

Girardian Perspectives on Power and Kenarchy in the Apocalyptic Age

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Introduction: The Crisis of Narrative and the Question of Power.

There was a time when we could veil our violence as sacred, uniting our society against a demonic other. That epoch has come to an end, for the aura of religiously justified violence has been eroded beyond repair. Our sacrifices and myths no longer have the magical power to unite our communities. We are no longer fully convinced of the guilt of our victims, the innocence of our community, or the divine inspiration of our myths. As a desperate last resort, we may multiply our sacred sacrifices and flood our communities with bewildering narratives, but the miracle of unanimous condemnation of an evil other escapes us. Our accusatory narratives only serve to further divide us and energize an escalation toward extremes.

According to René Girard's anthropological insights, archaic human society was founded upon the magical efficacy of sacred violence, where communal unity was achieved through the expulsion of a demonic other. The transformation of primal, uncontrolled violence into ritualized sacrifice marked the very genesis of civilization and religion. Warriors became worshippers, and savages became civilized through this process. However, it's not only in the birth of cultures that violence shapes our humanity, but in their disintegration also, as worshippers are tempted to become warriors once again.

As a critical framework, Girard's mimetic theory has become indispensable for analyzing contemporary acts of violence, yet popular analytical readings often miss the theory's profound historical trajectory. This study argues that the power of archaic structures was fatally wounded by a seed of awareness planted in human consciousness through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The Christian revelation unveils sacred violence; we can no longer be unconscious of what we do. The historic trajectory of mimetic realism—from an unconscious concealed event of violence, becoming ritual, developing into religion and culture, complemented by sacred narrative (myth), culminating in its exposure by Christ—has stripped archaic power structures of their efficacy, limiting humanity to an apocalyptic choice between self-destruction (profane violence) and the kenotic imitation of Christ.

Archaic Order: Scapegoating, Myth, and the Concealment of Power

Where did humanity's inclination towards violence begin? Girard connects violence to the twisting of desire. And he has much support, as every religion warns about the dangers inherent in desire. Buddhism, for instance, identifies it as the source of all suffering.¹ Christian scripture is just as explicit: "*What accounts for the quarrels and disputes among you? Is it not this – your desires that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; murder and envy and cannot obtain...*"²

Humans are characterized not only by an endless pursuit of our desires, but by discontentment even in the fulfillment of desires. We oscillate between a blind pursuit of our desires and not knowing what we desire. In this space of discontentment, it is easy to see in others what we think we lack in ourselves. Girard identifies this sense of lack-of-being as the source of rivalrous desire. He names the "other" onto whom we unconsciously project our hopes for fulfillment, models. Not knowing what we want, models give shape and direction to our desires. We unknowingly reflect their desires, and when many hands reach for the same object of desire, conflict inevitably follows. The *model* becomes an *obstacle* and then a *rival*. This insight unveils an uncomfortable truth: we are most often in conflict with those whom we unconsciously admire. We want what our rivals want, for we secretly esteem them. Girard remarks: "We don't resign ourselves to the recognition that we are imitating people we admire and envy as the expression of our desires. We see it as something to be ashamed of."³

Imagine how these dynamics played out in archaic communities. In situations where there are no laws or institutional barriers, conflict easily turns to violence, and violence naturally escalates. Isolated incidents gather momentum like a contagious disease, until everyone is involved in a war of all against all. In the midst of such conflict, the object of desire becomes obscured, as we reflect the hostility of the rival. Girard comments: "[T]here is also a tendency for the object [of desire] to disappear, to be destroyed in the conflict."⁴ We forget what we desired and become obsessed with the one who wants to take away our being. In the process of becoming human, rivalry often intensified to the near elimination of the community. Uncontrolled violence became the greatest obstacle to the development of larger, cohesive, and civilized societies.⁵

¹ The second of the Four Noble Truths states that the cause of suffering is *tanhā* (craving or desire).

² James 4:1,2 Mounce Translation.

³ René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (Bloomsbury Revelations), 43.

⁴ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 47.

⁵ "If imitation of others leads inevitably to rivalry and conflict, and if all humans act mimetically, then humanity as a whole would appear to be doomed to an endless cycle of competition and violence. Human survival and the genesis and development of culture are difficult to conceive under these conditions." *Girard and Myth*, 29.

The transformation of violence from uncontrolled to ritualized through the scapegoating mechanism provided a resolution. As Girard imagines it, a primitive community finds itself in the familiar scenario of escalating conflict. However, something unforeseen happens; at the very moment when the group is about to descend into uncontrolled and violent cathartic release, one of the community members points to another. This accusatory (*satanos*) gesture suggests the source of the “evil”. When at the height of mimetic crisis, the crowd becomes united in their accusations against a scapegoat, it brings about a new unity within the community. Rivals become friends when they share a common enemy. Violence finds a focus. A crowd converges upon a single (or minority) victim. One dies instead of many.

The crisis is spontaneously resolved when the crowd mimetically unites and finds cathartic release in eliminating the perceived source of evil, resulting in a magical peace. Magical, because they don’t recognize the true nature of the process that made this peace possible.⁶ In the same way they identified the scapegoat as the reason for all the chaos, they now identify it as the reason for the peace. Consequently, the community deifies the scapegoat. All the elements necessary for the birth of a new community, a new beginning, and a new sense of the sacred become present in this “saving” event.

Thus, there is at least one moment in which peace is restored within the community, and the community never praises itself for this reconciliation; it regards this new acquisition of order as a gift from the victim it just killed. This is both malefic because it caused the crisis, but also beneficial because its death restored peace, and therefore the scapegoat becomes divinized in the archaic sense, that is, the all-powerful, Almighty both for good and for bad simultaneously.⁷

A community that had found itself in the clutches of a chaotic monster, about to be devoured by uncontrolled violence, now finds itself born anew into a new unity and a new peace. Violence gives birth to this archaic sense of the sacred.⁸ The gods who are born here are idols, projections of our misinterpretations. It’s not hard to see why Girard proposes this event as foundational in the formation

⁶ A misunderstanding of mimesis often gives birth to a belief in magic. For instance: “Early anthropologists perceived something of the religious character of mimesis and spoke of imitative magic; for instance, many primitives guard against having clippings of their hair or nails fall into the hands of potential adversaries.” René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (Stanford University Press, 1987), 14.

⁷ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 48.

⁸ In Girard’s later work he would differentiate between the *sacred* and the *holy*. The “holy” being truly other and not a projection of human misinterpretation. See Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 157

of civilizations. It is also important to note that Girard refers not to just one specific event, but to a series of events that form a pattern and accumulate meaning over time.

Mimetic cycles and the scapegoating mechanism are not processes that humans invented but rather the very processes that made us human. These evolutionary events transformed animals into humans by providing the possibility for complex symbolic thought and language. Girard speculates that when the blind passion subsides and violence ceases, the chaotic noise gives way to a moment of silent attention. In this flicker of contemplation, everyone glimpses a symbol that overflows with meaning: the corpse of their victim. One who was in the community is now out; yet this death means *life* for the remaining community. Chaos has been transformed into order by this dead body. For Girard, the corpse of the scapegoat serves precisely as the kind of symbol that contains an excess of meaning, catalyzing the emergence of uniquely human, complex symbolic thought.⁹ These processes are therefore deeply embedded in human consciousness. Our very capacity for meaning-making was shaped by these events and our misinterpretation of them.

What constitutes the misinterpretation in this process? First, in the escalation of conflict, we fail to identify our own desires as the source of frustration. When conflict spills over into violence, the desires that sparked the conflict become irrelevant in the face of the immediate threat. Consequently, we identify the rival as the source of all conflict. When the process escalates into unanimous violence against a chosen party, the misrecognition continues and gathers strength. The community assures itself of its own innocence and attributes guilt to the scapegoat. The moment of murder and the peace that follows are also misinterpreted as we project onto the divine what we are unable to acknowledge in ourselves or take responsibility for. This self-deception is not intentional – it’s unconscious – and it becomes the secret hidden at the very foundation of the civilized world, a secret that Jesus would expose in due course: “I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.” (Matt. 13:35)

For the effect of the scapegoating mechanism to continue, the community needs to remember the event. And the best way of remembering in a pre-literate age would be through reenactment.

⁹ The philosopher Paul Dumouchel observes: “Girard’s elegant and original solution is to start from an undefined, exceedingly significant single symbol, which signifies precisely through the excess of significations that it contains.” Alison, James, and Wolfgang Palaver. *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*. (Palgrave Macmillan 2017). 17.

Consequently, rituals develop.¹⁰ The ritualistic repetition of the scapegoating violence forms the basis for religious sacrifice. Sacrifice, therefore, is a new kind of violence – a sacred violence, for it contains and controls the violence that would otherwise destroy the community.

Myth as the Power Narrative

Ritual and origin myths follow the pattern of the scapegoating event, in that they reflect the unconscious misinterpretations of the scapegoating process. These myths are first told and later written from the persecutors' perspective, concealing or sacralizing the violence and taking the guilt of the victim for granted.

With myth, *narrative* begins to take over the function of scapegoating. From the process of accusation, the presumed guilt of the victim, and the innocence of the community to the redemptive violence that saves a community—myth functions as a mirror of the actual events of scapegoating violence. Myth also ensures that the mechanism remains invisible, allowing it to function effectively. *Narrative* is able to proliferate and influence the community without the effort of bringing everyone together for ritualistic reenactment. The resulting social order and power structures—derived from the primitive sacred—depend entirely on the populace's *misrecognition* of the innocence of the victim. As the scholar Gil Bailie writes: “The generic term for the systematic misrecognitions that have veiled the victim’s face and silenced the victim’s voice is ‘myth’.”¹¹ Bailie illustrates this with the myth of Aeschylus. One of the characters, Agamemnon, is commanded to sacrifice his daughter to lift a curse. Animal sacrifices had failed and only a return to the more ancient and reliable type of sacrifice – human sacrifice – would be effective.

One bring a gag, and press

Her sweet mouth tightly with a cord,

Lest Atreus’ house be cursed by some ill-omened cry.

¹⁰ “There are two possible views of ritual. On the one hand, the Enlightenment view for which religion is superstition and if ritual is everywhere, it’s because cunning and avid priests impose their abracadabras on the good people. On the other hand, if we simply consider that the clergy cannot really precede the invention of culture, then religion must come first and far from being a derisory farce, it appears as the origin of the whole culture. And humanity is the child of religion.” Alison and Palavar, *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, 80.

¹¹ Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled. Humanity at the Crossroads* (Crossroads 1997), 16.

*Rough hands tear at her girdle, cast
Her saffron silks to earth. Her eyes
Search for her slaughterers; and each,
Seeing her beauty, that surpassed
A painter's vision, yet denies
The pity her dumb looks beseech,
Struggling for voice; for often in old days,
When brave men feasted in her father's hall,
With simple skill and pious praise
Linked to the flute's pure tone
Her virgin voice would melt the hearts*

The victim should not be heard, lest it cause a curse. She is gagged by people who know her. The series of events is described in detail, but the actual killing is too intense, as the chorus so poignantly captures:

*The rest I did not see,
Nor do I speak of it.*

Archaic myths turn a blind eye to the horror of the final act of sacrifice. To witness our violence and allow ourselves to hear the cries of our victims would undermine the power of the process. A solemn silence often concludes ritualistic reenactment. In the mythical retelling of the event, silence is imposed not through lack of sound, but through the erasure or suppression of the truth.¹²

Girard states that “the threshold of culture is related to the scapegoat mechanism, and that the first known institutions are closely related to its deliberate and planned reenactment.”¹³ Our modern

¹² Richard Golsan, *Rene Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2014), 68

¹³ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 49.

institutions have their origin in this ancient structuring of communities. They have grown from the blood of victims and depend on our misrecognition to maintain their authority.

Revelation and Exposure: Undermining the Sacred

Something has gradually demythologized our world. Victims have found their voice and are recognized. So prominent is the phenomenon that it's hard to imagine a time in which it was any other way. The pendulum has swung so far that the only remaining justification for making new victims is to claim victimization. According to Girard, the Hebrew scriptures began a gradual demystification of the sacrificial order by repeatedly bringing elements of the scapegoating mechanism into focus. These texts are unique in that they side with the victim and begin to question the efficacy of sacrifice. Scripture, employing the genre of myth to deconstruct myth from within, follows the same plot but then draws attention to the events that other myths conceal.

The crescendo of this subversive narrative unfolds in the story of Jesus. All the various themes of the gospels lead to the Passion, for it is here that the secret foundations of our world are brought to light (Matt. 13:35). Jesus takes us back to the events that shaped human consciousness, events which we misinterpreted, and progressively undoes each of the misinterpretations.

Starting with the most foundational misrecognition, he teaches that our own desires, more than anything else, reveal who we are; they are the reason for our violence or our love. Ultimately, we have only two options as models for our desires, namely, the Devil or God. We either allow ourselves to be shaped by accusation and violence, or we allow the Father, who loves, to give birth to his Son in us.

“If God were your Father, you would love me... Why don't you understand what I'm saying? It is because you are unable to hear my word. You are of your father the devil and it is the desires of your father that you wish to do. From the beginning he was a murderer and had nothing to do with the truth because the truth is not in him. When he speaks lies, he draws them from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:42–44)

Once we recognize our own desires as contributors to the conflicts we find ourselves in, we can re-evaluate our rivals, our scapegoats, and God's involvement – or lack of – in violence. Instead of being distracted by a thousand different reasons for violence, Jesus brings us face to face with the source of our desires.

The gospel narrative then continues to show that our social structures are founded on this misrecognition of desire and the scapegoating process that emerges from it. When Caiaphas declares that “it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50), he exposes the single victim mechanism. The scapegoating process has little concern for the victim’s guilt or innocence. The actual concern is the destruction of the community, and how to prevent it. Christ’s passion and crucifixion are the decisive culmination of this revelation, offering the clearest expression of the unmasking of the single victim mechanism. The effect is the undoing of the power structures that were built upon it. Through the gospel message, the power structures of our world are “doomed to perish” (1 Cor. 2:6-8). Girard writes:

From an anthropological standpoint I would define Christian revelation as the true representation of what had never been completely represented or what had been falsely represented: the mimetic convergence of all against one, the single victim mechanism with its antecedent developments, particularly “interdividual” scandals.¹⁴

The Gospels situate the myth of redemptive violence in historical reality, enacting textually the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. It is the beginning of an apocalyptic event that dooms the cultural power structures. Gaining momentum, it works “like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.” (Matt. 13:33) The gospel message has infected human consciousness with a new awareness: our victims may be innocent, and consequently, our violence might not be justified. This possibility has eroded our blind confidence and made unanimity impossible. Since we’ve witnessed God suffering our violence, we no longer believe in divine justification of our violence. Violence, unable to renew itself through sacred resolution, “no longer produces anything but itself.”¹⁵

The Unleashing of Profane Violence

To give us real and lasting peace, the superficial peace we attain through the scapegoating mechanism must be taken away. Girard understands that “Christ cannot bring us a peace truly divine without depriving us first of the only peace at our disposal. His peace entails this troubling historical

¹⁴ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Gracewing Publishing, 2001), 137.

¹⁵ René Girard and Benoît Chantre, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoit Chantre* (Studies in Violence, Mimesis &, 2010).

process through which we are living.”¹⁶ The kind of peace Jesus gives is “not as the world gives” (John 14:27), but one that “surpasses understanding.” But what delays the fullness of this revelation? Girard interprets the Greek word *katechon* (as used in the letter to the Thessalonians) as that which holds back or delays the Apocalypse. It is this primitive sacred, deriving its strength from our misrecognition, finding its form in all human institutions, that is doomed to pass away through the revelation of Christ.

The Christian revelation appears then to be a snare, and the knowledge it carries a kind of trap, since it deprives humanity of the only means it had to keep its violence in check, namely the violence of the sacred. Thus, Jesus’s enigmatic words suddenly take on unsuspected meaning: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on Earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34).¹⁷

Having taken away the shallow peace that comes through the scapegoating process, our choice is either a return to escalating violence or following the way of Christ, which is to love and forgive even if it means that we must suffer violence.

Historical Aporia

With the infinite varieties of scapegoating categorically eliminated as a valid option, only one choice remains: a return to uncontrolled violence or a new way of being human. We might finally have learned what the ancient scribe saw: “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” (Proverbs 14:12) Girard is explicit: “The Apocalypse is not some invention. If we are without sacrifices, either we’re going to love each other or we are going to die. We have no more protection against our own violence.”¹⁸

However idealistic and unlikely a universal movement towards the ways of Christ may seem, it is both a viable and practical alternative to self-destruction. This choice is not only supported by the stark reality of its alternative but by the growing awareness initiated by the revelation of Christ.

¹⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 186

¹⁷ Alison and Palavar, *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, 273.

¹⁸ *The Scapegoat: René Girard’s Anthropology of Violence and Religion*, a 5-hour radio series I presented on the national radio network of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 2001, transcript, p. 40. The series which can be found here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/542c2af8e4b00b7cfca08972/t/58ff87e0d2b8579e77e80882/1493141508746/Scapegoat.PDF>. Audio can be found in the podcasts section of www.DavidCayley.com

New Awareness as the Basis for an Alternative Apocalypse.

The same revelation that removes the constraint of sacred violence also brings a new possibility into focus. Humanity's misinterpretations and their consequences have been exposed, and it has brought about a new urgency to change our ways: "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." (Acts 17:30) In light of this unveiling, we must revisit the core assumptions of mimetic theory.

First, the revelation of Christ brings about a new awareness of how desires shape us. The very foundational processes that were previously unconscious – the sense of lack of being and the awakening of desire – have now been brought into greater conscious awareness, thereby transforming the very structure of desire. While Girard emphasizes that mimetic desire arises from a foundational lack of being, desire can be reframed so that *lack* is not a negative quality but defines the space between what is and what could be—a positive relationship with possibility. Our awareness can shift from a fundamental sense of *lack-of-being* to *possibilities-of-being*.¹⁹

What does this **new awareness** look like in practice? Just as conflict, scapegoating, and social structures originate in desire, so too does the transformation of society begin with the transformation of desire. A greater awareness of how our desires are formed should help us question our desires, especially in conflict. We are now able to ask the most uncomfortable questions, such as – where do our desires come from, and what do we admire about our rivals? Instead of being obsessed with the rival and consumed by conflict, these questions open up a space for introspection and an opportunity to interrupt reactive hostility.

Second, this growing awareness brings our desires into greater focus, but more than that, it removes the illusion of an isolated self. To do "to others as you would have them do to you", and to "love your neighbor as yourself", especially your enemies, is no longer an idealistic suggestion, but an imperative in the light of how our lives are intertwined. Our consciousness of "self" needs to expand to include our neighbors. In fact, our vision necessarily must extend beyond the human race and recognize Christ as the firstborn of *all creation*. (Col. 1:15) Violence done to nature can be just as consequential to our survival as violence done to humans.

¹⁹ Andre Rabe, *Processing Mimetic Reality: Harmonizing Alfred North Whitehead and René Girard* (Sacrasage Academic, 2024), 96

The Kenotic Imitation of Christ

Mimetic theory shows that imitation is inescapable, for good or for evil. Twisted mimetic desire escalates into communal scapegoating. Therefore, the path of love must also be mimetic; it must be contagious by offering a model worthy of non-rivalrous imitation. Jesus provides us with a model like this. To follow the way of Christ is the most authentic Christian message. However, the imitation of Christ does not mean that we sever all other mimetic relations. Instead, Christ transforms the structure of our mimetic relations with others:

We could look at it this way: the model does not contain the fullness of being I lack, but instead plays a role in contextualizing and communicating divine possibilities of being. As such, one can honor the model as an inspiring exemplar and enabler of a fuller being without any need to possess the model's being. Exemplars are non-conflictual models.²⁰

Acknowledging our mimetic nature enables us to benefit from the positive and inspirational aspects of mimesis, while also alerting us to the true nature of conflict. The renunciation of violence is an imperative. However justified we may feel in reciprocating violence, only the renunciation of violence can avoid escalation. The implications of this new awareness are not only personal but communal and national. Girard writes:

To leave violence behind, it is necessary to give up the idea of retribution; it is therefore necessary to give up forms of conduct that have always seemed to be natural and legitimate... Violence is always perceived as being a legitimate reprisal or even self-defence. So what must be given up is the right to reprisals and even the right to what passes, in a number of cases, for legitimate defense. Since the violence is mimetic, and no one ever feels responsible for triggering it initially, only by an unconditional renunciation can we arrive at the desired result.²¹

It is a near-impossible choice. Jesus sweated blood in the process of making this choice. Following him could at times mean that we choose to suffer violence unjustly to stop the escalation.

Conclusion: The Kenotic Imperative

²⁰ Rabe, *Processing Mimetic Reality*, 99

²¹ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 198.

The trajectory of human history, as illuminated by René Girard's mimetic theory, reveals a profound and precarious truth: the foundation of archaic order rested upon a system of sacred violence—the unifying power of the scapegoating mechanism. This study has argued that this structure, built on the misrecognition of the victim's innocence, was fundamentally undermined by the Christian revelation. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ exposed the secret of redemptive violence, stripping myth and ritual of their efficacy and ending the epoch where violence could be veiled as sacred.

The Crisis of Unveiling

The desacralization of violence, though initiating a trajectory toward truth, has left humanity standing at an aporia—a seemingly impossible choice. We can no longer achieve superficial peace through the unconscious expulsion of a demonic other. As the ancient restraints of the sacred erode, humanity faces the terrifying prospect of uncontrolled, profane violence, where escalation is perpetual and self-destruction is the inevitable terminus. As Girard warns, without the protection of sacred sacrifice, the choice is stark: "either we're going to love each other or we are going to die."²²

The Path of Positive Mimesis

Yet, the same revelation that removes the old guardrail simultaneously illuminates a new, viable way of being human. The exposure of our misinterpretations—from the source of rivalrous desire to the innocence of the victim—brings about a new awareness. This consciousness transforms "lack-of-being" into "possibilities-of-being," allowing for the interruption of reactive hostility through introspection and a questioning of our own desires.

This alternative path is a call to positive mimesis—the kenotic imitation of Christ. By offering a non-rivalrous model of desire and a commitment to unconditional renunciation of violence, Christ provides the paradigm for a contagious love that can finally break the cycle of reciprocal violence. To follow this path means accepting the "sword" of truth that dismantles false peace and embracing a love willing to suffer unjustly to halt escalation.

²² *The Scapegoat: René Girard's Anthropology of Violence and Religion*, a 5-hour radio series I presented on the national radio network of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 2001, transcript, p. 40. The series which can be found here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/542c2af8e4b00b7cfca08972/t/58ff87e0d2b8579e77e80882/1493141508746/Scapegoat.PDF>. Audio can be found in the podcasts section of www.DavidCayley.com

Ultimately, the choice facing the contemporary world is between a descent into an apocalyptic abyss of our own making, or a transformative embrace of this Kenotic Imperative—the only alternative to self-destruction. The future of humanity rests on its ability to re-pattern its desire, its actions, and its narratives after the ultimate, non-violent exemplar – Jesus, the Christ.

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