philosophy and Social Anthropology, as well as of Modern Languages), I returned to California, as elected Visiting Research Fellow of the Girardian foundation ‘Imitatio’, based at Stanford University.

Despite being, in Girardian terms, something of a ‘labourer of the eleventh hour’, I became then one of a tiny handful of British scholars fortunate enough, in workshops and conferences over a considerable period, to have interacted closely with the alternative theorist.

Here, I would wish to register a deep debt of gratitude also to the insight and scholarship of many longer-established Girardian colleagues, encountered in that place and time, who have likewise advanced my understanding of the depth, range and prodigious potential of mimetic theory. Chief among these are Paul Dumouchel, James Alison, Benoît Chantre, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Andrew MacKenna, Wolfgang Palaver, Michael Kirwan, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, Martha Reineke, Sandy Goodhart and Pierpaolo Antonello; the last-named being the Cambridge-based co-editor, with me, of the two books (2015a and 2015b) that emerged in those years from the three conferences, organised between 2009 and 2013 at Cambridge and Stanford, around the theme of ‘Darwin and Girard’.

It is a considerable fact about studies in Girardian mimetic theory that they represent an ongoing collective enterprise, engaging many disciplines, and addressing many topics pursued by researchers of diverse sensibilities and mindsets all over the world. This fraternal diaspora is very loosely organised in a – sometimes dynamic and sometimes unstable – ellipse. It turns around the twin focal points represented by the ‘Imitatio’ foundation, on the one hand, and, on the other, by the standing Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R).⁴ The rewarding aspect of this unusual constellation of researchers and seekers is, as one might imagine, its implied catholicity of mind, its rich human diversity and unfailing intellectual stimulus. The penalty is that not all Girardians think with the concise and modest brilliance of their original inspirer. Girard is often then misjudged by the dispersed order – and even by the lesser merit – of the ever-growing host of Girardians.

It remains true that the reception – not infrequently, the non-reception – of Girard in the UK presents a special and interesting case of academic *méseshime*.⁵ True: Girard’s reputation was never easily or comfortably established anywhere: the interdisciplinary nature of his thought disconcerts many; so does its relentless focus and consistency – and its breadth of purview. His thrust is counter-cultural; and there must be discomfort where so many corporations and establishments are challenged, so many minds asked to turn around. The prophet always divides opinion and scandalises. Whatever seems powerfully prophetic to some will inevitably appear suspiciously marginal and irritatingly maverick to others. And yet the prophet opens ears and eyes to what is closest to us and to the things we most need to discover.

It is in this larger context that I would wish to express my very warmest thanks to Dr Rowan Williams, currently Master of Madgalene College, Cambridge. He is well-placed to know why such *méseshime* occurs – also, and perhaps especially, in academe. He has used his considerable position and public influence generously, in giving play to promising theories, and their bearers; especially where they both attract

4. As its website explains, this review has been devoted (since 1990) to ‘Exploring, Critiquing and Developing Girard’s Mimetic Theory’, <https://violenceandreligion.com>. The Imitatio website (www.imitatio.org) has many brief video clips in which Girard expounds key points of his theory.

5. One sign that the ice age may be yielding was the foundation of a new series devoted to Girard at the Bloomsbury Press under the title ‘Violence and the Sacred’. The first volume, edited by Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming and Joel Hodge was *Girard’s Mimetic Theory Across the Disciplines* (2012).

stone-throwers and, as in this particular case, also make intelligible the phenomenon of stone-throwing (known, in the more violent forms it assumes in certain social and religious practices, as 'lapidation').

His support has been invaluable in introducing Girard to established opinion-formers in this country: by attending, while still at Lambeth, the first Darwin-Girard conference in Cambridge; and, subsequently, by prefacing the two Darwin-Girard books which appeared under the titles *Can We Survive Our Origins?* and *How We Became Human*. He also chaired *con brio* the book launch of the two Darwin-Girard titles at the Cambridge Festival of Ideas in October 2015.

More than that: the simple encouragement he has given has been sustaining. It derives from an idea I have come to share with him and which underlies the present book. Rowan Williams was among the very first to understand that a cogent theory of emissary victimisation (or 'scapegoating') is required in our twenty-first-century culture, if the Passion of Christ is to remain, in this time of interfaith and of no faith, universally accessible, and its true resonance and import discerned.

A serious piece of fundamental anthropology, in other words, is required to unlock the transformative and reconciliatory potential of the Christian faith itself. If the present book can contribute in any measure to meeting that strategic requirement of our times, it will have achieved its goal; its travelling will have been light, and its labour joyful.

My lively thanks go, finally, to two colleagues: Professor Ann Loades, CBE, who gave me good, crisp and stimulating theological advice; and Professor Brian Stimpson whose reactions helped define my sense of what, where and how much to explain.

The old adage is still true: for whatever defects remain, the responsibility is entirely mine.