Scandals, Scapegoats, and the Cross: An Interview with René Girard

Note: Mack Stirling, Director of Cardiothoracic Surgery at the Munson Medical Center, Traverse City, Michigan, and Scott Burton, director of the LDS Institute of Religion at Ohio State University, conducted this interview with René Girard, Andrew B. Hammond Professor Emeritus of French Language, Literature, and Civilization at Stanford University, at Girard's home in Palo Alto, California, on April 3–4, 2009.

Stirling: We would appreciate it if you would tell us a little bit about your family background and your education in France and then how you ended up immigrating to the United States.

Girard: I was born in Avignon on Christmas day, 1923. I am the second son of a family of four. My father was curator of the museum, of the library. The museum is a kind of foundation, a private foundation of an eighteenth-century collector who had a library, which is the basis of the public library in Avignon; but my father created the first lending library in Avignon, which is part of the library. He was very active; he was very dedicated to his work. In France, a job like that is a state job. You are a *functionnaire*, which means a city servant. My father had been a student at l'École des Chartes in Paris, which is where I went to the university during the war.

Stirling: I think I read once that your father was more of an agnostic, whereas your mother was more of a believer?

Girard: Yes, this is true. My father was the typical French agnostic. He was a member of what they called the Radical Socialistic Party, which is a party of the right.

Stirling: Where did you attend school?

Girard: I was at the Lycée d'Avignon, which is a public school with Latin and Greek. I have some kind of phobia of educational institutions, and it started when I was about ten. I was scared to

death of the schoolteacher, who was a perfectly innocuous lady—nothing dangerous about her. But I was so terrified that my mother took me out of school and sent me to what my father called a school for spoiled children. It had only four or five students. The teacher was some kind of a spinster who taught students who had fragile health or some special problems, or didn't like school, which was my case. But with her, I think I learned quite a bit, as a matter of fact, because it was almost like an individual education, with only three or four students talking to her. It was more like home. I went back to the Lycée later.

Burton: So at what age did you move to the university?

Girard: I didn't move directly to the university because I was thrown out of high school. After the first two years when I had what was called the "excellence" prize and was the first in the class, I started to become rambunctious and noisy and so forth. They threw me out because I had become too rambunctious and was organizing big upsets in the school. Even though my father was a member of the school council, they threw me out.

My father was very mad, but I said I wanted to work at home. In a way, it was a return to the time when I refused to go to school as a young child. And then I received the next to the highest *mention*. They practically never give the highest *mention*, so my father was very impressed by that.

Stirling: After this, you went to the university—l'École des Chartes in Paris?

Girard: Yes. I prepared for the examination, the contest you know, and I was accepted, even though I was in the lowest, last numbers. I went to Paris. When I was alone in Paris, I found it very difficult. I found it insufferable for food; there was very little heat. I was not in student houses, which are pretty well organized. During World War II, there was quite a difference between a student house and a student hotel. So I was in a hotel. I was cold, I was getting a little hungry, and my first decision was to do the same thing I did when I was ten: Go back home immediately. My fellow students said, "If you go back home, what will happen to you? You know that everything is in Paris for higher education in France." So I stayed, but I sure didn't like it, and I ended that school at a pretty low level. That is one of the reasons I went to the United States [in 1947], and it was pretty fortunate for me because

I was preparing for a career like that of my father's—as museum curator, librarian, archivist. I didn't want to be an archivist. . . .

My thesis was "Private Life in Avignon in the Fifteenth Century," using marriage contracts, birth certificates, wills, and documents like that. If you look at the wills, you see immediately what people owned or didn't own, you know. And, therefore, you can classify, and that is what I had done. Studying the way people lived, the kitchen utensils they had, their furniture, and so forth is fascinating. It doesn't teach you anything about the lower classes, but it teaches you practically everything about the life of the higher class, middle class, and aristocracy. I went into anthropology without knowing anything about it. I was kind of pushed by my literary studies, which is the strangest thing.

Burton: Why strange?

Girard: Strange from the point of view of what science thinks it is. I really think that it is not that different from literature—not because it is false, but just the opposite: because it is just as likely to be true as literature. Literature is generally limited to the truth of certain individuals who tell you about their life, and in my view, literature is essentially autobiographical.

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Burton: Could you talk to us a little bit about texts that led you to begin to think about the origins of culture? Novels and other texts?

Girard: Yes. Probably the most important of my novelists and the one who is closest to a scientific observer of psychic life, even compared to most psychologists, is Proust. His writing is incredibly detailed and precise. I discovered Proust two or three years before leaving for the United States. I think it was Proust that triggered my taste for psychological observation. I read him mostly from the beginning.

Stirling: How does Proust compare to Dostoevsky?

Girard: They are very different. Proust is much closer to scientific observation, and Dostoevsky is the observer of extreme situations, conflict, and so forth. He says countless fascinating things about psychology and violence. Proust is more like an observer of modern psychology. Cervantes and Proust are the two novelists I met first, then Dostoevsky. Then I added Stendahl. Flaubert is

probably the least recognized in that company. Proust is a born psychologist in his observations. It is always mixed with humor, and he is extremely precise and detailed. He fascinated me.

Stirling: So those novelists were fundamental for your developing the idea of mimesis?

Girard: The recognition that the resemblances between them are just as important as the differences. I was reacting to modern criticism, which said that each writer is a masterpiece in himself and has nothing to do with any other writers.

That is true of two volcanoes, you see. Neither of them is identical, but they both have something to do with what is at the center of the earth.

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Stirling: And what role did Greek drama play in your thinking at that time?

Girard: At the beginning, it was really just the novel. I went into Greek drama in order to check if some of the things I thought I had discovered in the novel were already present there. My conclusion is that, yes, they are, although in a very different form. And the view of man which is present in the Greek drama, is justly regarded as universal, because Greeks had a unique genius. I don't accept the modern skepticism or the idea that there is some kind of sharp separation between science and the humanities.

I moved to Greek tragedy because the study of the novels had brought concepts which I felt would probably be first visible from a literary and chronological point of view in Greek tragedy. And the same concepts were there. Greek tragedy was a simpler version of the same things; the structure was already there.

I think that the purely mimetic crisis can be turned into comedy or something like that. The Greeks invented a type of comedy which is very important. There is a comedy in which two brothers are so much alike that one brother gets into the wrong house with the wrong wife and there are exchanges of this type during five nights. This is a fundamental comedy because the doubles are not only tragic, but they are also comic. These features appear together. If you look at the origins of comedy and what the first comedies are about, you see it is really the same thing as the tragedies. The comedy of doubles is the fundamental comedy. The

doubles are confused by other people, but they also confuse each other and that is very important.

Burton: In what way do the tragedies and the comedies treat the doubles differently or approach them differently?

Girard: In the tragedies, there is always one or very often two who die. In the comedy the consequences at the end are cancelled and everybody is happy.

Burton: And what are they trying to say?

Girard: I am not sure they always know. You know, I think you can be a very good observer of these things without getting to the basic principle, which is sameness, or the inability to distinguish.

Stirling: The end result of the mimetic crisis is this inability to distinguish?

Girard: Yes. The misunderstanding is born through the inability to distinguish. The wife is unable to distinguish her husband.

Burton: That is about as much of a crisis as you can get!

Girard: As much of a crisis you can get and as funny as you can get as a basic comedy, because all comedies are about sex and doubles. In Greek comedies, usually the two doubles have been raised in different parts of the Mediterranean world and don't know each other. Suddenly one arrives in the same city where the other one lives, and it is the beginning of the entanglement, which gets solved in the last scene.

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Burton: And then you moved to Shakespeare.

Girard: And then I moved to Shakespeare because my biggest literary experience with mimetic patterns was in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It appeared to me as a total mimetic masterpiece in a humorous plot. *Midsummer Night's Dream* is total genius as a model of mimetic desire. After that, I went to other plays of Shakespeare, which confirmed this, but *Midsummer Night's Dream* remains my favorite.

Stirling: You have spoken of imitating in a spirit of rivalry versus imitating without rivalry.

Girard: The rivalry comes from imitation. The imitation comes first and produces rivalry if it is an imitation of desire. If you look at Shakespeare's plays, how many begin with two friends who are so much in love with each other that nothing can ever happen to their

friendship? Then, the next minute they are fighting over the same woman, because one of the two imitates the other. This is especially true and obvious in *The Winter's Tale*, which is very late in Shakespeare's canon. Shakespeare is obviously interested in the subject and it cannot be by chance. Fundamentally, his plot is an imitation that goes wrong. And it doesn't go wrong because it is a bad imitation, but because it is a naive imitation, which doesn't realize it is going to get into trouble—that the model is only a man and not a god.

Stirling: When did you begin to think about how the Bible is connected to your theory of human desire and the origins of human culture?

Girard: I decided to look in the Bible to see if it confirmed the ideas from the novel, anthropology, and Greek drama. The culture of French secularism in which I was raised at the lycée in Avignon is remarkable for an absolute, total absence of the Bible. I went to the Gospels. I immediately felt that there was a lot of truth in them, and I began to be really fascinated. I can say I had a conversion experience at the time and went back to church.

Stirling: In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, you described conversion—at least among the novelists that you were studying—as an intellectual understanding that we are all part of the mimetic process. So when writers are making observations as an author, it is not from an independent position outside this mimetic structure of human relations. Is conversion to Christianity the same? Does it involve any more than that kind of an intellectual understanding?

Girard: Yes, I think so. I had my mystical period when I was teaching at Johns Hopkins for the first time—from 1957 to 1968. It was a very strong thing with me.

Stirling: So, there is a component of intellectual understanding, but also a spiritual. . .

Girard: Spiritual, affective. I went back to the church. I had my children baptized. I remarried. The priest in Baltimore who performed these rites—I think he may have wondered a little bit if I was crazy. He shouldn't have! He had a feeling that I was dropped on him from outer space. We did everything at the same time.

Martha, my wife, was very nice, even though she has remained an atheist. She was raised in a Methodist Church in Union City, Indiana, but she was nauseated by it her entire life. She is very

strong, so I have absolutely no influence on her. But at the same time, she is more of a Christian than I. She hates the outward manifestations, although she goes to church on Sundays with me. But she brings in Protestant habits. She brings food there—because Catholics go to mass, but they leave immediately.

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Burton: After your conversion, did you find confirmation in studying the Bible of the ideas you were developing from your study of Greek tragedy? Did you, for instance, look at the story of Jacob and Esau in the Old Testament and find the same kinds of doubling?

Girard: It is there, but it is not developed in the same way. The comic aspects are more subdued. But in the case of David and Jonathan, it is discussed openly. There is something to write about the comparison between the Greek way of handling the subject and the biblical way. What the Greek writer wants to do is to bring back the people who came to the theater the first time. They want more of the same, and they get more of the same; whereas in the Bible, once a subject is really treated, the Bible moves on. Are there other parts of the Bible, for example, where the subject of the David and Jonathan story is being repeated?

Stirling: I don't think there is anything quite comparable to Jonathan and David.

Girard: I am not a good scholar in the sense of research; but from everything I have known about Greek comedy and so forth, the origins of comedy have to be in something basically human, not in a pure invention.

Stirling: One element you examine in the Bible that is not prominent in Greek tragedy is the scapegoat. In a human mimetic crisis, the differentiation of society is lost or originally never existed. The natural human solution to the crisis is to mimetically polarize against one victim, obliterating him.

Girard: Well, in mimetic crisis it gets worse and worse when more people get involved. The saving device—the scapegoat—is, in a way, the same thing which is bad about the crisis. It is the sameness of people. Because the choice of the scapegoat will not be determined by some real difference (which does not exist), but by something ridiculous like, you know, the pimple on your nose or

something. There is always this tiny difference which distinguishes, which polarizes a whole community against a single individual, which you will find in the archaic myth where there is one little detail, like a limp, a physical defect, which is meaningless because . . .

Stirling: In a moral sense, it is meaningless, yet the victim is arbitrarily selected as guilty. And you have talked a great deal about the innocence of the victim—

Girard: —because my definition of Christianity versus myth is the simplest it can be. In myth it is a scapegoat phenomenon, which is never discovered. Modern scholars have not yet discovered that the mythic hero is a scapegoat, whereas, the fact that Jesus was a scapegoat is the basic fact about Him. But of course, this was not recognized by the people who crucified Him.

Stirling: When Christians and other religious people talk about guilt and innocence, they often attribute that state to whether a person has sinned or not. In ancient human history, the scapegoats were unlikely to be totally without sin in that sense, but they were innocent of what the group was projecting onto them.

Girard: There are really cases where everybody starts a problem at the same time, and it is literally impossible to decide fairly on a culprit. So the scapegoat instinct is very strong, because as long as you haven't attributed the guilt to someone, it remains there in the group and everybody is supposed to bear a little bit of it. People want to get rid of it, and that is really why they are looking for a scapegoat.

Burton: How is the scapegoat different from the mimetic double?

Girard: I would say they make themselves double by retaliation. Everybody retaliates, and everybody accuses the other of starting the confrontation. Everyone does that honestly, really believing they are right, because the contamination at the beginning is invisible, even to the participants. People are not observant enough of the moment when things become sour between two people. It is retrospectively impossible to reconstitute. Therefore, human violence is a difficult problem.

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Burton: We were hoping that you might summarize your view of human cultural origins.

Girard: I think it starts with scapegoating.

Stirling: With murder?

Girard: Probably.

Stirling: Do you see scapegoating as one isolated event, or is it something that happens many different times in many different places?

Girard: My own tendency would be to see it happening in different places, in many instances. Crowds have a tendency to become united against something. Original sin is probably that—to be united not around something, but against. All the archaic gods always have bad aspects, bad signs. Even the very old gods—like Jupiter in the Roman world—are fundamentally adulterers, murderers, and so forth. This characteristic has been attenuated over countless centuries but probably started with specific accusations of the crowds against a human scapegoat. That is how I would see it.

Stirling: And so you see all of these ancient gods—these idolatrous gods—as having an origin in a scapegoat that was blamed for all of the evil in the group and later credited with establishing peace?

Girard: Credited with establishing peace. Because when the group accepts that idea, you know, it feels better; and it attributes, rightly, this feeling better to the victim. Therefore, the ancient god is fundamentally bad and good. The essential features of myth are precisely that: a scapegoat phenomenon, which became so important that there was a tendency to replay it, to ask how it happened. It is because archaic people were very concrete. They believe that the scapegoat may be a god, but they also recollect somewhat how spontaneous murder by the crowd happened. So someone must say at some point, "Why don't we try to do it ourselves with another victim?"

Stirling: So that is how ritual sacrifice began?

Girard: Ritual sacrifice would be the first institution, when the society is going back again to the beginning and there is enough recollection of what happened. And if the god did it for us, accepting to be mistreated, wasn't it because he wants us to replay it?

Stirling: What about prohibitions? How did they originate?

Girard: Well, prohibitions are very simple. Because people are very observant, they know very well what gets them into trouble.

And prohibitions usually make sense. But if they don't make sense to us, it may be because they are linked to a very specific incident that we don't know, which we would have to know to understand. Everything was copied religiously in the ritual and was often remembered because of its very irrationality. Therefore, it persisted long enough to make the whole institution unintelligible—because in order to have a good scapegoat phenomenon, you must *not* understand it. They were misunderstood, these phenomena. So it was natural to try to redo them. Doing things exactly. Getting the equivalent. So if they had killed a member of the community, they knew very well that this murder increased the violence because it set the family of the victim against the family of the killer. But if you managed to have a scapegoat ritual, it was very different.

Stirling: Now, in the current world, it seems that we have lost the ability to generate new myths—

Girard: —because we understand the scapegoat phenomenon. And this is both good and bad. We want to avoid scapegoat phenomena. In archaic societies, probably there were always things that were understood about it, but it was an incomplete knowledge, which makes allowance for the existence of a scapegoat world.

Stirling: And when you say we want to avoid scapegoating in the modern world, you must be referring to the group as a whole. Because each one of us individually pretty naturally lapses into scapegoating. We can't do it en masse.

Girard: You have to spread the impulse to have scapegoating, but the fact that it diminishes with more understanding is, I think, unquestionable. And then it can no longer create the sacred.

Stirling: That leads me to another question I was going to ask a moment ago. Do you still see most human institutions that we have now as descending in some way from the ritual sacrifice of archaic religion?

Girard: Indirectly. Not directly. There are many institutions—

Stirling: As time goes on, many of the institutions will be further and further removed from ritual sacrifice, but you have described how kingship could have originated from the prestige of the scapegoat victim. It is also quite easy to see how legal systems could evolve at a step removed from ritual sacrifice. You have described this as well.

Girard: Yes, I am in a state of flux with respect to this aspect of culture. I have been thinking about modern anthropology, which is an anthropology essentially of the gift, the counter-gift, etc. So, I was thinking that there was the possibility, instead, of doing an anthropology of avoidance. For instance, instead of thinking that people go far away to marry girls from outside the group, one could think that the group wants to get rid of its girls because it is afraid that its males are going to fight over them. What categorizes human culture is that, instead of doing things in the vicinity, in being as close to the first object that can satisfy their desires and so forth, they go far away in order to get people who are unrelated. It is probably a movement of avoidance, more than a search, or a combination of both, see what I mean? And avoidance is something which anthropology has not thought out, which is not there.

Stirling: Could this relate to your idea of the prohibitions as well?

Girard: Yes, because prohibitions are most important. Prohibitions, in a way, come first; and rituals become used when prohibitions fail. Because in a way, ritual is the opposite of prohibition. In rituals, you redo the behavior, which is forbidden by the prohibitions, which is supposed to become the medicine. I think that this concept could become a development in concrete anthropology when you look at archaic culture. But it would involve a shift away from the idea of the gift, which is too optimistic, typical of European socialists at the beginning of the twentieth century. But this is a myth—that people want to give, want to exchange gifts. They want to avoid trouble. This is more fundamental, and one of its consequences is the gift. The importance of the gift should not be denied, but to say that it can become powerful enough to pull apart the community in search of wives is not convincing to me.

The main phenomenon to explain human culture is avoidance. I don't think that there is real evidence that this avoidance is a natural one. Otherwise, you are forced to see things which are mad. For instance, you see people who exchange even corpses—because there are some tribes in which no member of the culture buries its own dead; one always gives them to someone else and vice versa. But one cannot say they exchange corpses as gifts; that is ridiculous. Obviously, they avoid corpses. Because, even today,

funerals are often the occasion for conflicts in families, old conflicts being revived by the presence at the funeral of people who never see each other. So you would avoid it completely by having something like professional undertakers. Everybody becomes a professional undertaker of the people who don't matter to him. Because if the people matter to him, it is better to avoid them.

That is what I mean by an anthropology of avoidance, by putting avoidance first. Of course, the gift is important, but cannot be an origin. Avoidance may be, because you try to protect your own life. And, in a way, in the theory of the gift and the anthropology of the gift, there is something anti-Christian, because it is directed against original sin.

Stirling: Does it deny original sin? If one sees the origin of culture in the spontaneous exchange of gifts, one denies the founding violence—the original sin—that the Christian revelation exposes.

Girard: Yes, it seems obvious to me . . . , but I am too old to write a book about it; it is too complex a subject.

Stirling: How do people typically deal with their resentment today, when mythology does not create the sacred and when the institution of sacrifice is attenuated?

Girard: I think you can show that there are still sacrificial aspects in human nature. That sacrificial aspect, we experience it every day. For instance, take a young man who is forced all day long to submit to his boss. His boss has very different worries from him. The boss tends to express his anger at his subordinate, who really doesn't deserve it. In the evening, the subordinate goes back home; and if he is really mad, he will kick the dog. Is that not sacrificial? If he is angrier, he will slap his child. And if it gets even worse, he will have a quarrel with his wife. So, isn't that a sacrificial hierarchy of sorts?

Stirling: It is. We also see how easily anger can be displaced from one target to another. What did the discovery of ritual sacrifice do for archaic societies?

Girard: You can see how in a more primitive humanity the discovery of sacrifice could have been a real discovery in the sense that it made possible the stabilization of temper by discharging its resentment onto a victim. This discovery was perceived as something great and, as a result, created an institution.

Stirling: How did sacrificial ritual engender human knowl-

edge? You have suggested that the sacrificial ritual itself gave more ancient humans an ability to relate different things in their lives to one another in a conceptual framework. It also seems to have created a kind of intellectual peace or space in which they could devote their capacity to discovering—

Girard: —which was enlarged by time, experience, and repetition. So they chose a victim who was not their child. We do not want to disturb our community; the main thing is to save our community. But a victim who resembles a member of the community can function to absorb the anger and save the community from itself.

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Stirling: What about philosophical explorations of origins? Do you see philosophy as an enterprise that seeks to cover up our origins in violence? Does philosophy in some sense try to support the idea of human culture as a peaceful enterprise, the result of intelligent good will?

Girard: Yes, well, philosophy seeks to cover the violent origination of social institutions, in a sense. The philosophical descriptions of human origins usually wouldn't talk about violence.

Burton: Would not?

Girard: Would not. These philosophies would tell you some kind of fairy tale about human origins. The philosophers usually want to review excellence and inculcate a favorable idea of primitive culture as being empty of violence. This fashion has disappeared, to a certain extent, but not as fast as it should. I think I have contributed a little bit to that movement—at least to say, "Look, it makes no sense."

Stirling: The more evidence that we gain from biology, archeology, and anthropology, the more we see violence going all the way back, underpinning human culture at every level.

Girard: Sure, and we see it in animals too, in more cases where we didn't see it before. Philosophy is tied up with the general movement toward the idea of human autonomy and anti-Christian aspects of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The idea of human autonomy is completely out in the open in the sixteenth century and is still that way. Therefore, it is fundamentally

anti-Christian. It is the origin of modern human sciences. I depart too much from that view to be acceptable.

Stirling: You mention that Shakespeare went beyond Greek drama in laying bare the origins of human culture, perhaps most explicitly in *Julius Caesar*. Why was he able to do that?

Girard: Well, my tendency would be to say because of Christianity. It is impossible for a man like Shakespeare, as intelligent as he was, to represent a scapegoat phenomenon, which he did not understand, and then make it understood by his readers. So, I think there is a fundamental superiority of Shakespeare over the Greek dramatists.

But I am not sure I want to say that because I don't know what is behind Euripides's *Bacchae*. You can read it in a modern way and see the scapegoat phenomenon and think that Euripides understood it. But is it really true? I don't know. Were they terribly exceptional men or mostly artists? We don't know, but they were disliked by the community and were regarded as betrayers, speaking about the gods in a way one hadn't heard before. You have Plato's opposition against dramatists and art. This attitude is probably typical of the extremely conservative guy who sees culture being destroyed and who realizes that the knowledge of the dramatists is playing a role in this destruction. The conservative is right, but you cannot go back in time and restructure what is being destructured.

Stirling: How does the Bible differ from myth?

Girard: The Bible reveals scapegoating. And it revealed scapegoating very early. It is difficult to say, but there is one text, which obviously is very ancient, according to the scholars, which is the story of Joseph. Joseph is the story of a scapegoat who is treated in the Bible as a scapegoat. That is why I had in one of my books a parallel between the Oedipus myth in which you believe in patricide and incest and the Joseph story where you don't [*Oedipus Unbound*, chap. 5]. Freud tells you it is scientific. That is a comic thing, I think. And the Bible does not believe Joseph is a scoundrel. Rather Joseph is seen as a scapegoat in the Bible. The story of Joseph is a magnificent story.

Stirling: It is indeed. It inverts mythology. Many myths contain signs in themselves of undifferentiation and differentiation. There are myths that show some evidence of communal violence or col-

lective violence against a victim. However, there are many myths that don't have these elements.

Girard: I would reserve the word *myth* for misunderstood scapegoats, but that is my definition, and I don't try to generalize to all myths or talk about myth as defined by modern science. I talk about a certain type of myth, which has the victim at the center. That victim at the center is never like Christ, an innocent condemned for the false reasons. The condemnation always seems justified in the myth. And that, I think, is maybe the most important concept—central for converting people to the mimetic theory. It is very important to say, "Look at myth, and ask why is the hero guilty?" It's not an answer to say that the Bible is cruel, because the Bible also contains stories that denounce human violence. We say that the Bible is cruel because it shows the cruelty of men—while mythology, precisely because it *is* cruel, doesn't show it. Cruel people don't show their cruelty. Only good people talk about evil, talk intelligently as the Bible does. I think the Joseph story is the best example.

Stirling: Do you believe that the true God has used the false transcendence of the violent sacred in any way to begin His process of revelation? As a starting point to help humans understand the scapegoat mechanism or original sin, as you see it?

Girard: Yes, we may say that God wanted human beings to collaborate in their own salvation and therefore understand themselves and their own sins. People see the similarity of structure between mythology and Christianity. But Christianity and myth are not the same story at all. The victim's innocence in Christianity potentially destroys all myth. So the idea of Christianity as a universal revelation makes sense. When I first talked about the mimetic theory, I didn't see the tremendous importance of that concept. In a truly popular—in the best sense—version of the mimetic theory, it should be in the center.

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Burton: Does the Hebrew Bible have an emergent rejection or a full rejection of the scapegoat mechanism?

Girard: Fundamentally the Jewish religion and Christianity are aware of scapegoating and its consequences. The scapegoat

mechanism does not appear in the first chapters of Genesis. The first significant example is the story of Joseph.

The conquest of the Holy Land, for example, is always quoted by enemies of the Bible as a story that fully justifies violence. This is, indeed, the case. The Bible has texts that are similar to mythology or other texts connected with origins, but the knowledge of scapegoating appears sporadically. From the perspective of Christians, the Gospels are the supreme revelation of human scapegoating because it is a full expression. God is not a scapegoater. He is a victim of scapegoating. Of course, I think the Christian story can also be strongly emphasized as the reversal of certain aspects of archaic religion. You have so many myths in which human scapegoating is wrongly justified as the "judgment of God" or the "victory of the good people."

Burton: Why, in the Old Testament, do we see the beginnings of rejecting the scapegoat mechanism, even though there were relapses, as you say. What about their culture or their thought that allowed them to see this scapegoating mechanism as—

Girard: It is revelation—I mean, if the scapegoat revelation is really unique to the Bible. As far as I know it is, but I cannot claim that I have studied all religions. Countless archaic myths justify the human scapegoating of victims. For instance, I quote one about the visitor from abroad who steals. So they follow him to the top of the mountain. He falls and disappears, and the community is founded. In the myth, the punishment is just. The thief is guilty—the only guilty one—and the community is right to expel him. That doesn't prevent him from becoming divine in a way. That's a benefit of scapegoating, which in turn becomes the origin of sacrifice and culture. Scapegoating in mythology is misunderstood, only partly understood, or understood as a sudden divine intervention at the expense of a guilty victim. This intervention saves the community and must be the starting point of a culture.

Burton: Would you comment on the possible relationship in the Hebrew Bible between this emergent understanding of scapegoat and monotheism? Would the monotheism have played a part and, if so, how?

Girard: Sure. There is something very special about what God says to the Jews. He says, You have been liberated yourselves and

so you must be kind to people who take refuge with you. These concepts are very striking because they are unique in ancient writings. They are also anti-scapegoating. However, other parts of the Hebrew Bible are clearly (or probably) scapegoat phenomena. It is a mixed bag, but it's the sort of mixed bag you don't really find in mythology. Mythology has pretty clear scapegoating which is never criticized. The Bible contains scapegoating but also contains a critique of scapegoating. It does not show a uniform movement away from scapegoating, but it does show a general trend that is a historical process. The process is complex, but I think it is visibly present. I don't think you can find the equivalent of the story of Joseph in the Oedipus myth, for instance, where Oedipus is seriously regarded as guilty of patricide and incest. The great mistake of Freud was to think that patricide and incest were the important discovery the Oedipus myth, which is not true at all. They are standard scapegoat accusations.

Burton: Is the individual scapegoat always divinized after the event?

Girard: How can we know that? If the scapegoat is not divinized, no myth is generated. There may have been countless unknown scapegoats. I don't think we are in the position to answer that question definitively. Even if we have no mythic scapegoat, there may be one in actuality. The collective delusion may work so well that the scapegoat disappears completely. Even the story disappears. That is a possibility, I think. It is a pretty common theme to show a community beginning with a scapegoat affair, which is remembered because it had a saving effect—it interrupted a fight, a potentially fatal fight.

Burton: In 1 Kings 12, the Northern Kingdom has rebelled against Solomon but hasn't really formed a nation yet. Adoram comes up from the south to collect taxes in the north and is slain by the Israelites. The text says he was stoned by "all Israel" (v. 18).

Girard: People who collect taxes are always badly treated!

Burton: Maybe! But immediately afterward, Israel formed a nation in the north separate from Judea in the south. They created their own cult. But Adoram is never made part of the cult. He is never divinized. Can we call him a scapegoat, even though his death leads to the founding of the Northern Kingdom, Israel? I've

wondered if it isn't partly to do with the fact that Israel had no way to divinize Adoram, because they believed in one God.

Girard: Yes. And you can see why the concept of one God would have led inevitably to the death of archaic religion because it was an obstacle to divinization. So you have to tell the story in a realistic way. That story is good proof that belief in one God can cleanse a story of the temptation to idolatry.

Stirling: Yes, so we can see him as a scapegoat, but he can no longer can be divinized.

Girard: Yes, he becomes a scapegoat in the modern sense. I wish I had known that story better. I would have used it. I think your interpretation is very good. These are important moments in the Hebrew Bible where its fundamental, structural difference from mythology appears.

Burton: It does seem to flow in some way from Abraham's monotheism, which came, at least in part, as a consequence of his attempt to sacrifice his son, but then being stopped.

Girard: In the so-called sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham is presented as the object of a special command from God, which was not for everybody. In fact, the whole beginning of the Bible occurs in the context of human sacrifice, but this story has been manipulated a little bit to make human sacrifice seem a very special thing. This human-sacrifice culture is abolished by the beginning of the Bible. So I think it is very close to telling us the truth of human sacrifice and especially the sacrifice of children. Today we know that the practice of sacrificing children existed everywhere—all over the world—to some degree. It is part of the sacrifice of the first fruits.

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Stirling: You have talked about the cross or the Gospel accounts of Jesus's death and resurrection as being the summit of biblical revelation. What is the most important teaching of the cross?

Girard: It teaches us that human beings are fundamentally prone to look for and to murder scapegoat victims. This looking for victims is very important in the birth of human culture. So the revelation of the cross brings out this dreadful aspect of humankind.

Stirling: We see it perhaps most clearly there.

Girard: Yes, we see it most clearly there. It is very interesting

that the modern period, which is anti-Christian, has also created an anthropology, which makes Western culture— perhaps because it *is* Christian—guiltier than any other. The myth of the innocence of the primitive is an invention of modern humanism. The cross teaches us about true religion because at the same time it teaches the badness of false religion. It shows the murderous aspects of humanity, but this is true of the whole Bible in a way.

Stirling: What does the cross teach us about the nature of God?

Girard: It teaches that God has devised a way to save humankind by enlightening us about our murderous nature, but God doesn't murder anyone. His Son, God Himself, accepts to be murdered for us and thereby to bring our nature to our conscious knowledge.

Stirling: Paul said: "I resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (2 Cor. 2:2). You have said that that statement made sense to you because it designates the cross as the source of all knowledge, both about God and about man. Do you still feel that that is correct?

Girard: Yes. It is an extremely brief sentence, which becomes intelligible only in view of the scapegoat mechanism.

Burton: Paul also says: "If the kings of this world had foreseen the consequences. . ." (1 Cor. 2:8). What does that mean?

Girard: Paul is saying that they would have never crucified the Lord. This is the marvelous idea that, when you understand the cross, you understand that all society is based on scapegoat violence. Christianity today seems to be disintegrating, but the state is also disintegrating—disintegrating in a particular way. We know with increasing clarity that states are always based on something like the crucifixion—on the ability to kill to cure the community of disorder—or, in other words, a smart use of the scapegoat mechanism, which the leader himself triggers to reconcile his people against the scapegoat. When you think of the Roman circus games and so forth, you can see that much of ancient civilization was organized to make people participate in the scapegoating.

Stirling: Different from scapegoating the ruler himself?

Girard: Yes, a form of scapegoating that saves the rulers. And people have always seen the relationship between the guy sen-

tenced to death and the ruler. You can see from many signs all over the place.

Stirling: You, in fact, believe that the institution of kingship derives from the sacred aura surrounding the victim. The victim eventually succeeded in using that aura to propel himself into a position of authority.

Girard: We westerners were very surprised to discover the relationship between the victim and the ruler in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is a theme that scholars discovered from Egypt to South Africa. The king was essentially a victim killed by the crowd. That is pretty fundamental. There are aspects of this cultural theme in Asia and even Europe. I think that, if culture were studied without a prejudice in favor of public order, we would see that the murder of the victim is always present. But it is quite distant in time, and it becomes less and less visible as civilization advances.

Burton: Just a question: Can you give an example, a modern example, of a scapegoat phenomenon?

Girard: Well, a modern example of a scapegoat phenomenon would be the system of elections. President Mitterrand (he was a man with quite a sense of humor) used to say that when you are president, first there is a state of grace; you cannot do anything wrong. Sooner or later, it is always replaced by the state of disgrace, and then you cannot do anything right and you may be killed. In those African monarchies, it always ended with a murder. But the anthropologists take for granted that the murder of the kings was purely a formal thing which had no meaning. This is ridiculous. The monarch is essentially the enthroned victim. Instead of being enthroned or divinized after he is dead, it happens before he is dead. And probably the invention of political power is one with this. They want to use him as a leader before killing him.

Stirling: So, certainly all of our leaders oscillate between excessive and inappropriate adulation, on the one hand, and then excessive—

Girard: And then a state of disgrace. That is why the more popular they are, the more they are at risk for a fall. Today we have a good example because people are all asking: "When will Obama fall into disgrace?" The people are aware of this phenomenon of

scapegoating rulers and celebrities, but they continue to do it anyway!

Burton: Can we imagine a scapegoat selected who really *is* guilty of all that the mob puts on him?

Girard: Well, no. You see, the idea of a scapegoat was there before the idea of punishing only the guilty man. In many primitive societies, you can see very well that, for reconciliation, the tribe which has been guilty of doing something does not look for the single guilty culprit. You take someone in the tribe whom you feel is more expendable than the others. You chose a victim, and you give that victim to the other party, or you execute him. But very often it may be someone who is not doing well in the society and so forth, who is already on the way to being scapegoated in his own group. There may be an exchange of victims between tribes against which they can each get rid of their own violence.

Stirling: When you have a human crowd revved up, there are always metaphysical projections onto the victim—onto the scapegoat—that far exceed his actual guilt.

Girard: Sure. Because it is multiplied by the crowd. Everyone invents something new.

Stirling: That is the essence of the phenomenon.

Girard: That is the essence, yes. All crowds are dangerous. The police know that. That trouble arises for no reason at all. It doesn't matter.

Burton: Part of the Christian revelation is the revelation of the victim's innocence but at the same time—the mirror image of it, also part of the Christian revelation—is the revelation of the individual's guilt, the guilt of each member in the crowd. Both things are essential.

Girard: Yes. Both things are essential. The essence of the crowd is that the individual hides within the crowd, and all can say that no one is responsible for the death of the victim.

Burton: Some time ago, I watched a report on TV of an execution in Texas. Outside the jail, a big group of people gathered. At the moment he was killed, they started blowing party horns and put on party hats. As I watched that, I thought of your theory. It seemed like classic scapegoating.

Girard: It is classic scapegoating, and there was a time when it

existed everywhere. Executions were supposed to be public, you know, in the old regime. As the tendency grows to suppress capital punishment, it becomes private, done in the jail. But if you don't dare show it to people, why do you have a right to do it at all? What is the state if not the union of all the people? Therefore, the public nature of capital punishment was essential to its effect. As this begins to disappear, you can be pretty sure that capital punishment itself is not going to last very long. This is the normal evolution of our world.

* * *

Stirling: Is it fundamental to your way of seeing things to consider God as non-violent, as not a killer of human beings?

Girard: Yes, it is fundamental, but that doesn't mean that I have an explanation for the fact that we live in a dangerous world, full of volcanoes and hurricanes.

Burton: Would any elements of your theory respond to the criticism of Christianity that a truly good and powerful God would not allow so much suffering?

Girard: If God had created man as happy and peaceful as cows in a nice meadow, there would be no point to the creation. In a way, suffering is part of education, but that is all we can say. We see it at only the human level. If you want to educate yourself, you have to suffer. It is more difficult than playing cards all day long. This explanation is imperfect and incomplete and doesn't help much. Christianity is a religion which demands faith, and faith makes sense precisely because we don't have all the pieces for understanding. Otherwise, it is not faith. It is the same thing as driving on the right side of the road—because everybody does that. If you don't do it, the consequences will be bad. Whichever way you look at it you have mysteries, which are unfathomable because we are just not good enough, not holy enough to understand all the points, all the reason for creation.

Stirling: I think we are all in agreement that we don't know all the answers. Do you believe that here, in this earth life, God has ever killed anyone or has sent somebody else to kill for Him?

Girard: Our period of time is especially sensitive to the violence of God because it is so much against violence. It is now politically correct to believe in a non-violent God and to justify rejec-

tion of the biblical God because of His supposed violence. It is a problem that made no sense in earlier times, and so why does it make sense to us? I would like to believe that it is a sign of progress towards real Christianity. It is a result of the biblical revelation.

Stirling: Your theory of human culture teaches that the concept of a violent God arose when the crowd was obliterating a victim. Humans have projected their violence onto other humans and eventually onto their victims whom they deified. So the idea of a violent God stems from that phenomenon, and the idea of a non-violent God stems from the cross. Were God to resort to the expedient use of violence, it would cancel the message of the cross. I have been pretty well convinced by the things I learned from you that God does not kill nor does He send other humans to kill other humans in His name.

Girard: The way you've stated it is a very good way to explain it to people, because many are scandalized by the idea of a violent God.

Stirling: Well, let me ask a follow-up question. Was Jesus's cleansing of the temple a violent act? He upset the tables and drove out the money changers. The account in John says Jesus made a whip of cords (absent in the synoptic Gospels), although a close reading suggests he used it to drive out the cattle and the sheep that were to be used for sacrificial purposes.

Girard: But it doesn't say that He actually used violence.

Stirling: It doesn't say that He used His fists or killed anyone.

Girard: And so, what is your question?

Stirling: My question is this: People will correctly perceive that you are teaching that God is not violent, based on the revelation of the cross. Then they will say, "But right here in the New Testament, Jesus is being violent; therefore, your conclusions are invalid."

Girard: Yes. So what do you answer to that problem?

Stirling: Well, if I recall correctly, you have said that a true peace can never be built upon a lie; it must be built upon the truth. Cleansing the temple represented one of Jesus's last chances to express the truth publicly. Shutting down the sacrificial ritual in the temple was a prophetic, symbolic act, demonstrating that the temple of the old archaic religion—the center of sacred violence—would not lead to salvation. It had to be de-

stroyed or transformed. It was one of His only ways to express that truth at that time in his culture. It certainly didn't involve killing anyone and probably didn't involve a fist fight either. It was an attempt by a non-violent God to express the truth that was being driven out by a violent world.

Girard: Sure. The scandalous aspect is that it was done in the name of religion, you know.

Stirling: The driving out of Jesus, you mean?

Girard: Yes.

Burton: On that point, you have said, "The [g]ospel does not provide [a] happy ending to our history" [*Evolution and Conversion*, 213].

Girard: The gospel simply shows us two options, which is exactly what ideologies never provide. Either we imitate Christ, or we run the risk of self-destruction.

Stirling: That is the gospel's message.

Girard: We are in a world that is very different than what it was before. In our lifetime, people have become concerned with the livability of our planet and with the issue of humanity destroying itself. Justifiably so. First they were concerned only with war. Today, they are concerned with both war and environment. Even if there is no war, it is quite possible that the atmosphere could become unbreathable. And the interesting thing is, why is this apocalyptic ending found in the Gospels? It is our fault. There is nothing divine about the violence of the apocalypse. God permits it, but it is a consequence of human behavior. The apocalyptic texts should be studied rationally, not merely by people who dream of not being "left behind."

* * *

Stirling: Some Christians do see the second coming as a time when Jesus is going to come down and finish off all the bad guys—

Girard: Yes, but Jesus doesn't need to finish off all the bad guys. They finish each other off. Today, what should be emphasized is that we are already verifying aspects of the gospel that seem completely mad, aspects that have played a great role in the gospel's rejection by modern rationality. However, modern rationality is beginning to perceive that it carries within itself the seeds of destroying our environment. And if you look at the apocalyptic texts of the

Bible, they never tell you that God is violent or that the apocalypse is quick. These texts are very profound, much more pertinent to our condition than people have realized. I find it amazing that rational churches, which do not try to terrify people, do not focus on this aspect.

Then there is another thing about the apocalyptic texts. People conclude that they are irrational because they mix up natural phenomena like storm and tsunamis with the human capacity for destruction. So they seem totally anti-scientific. Science, fundamentally, has been separating the results of human culture from nature and understanding them both separately. But if today there is a new hurricane in New Orleans, we don't know if human beings are partly responsible or whether it is nature alone. Human culture affects nature. There should be a rational investigation of this relationship. That is a book I would like to write. The apocalyptic texts are not anti-scientific. The distinction between nature and culture is beginning to erode. That is tremendously important for me.

Burton: So you would be hesitant to read the book of Revelation or other apocalyptic texts and see a violent, vengeful God in human history?

Girard: That is right. I think that the apocalyptic texts of the Gospels are extremely important for our time. I would like to write a book specifically on them. John's Revelation is a narrative—very different, I think, from the synoptic Gospels, which never mention God as an agent of violence in the apocalyptic passages. The apocalypse is becoming true, and its rationality should be more emphasized in relationship to its text. I think this is an important subject from an apologetic viewpoint, too, that is avoided today.

Stirling: In *Evolution and Conversion* (224), you said the cross is a scandal because we do not understand a violent God who suffers his prosecutors humbly.

Girard: His *persecutors* humbly. . .

Stirling: So the cross is scandalous to us because naturally we do not know what to think about a God who would not retaliate and achieve a glorious victory.

Girard: Yes, when we choose a leader, we want him to fight back.

Stirling: Yes. So here is the problem. Jesus *did* suffer His persecutors humbly during His mortal ministry. If, then, we saw Him at His second coming violently destroying the wicked, would He not seem to be an opposite kind of God?

Girard: And, in a way, a cancellation of what the cross tells us.

Stirling: Exactly.

Girard: Yes, that is a very good argument. I think it should be there. There is a difficulty with the Christians themselves to assimilate fully the nature of the cross and the refusal to see its implications. It is becoming more apparent that we are responsible if something happens to the marvelous place that God has given us. It is ours. Of course, he could intervene to stop it, but in a way it would cancel the lesson.

Stirling: It would also cancel human choice.

Girard: . . . and turn us into zoo animals.

Stirling: Exactly. In Mormon theology, we all existed before we came to earth and we chose to come here, knowing what it was like. We came to learn. The learning is critically important, as is our freedom to choose.

Girard: So, freedom is greatly emphasized.

Stirling: And responsibility.

Girard: And responsibility, sure. Even the history of the Mormons gives you a theme that illustrates this aspect. This theme is a bit lacking for established Christians, you might say. They settle in Rome or in Constantinople, or wherever and they don't move from there.

Burton: The mimetic crisis erases all difference. Right? Makes people alike, creates doubles, they all become one in their anger and their hostility toward that scapegoat, so why is there no crisis now?

Girard: But there *are* crises. There is a latent crisis, of course, but we are ashamed of solving it with a scapegoat in the classic manner. Instead of going all the way to the scapegoat mechanism, we hesitate because we are "too Christian." We are not Christian enough to be fully Christian, but we are Christian enough to be ashamed and therefore resort less efficiently to the mechanism. Or suddenly there occurs a regression. The twentieth century was a period of great regression because of Marxism and Nazism. These were obviously scapegoat systems, which were very power-

ful since they convinced hundreds of millions. If you look at today's elections, there is always a little scapegoating, but it is nothing compared to the past. So, contrary to what many people say, mimetic theory is not a pessimistic theory. Today we are in a very dangerous world, which we can destroy at any time. And if we don't, it is simply because we know enough to understand that we ourselves will be the victims.

In the Catholic liturgical year, after Pentecost and just before the beginning of the new year comes Advent, when the priest would give his homily based on the apocalyptic texts. I still remember these sermons from when I was a child; but with the invention of the atom bomb, the apocalyptic homilies stopped. This is fascinating. They were afraid of scaring people.

Stirling: So, they dropped it from the liturgy?

Girard: They didn't drop it from the liturgy—that they wouldn't do—but from the sermons. But we really are moving inexorably toward the end of the world. We should be aware of it and work to postpone it.

Burton: So you think we ought to be talking about the apocalyptic texts more?

Girard: They have never been so relevant, and yet we ignore them. For some churches, which are very excited about the end times, these texts are always relevant. But for the bourgeois churches, I have not heard one sermon about the apocalyptic texts since the invention of the atom bomb.

Stirling: Do you believe that God is calling us to somehow evolve so that we give up all violence?

Girard: Yes, He allowed us to play our game and it is coming back against us now.

Burton: Are you hopeful?

Girard: I am hopeful because I am a Christian. However, I would like to write a book on apocalyptic texts and show that they are true. It cannot be mere chance that suddenly we find ourselves in a situation where we threaten our own survival, all described in advance by the biblical texts.

Stirling: Although you so clearly value the revelation contained in the Bible, many Christians who are anchored in the Bible are frightened by your approach to it. Your approach sees

many biblical texts as being influenced to some extent by the mythology of the violent sacred, rather than being purely the product of infallible inspiration.

Girard: You mean that I put the Bible in a historical context as I did for the sacrifice of Isaac?

Stirling: Yes. For example, let's take the stoning of Achan (Josh. 7). The literal interpretation is that this one evil man was responsible for Israel's defeat and God wanted him to be executed by stoning. Your theory would ask us to read that story in a different way, suspecting a crowd phenomenon with elements of ritualized scapegoating. Many people are uncomfortable with taking that kind of liberty with the biblical text.

Girard: The Bible is so rich and so powerful and so inspired, yet at the same time, it is a human book. You pose a very important question, because it is the relationship between modern science and faith. My basic point is that they don't have to be enemies. When modern science becomes anti-religious, it goes beyond its own possibilities. It is wrong to see religion as something so fantastic that it cannot be studied rationally and must be discarded. However, the opposite is wrong, too. To dismiss modern science as something which doesn't contain many truths and achieves much good (as well as bad) is obviously wrong.

Stirling: Some people feel that they cannot have a Bible which is not wholly a divine product and still have confidence in it. That is the problem.

Girard: The Bible, even if you believe it is divinely inspired, is transmitted by human beings who are extremely fallible. We can accept forms of criticism. I value the insights of scholars. Many people who work on the Bible in a scientific way are believers, but they are not literalists.

Burton: I appreciate your example of faith. Your scholarship is a great example of faith.

Girard: Faith is faith, and there are variations in faith. There are days when I believe more than others. I am just like everybody else, you know; I am not a saint.

Stirling: We have heard differently, frankly. I am personally grateful for your theory and how it has helped me to understand myself, human society, and God better.