

Hans-Martin Gutmann

Germany, 1998

## The contagious effect of violence, the “making sacred” of the victim, and the enlightening power of the Gospel

### Aspects of the theory of René Girard

topics:

- the theory of Rene Girard
- desire and “mimesis” as a source for violence
- scapegoating in societies
- the meaning of sacrifice

source: *Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling* No 4, 1998; pp 13-19

#### 0. Scenes

##### 0.1.

A metropolis in Eastern Germany. The unemployment rate is high, especially among the younger people. There is a continuous lack of apprenticeships and job possibilities. Many of the young people are without a clear perspective in life. It is night time: A group of drunken skin heads is romping around town when they come across a homeless person who is sleeping on a park bench. Bruises cover his face and legs. Maybe he is an alcoholic. The youths start hitting him with their baseball bats and, when he finally lies on the floor, kicking him with their heavy army boots. After a while they leave him behind, badly hurt.

##### 0.2.

A group of teachers from Hessa/Germany is participating in a training seminar that deals with “Horror-videos and their impact on children and young adults”.<sup>1</sup> They watch the movie “Class of 1984”. The discussion that follows goes as follows: One of the teachers had told the class he was teaching as a substitute, that their regular teacher is pregnant. He is unwilling to understand why the principal reprimanded him for doing so; another teacher is trying to find out which one of her students is making obscene phone calls to her for the last three years; yet another teacher is scolded by her colleagues for leaving around an address book that contained the other teachers’ private numbers...

0.3.

There is a war breaking out on German highways. Each and every driver can attest to that from his/her own experience. Car racing seems contagious, and when I am being hustled by a speeding driver, using his headlights to further harass me, I have to stifle the strong urge not to enter his game and to “simply hit back”. Fortunately, my rational sense kicks in after only a few moments, and I also begin to think of the environment. However, the contagious virus of violence is clearly noticeable on our highways, especially in those who are less scrupulous and drive bigger cars. The inevitable happens – an accident occurs. In the opposite lane cars slow down, some even stop in order to catch a glimpse of the metallic and bodily remains. Almost always the traffic report registers a traffic jam on the opposite lane of the accident. Those who experienced or witnessed a traffic accident are often shaken, or at least pensive. The urge to speed is dampened – for a while. Sometimes the accident reports on the radio have a similar effect on the people. But the effect never lasts long – due to stress and the low threshold of control, the speeding starts again soon – until we are dealing with the next fatality.

0.4.

In recent times one can find more and more proofs for the fact that the war in Ex-Yugoslavia was intended and the plot of selected political groups. However, the dynamic of the war, the unimaginable brutality and the continuous helplessness of the liberating forces indicate that a special kind of power was set free. A power that strongly differs from the intended plans of the war mongers, and that is difficult to understand even by them. It may be that the now deconstructed, multinational, post-socialist countries have developed a dynamic that works opposite to what Norbert Elias describes in his “The Process of Civilisation”.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that once the core of the political power has been destroyed, psychological forces are being set free. Forces that thus far have helped the “civilised” citizen to contain his or her emotions and to keep them from erupting. Now all hell breaks loose. Violence spreads like a disease – ecstatic, uncontrolled, unlimited.

Sometimes I have a gruesome vision: the dead body of a man, thrown over the barricades in Sarajevo. He is the victim of one of the last terrorist attacks of the Bosnian-Serbian groups. His body hit the bullet in such a way that through the hole in his stomach one can see the other side of the street. For me this body incorporates the thousands of faceless victims of the Serbian massacre that happened only a few weeks earlier in the UN protected territory of Srebrenica. Could this be an act of violence so powerful, that it indeed satisfied and pacified other forces of violence?

How can we understand these scenes of violence. Do they possibly follow a logic, that can be reconstructed and thus help to interrupt the circle of violence? It is with this understanding that I read the texts of R. Girard. And I feel the challenge to try and give an explanation for the different phenomena of violence – as diverse as they may be.

## 1. Outline of the theory of René Girard: material theory and / or hermeneutic concept

### 1.1.

René Girard examines the connection between “violence” and its “victims”, or rather its “sacrifices”.<sup>3</sup> The sacrifice has the ability to ban violence in that it fits into the existing mechanisms of violence: Violence spreads through “mimesis”. Girard considers it a fundamental anthropological principal that “the desire” or rather “the wish” are originally connected with the phenomenon of violence. This idea derives from Freud’s theory of the Oedipus-myth. But for Girard it serves as the concrete example of a general matter. His original thought is the insight that the human “desire” or “wish” is not a natural phenomenon, rather the human learns to desire by way of examples and idols. He or she learns to wish by way of imitating the wish of the idol. And the wish, as well as the sexual desire do not stem from a sexual drive, but from a mimetic mechanism. The child wants to love his mother and ends up killing the father who seems to compete for the mother’s love. All the while he is learning the desire for the mother by way of his father’s example. There exists no wish without simultaneously entering into a competition with the other wishing person, who has demonstrated the act of wishing first, and who initially pointed to the object of our wishes. Later we are not so much concerned about the object of our wishes as about the competition. The mimetic mechanism shifts to the person who desires the same. The result is violence spreading in a mimetic fashion – like an infectious disease.

Desire and violence, both occur at the same biographical point in time. Moreover, in each moment of crisis, the young adult feels the need to reactivate this deathly connection. Thus, violence becomes boundless – flooding everything. Once violence established itself in a society, it cannot be stopped, rather it continues to demolish the original order of the community. It is at this crucial point where we find the culturally important role of the victim: Since violence spreads by way of imitation it can also be “bound” by way of the mimesis. It can be “bound” with the help of a killing – so monstrous that it absorbs all other violence. In the place of the continuously spreading violence we find that the one terrifying murder can cause such a shock that peace may settle in. And the people now experience reconciliation like the end of a terrible and contagious disease. Naturally, they contribute this conciliatory effect to the victim. In other words: the victim is being “made sacred” (sacralised).

Girard calls this killing the “foundational murder”, since it helps to form the foundation of any given society. Sigmund Freud’s “scientific myth” of the killing of the father by the brothers<sup>4</sup> serves as an attempt to historically and mythologically construct an ever repeating, intrinsically human anthropological fact. Communal life becomes possible only through the deed of the “foundational murder”, since it stops the general killing, and pacifies the violence of the many. The ritual sacrificing is nothing less than the repetition of the “foundational murder”. As long as this ritual is being performed, and as long as it is effective in society, every day life is being protected from further violence. (Girard shows, however, that the effect of the ritual sacrificing decreases again and again). In short: the (unstable) result of the sacrifice lies in the fact that communal life is possible again – without violence.

Girard thinks that by composing all three facts (the mimetic character of desire, the pacifying effect of the “foundational murder”, and the ritual repetition of the

“foundational murder” in form of the sacrificial murder) into one theory, he may be able to explain the “hominising” of the human being. Here he is referring to an absolute theory, that contains ethological, ethnological and sociological interpretations as well as theology.

This is the one side of Girard’s theory. Let me soon explain the other side. But to summarise first: the hominising of the human being is the result of the human ability, to ‘make sacred’ the ‘victim’ of the foundational murder, that is to say, to ascribe a certain efficiency to the slaughtered person for pacifying the society; and also, in the follow up, to ascribe the same efficiency to all the next ‘victims’ ritually representing the foundational murder again and again. While we also find mimetic behaviour, i.e. desire and competition in the animal world, it is only through the ritualisation of the sacrifice – by way of the “foundational murder” – that the human being differs from the animal. Both, the process of “hominising”, as well as the process of humanising, that goes along with every cultural development, can be described as the final achievement of the sacrifice.

## 1.2.

Along with the above mentioned theory, Girard works with a second theory, for which he does not claim absolute validity. He developed a hermeneutic concept, which allows the reader to “decipher” certain “texts of persecution”, as well as “myths” of the Ancient European world and archaic societies in general. In doing so he operates with the help of a so called “Hermeneutic of Suspicion”. With this Girard intends to prove that – although the motifs and the actions of the persecutors might be hidden – it is a fact, that the deed itself, i.e. the killing of the victims is very apparent and real.<sup>5</sup> In talking about “texts of persecution” Girard is thereby referring to those stories where certain people, like the Jews, the witches or the gypsies are blamed for a crisis situation, such as pestilence, famine or war. Thus, it is secretly expected that the termination of the “guilty party” will ultimately result in the termination of the crisis itself. It is Girard’s goal to prove that these texts always refer (and here he is quite absolute in his approach) to real crises and real sacrifices (or rather, violence, killings, pogroms) – despite the fact that the dreadful actions of the victims are apparently very unreal (such as the poisoning of wells, black magic, or the misuse of economic and political power).

In order to stress this point, I’d like to quote Girard’s interpretation of the works of the 14th century French poet Guillaume de Machaut. Girard summarises his poem “Le Jugement du Roy de Navarre” as follows: The poem describes a wealth of dreadful events, all of which involve Guillaume, who finally – out of fear – locks himself in the house. While some events seem more real than others, the whole story leaves the impression that something crucial must have happened. Signs appear on the sky. It is raining stones, and people are being killed. Entire cities are being destroyed by thunder and lightning. In the unnamed city where Guillaume lives many people die, and some of their deaths are contributed to the malice of the Jews and their Christian allies. What did these people do, that the population has to suffer so severely? They have poisoned rivers and wells! Heavenly justice is terminating these evil deeds by revealing the culprits. In the end all of them are slaughtered. But still, the dying does not stop. More and more people die; until one day in the spring Guillaume finally hears the music in the streets and the laughter of the men and women. The nightmare has ended, and the court poets can take up poetry again.<sup>6</sup>

Girard is a modern interpreter and hermeneutic scholar. He shares the modern insight that one cannot easily believe the old texts or their authors who often were without a clear understanding or hermeneutic knowledge. Still, he is of the opinion that Guillaume did not simply “invent all of this”. And after applying his “Hermeneutic of Suspicion” he writes: “The many deaths that Guillaume mentioned were a reality, caused by the famous Black Death that devastated the North of France in 1349 and 1350. Furthermore one must say that the slaughtering of the Jews is a sad reality – due to the many rumours about the poisoning of wells. Thus, the spreading disease had enough power to cause the massacre.”<sup>7</sup>

Girard detects a structure in the scheme of the above mentioned “stories of persecution”, that may have the potential to reveal the true, historic course of certain crisis situation and its “solution”:

a) In the beginning one finds evidence of a social crisis, triggering the mechanism of violence. This can be described as a crisis of “de-differentiation”; i.e. any difference between the people, be it due to hierarchy, gender, or individuality, is now blurred. The epidemic, for example, hits everybody, regardless of their background and thus serves as a form of “de-differentiation”. All humans become equal – in a deathly way. Moreover, there exist no boundaries anymore, that could break up the mimetic competition between the rivals.

b) The people start looking for culprits – and find scapegoats. In a situation of collective persecution similar accusations are used on a regular basis, following an almost identical pattern for example in violent crimes that are especially reprehensible (e.g. violence against the king, the father, or against the weakest members of the families, such as the children, widows and orphans); sexual crimes and those that violate a sexual taboo or religious crimes. Girard interprets them as an attack against those fundamental cultural paradigms, through which a society is able to establish its differentiation. Furthermore one can find a pattern in the choice of victims: Those who serve as scapegoats, typically are outcasts, and thus are suspected to demoralise the social order (such were the attacks against the Jews); people who bear certain physical marks (e.g. physical disabilities).

(In parenthesis: With the help of Girard I now see an important correction to common explanations of violence, such as xenophobia. Violence does not occur between the “home group” and “the others”, e.g. between Germans and foreigners, but it is found among people that are too similar, too much alike. Thus the mimetic violence is the consequence of fatal closeness, rather than insurmountable distance. Consequently, the stranger, the other, the distant one, who bears similarities to the phenomenon of “de-differentiation”, is chosen to become the scapegoat for all ongoing violence.)

c) The scapegoats finally become the victims of murder, massacres or pogroms. And in the eyes of society this is the moment in time when the instigators of violence are rightfully convicted, so that peace and reconciliation have a new chance. While in some incidents this experience is closely connected with the termination of a massacre, at other times the pacifying effect may occur at a later moment. Almost always the “liberated” members of society are of the opinion that the scapegoats were truly “guilty”, and thus responsible for being sacrificed. It is this shared opinion which largely contributes to the pacifying effect of the pogrom itself.

In later works Girard suggests to closely look at late (medieval) texts of persecution, as well as the mythical stories of the ancient European and non European world. Although he largely identifies the same scheme in terms of violence and its pacification in those texts, he emphasises the following modification: While the texts of persecution view the victims as guilty, the mythical texts treat them as sacred. Time and again Girard points out how the fact that the victims are being made sacred (are 'sacralised') is central to any mythical text. Furthermore, in its ambivalence the myth incorporates what R. Otto has labelled the "fascinatum et tremendum" (the fascinating and the frightening).

Once you go along with this, then you can (seen from the point of view of Girard) interpret any myth similar to the texts of persecution (which are historically seen younger texts), moreover one could say: the texts of persecution can be understood as being already 'partly-demythologised myths', in that the 'victims' don't have an ascribed character of being made sacred any more, but in that they just only show the dark side of the ambivalence. And vice versa: one can 'decipher' any myth by using the interpretational insights gained from the interpretation of the texts of persecution: one can easily see the link between the "sacred victims" of the ancient myths and the existence of social crises and their solution by way of a pogrom.

Girard states the example of Sophocles' "King Oedipus" that is central to Freud's concept of psychoanalysis. He attempts a reconstruction of the myth: "The pestilence has hit Theben. It is the first sign, or rather the first stereotype of persecution. Oedipus who is responsible for the misery of Theben – since he killed his father and married his mother – represents the second stereotype. According to the oracle, the culprit has to be driven from the city, in order to terminate the epidemic. Persecution is imminent and explicit. The killing of the father and the resulting incest are the ultimate link between the individual and society. These crimes have the effect of "de-differentiation", in the sense that they are contagious and will effect the whole of society. ... Third stereotype: the sacrificial sign. ... The more signs a victim bears, the more he or she will draw termination upon him- or herself. Because of his disability, his past as an abandoned child and his situation as a foreigner, as parvenu and then as king, Oedipus bears an abundance of sacrificial signs." <sup>8</sup>

If one decides to read this text as a historic text, rather than as a myth, it would be easier to break its magic spell. As a myth, however, it bears the signs of the holy, and it is almost not plausible to interpret it as the proclamation of a violent crisis and persecution. Thus, in order to unveil the "aura of the holy", Girard puts the story in a historic context which reads like this: "The harvest is bad, the cows do not bear calves, the people are hostile with one another. It seems as if the village is under a bewitched spell. Obviously, the cripple has caused all this, when he appeared out of nowhere and made himself at home, as if he belonged to us. He dared to marry the much desired heir of the city, and had two children with her. There seems to be foul play involved, since the first husband of his wife – a potent person in the city council – suddenly disappeared under very mysterious circumstances. The newcomer takes his place in both, the city and the home. One day the men of the city had enough. They take their pitchforks and force him out of the city." And Girard continues: "Nobody ever has any doubts. Every reader instinctively goes along with my intended interpretation and understands that the victim most likely did not harm anybody. Nevertheless, he was almost predestined to serve as the outlet of fear and aggression. ... Nothing has changed. We are still dealing with a mythical structure – although grossly exaggerated." <sup>9</sup>

1.3.

I want to conclude this part with a remark concerning Girard's theoretical construction. In reading his works I realized how central the works of Freud are for him. For example, Girard feels inclined to deepen the Freudian interpretation of Oedipus. Based on this, he tries to understand the construction of myths in general. He also strives to deepen and to generalise Freud's fundamental theories of psychoanalysis. Furthermore, the re-reading of certain ethnological and psychoanalytical texts is of great importance to Girard (e.g. J.G. Frazer, W. Robertson-Smith, M. Mauss and others). Freud's interpretation of contemporary literature prepared the ground for Girard's re-reading of certain texts. In addition, other texts proved to be of great importance to him as well. For example, he describes Shakespeare as being fundamental to his theoretical work: "The bible of my mimetic theory is of course 'Troy and Cressida'. But I first discovered Shakespeare through his 'Midsummer night's Dream' Speaking from a literary standpoint, this discovery probably is the most beautiful memory of my life. ... I had already developed the theory of mimetic desire, when all of a sudden I discovered it in its most complete form in the works of Shakespeare..."<sup>10</sup>

However, even a careful and precise reading will not reveal how extensive the relationship might be, between Girard's hermeneutic journey through the literary world and his claim to introduce a "theory of the human race" which he considers to be absolute and complete: Girard believes that the "hominising" of the human being is closely connected with the act of "sacralising" the victim – by way of a foundational murder and its ritual repetition in other sacrifices.

As clear as his hermeneutic search seems to me, as confusing I consider his material theory. Among other points, I mainly struggle with the following problem: Can one really explain Girard's theory of the mimetic desire/violence (also described as "evil" or "bad reciprocity") in light of the typical reciprocity of the ancient societies? – A reciprocity that is not violent and destructive, but highly productive.

Marcel Mauss' revolutionary study *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*<sup>11</sup> helps to understand reciprocity as the expression of a certain kind of economic formation. Mauss describes the system of exchanging goods as controlling the exchange within the social nexus of an ancient society, as well as the exchange between the human and his or her ancestors, their gods, or their natural environment. The exchange of goods thus implies a wealth of duties, which would have to be observed by all members of society – unless they were willing to risk their "social death". He refers to the obligation to give, to take, and to give again. Mauss defines the exchanging of goods as a "total institution", operating on several levels:

The exchange of goods is not bound to economic exchanges only, but it also follows juridical, religious and aesthetic rules.<sup>12</sup> It involves living people, as well as their dead, their ancestors, their gods and nature in general.<sup>13</sup>

The goods are not specific in character. Rather, they may represent the wealth of existence (clay shards may represent sexually mature women, etc.) Consequently the exchange enables a relationship between almost anything. Without the use of a third force (i.e. money) the symbolic relationship between all things is unveiled. An order of "symbolic exchange" is being created.<sup>14</sup> No abstract goods are being exchanged, but goods that are inhabited by a spirit which in turn binds all participants through their sense of obligation for one another.

It was Maurice Godelier who further clarified Mauss' theory by pointing out that a 'hostile' form of exchange (where the participants try to compete with one another) is almost unknown in ancient societies.<sup>15</sup> It is significant that these societies relied heavily on the ethos of co-operation when it comes to reproducing natural resources. As a result, they almost always had to reproduce the living conditions of the community – a fact which is completely different in modern day economy.<sup>16</sup> This insight into other ethnological theories taught me the following: Reciprocity in ancient societies is not at all synonymous with the expansion of violence.

Could Girard have incorporated this notion of reciprocity in his theory? Maybe the notion of the "good" reciprocity? While I believe this notion were a sensible addition to his theory, it would also seriously question his claim of having developed an "absolute theory".

The next paragraph will further enlighten the unsolvable problem of "bad reciprocity" and violence, and "good reciprocity" and mutual obligation.

## 2. Girard's interpretation of the person and the meaning of Jesus

Unlike his theoretical book *The Sacred and Violence*, Girard's *The End of Violence*<sup>17</sup> became popular very quickly. Since then the person of Jesus Christ represents a central part of Girard's thinking.

At first glance it is remarkable how easily Girard can shrug off all research of the historical exegesis. It does not interest him, and thus, he simply ignores it. While this does not disqualify him as a Biblical scholar I feel inclined to mention it, since it reveals the characteristics of his exegesis. Girard does not read Biblical texts in light of their origin, their author or their "*Sitz im Leben*", instead he concentrates exclusively on the problem of violence and its victims. That is, he looks at how the fundamental thesis of the mimetic desire/violence presents itself.

### 2.1.

Girard is clearly not concerned to separate the NT from the Hebrew Bible, in order to set Jesus against the Jewish tradition and the "Scriptures". One would immediately fail to understand his intention if one assumed that he juxtaposes the good God of reconciliation with the evil God of creation (as Marcion did it). For Girard Jesus stands in line with the whole of the Bible. In the Bible the victim is not being made sacred – a fact that is central for the Biblical perception of mimetic desire/violence. Unlike the mythical stories, the Bible does not consider the victim an ambivalent entity. While for the former the victim is guilty and sacred at the same time, the latter's message is that the victim is innocent – it should not be mystified. Murderous deeds and killers are never justified. This is the gospel.

### 2.2.

Using the example of various texts of the Hebrew Bible Girard explains the difference between the mythical and the Biblical texts: For example, while Gen 4 (the story of Cain and Abel) represents the classical "foundational murder" (*Gründungsmord*), there is one fundamental difference to the mythical Roman story of the killing brother Romulus (cf. the story of Romulus and Remus). Girard writes: "Romulus as a person and his killing of Remus seems unfortunate – but nevertheless justified because of the victim's evil deeds. Romulus embodies the



sacrificing High Priest. In the story of Cain and Abel however, Cain is being made an unscrupulous murderer – although God felt inclined to listen to him. And even the fact, that the first murder that ever occurred in the history of humankind had the tendency to foster our cultural development, does not imply a justification of the killer...”<sup>18</sup>

In examining the story of Joseph and his brothers, Girard further develops this insight. Whereas in the story of Cain the collective aspect of the persecution is still hidden – here we find it clear and unveiled in the case of Joseph. He, the victim is being rehabilitated – at the expense of his brothers (and don't we feel some sympathy for them, when we think of what a “big mouth” Joseph was?). The prophets of Israel define the political crisis (i.e. the threat of siege by the surrounding forces) as characteristic for another, a deeper religious and cultural crisis: The “exhaustion” of the sacrificial system, the highly problematic phasing out of the current order. Girard pushes this further, when he looks at Isaiah 53, where God's servant is bearing all the signs of a human scapegoat (i.e. being a foreigner, ill, ugly and despicable). While he and his fate resemble the Greek “pharmakos”, he is not a ritual sacrifice, but rather a historic event. It is not God who strikes out at this servant, but it is the people who bear the responsibility for his salutary death (Jes 53:4-5). Girard concludes: “In the whole of the OT we find exegetical insights that are contrary to the common cultural myths.”<sup>19</sup> Not through modern, existential exegesis texts are being demythologised; rather we learn that the Biblical text itself demythologised the myth of the victim, and his/her being made sacred.

In looking further, we find that this notion continues in the NT. The example of the murder of John the Baptist may serve as an example (Mark 6:14f).<sup>20</sup> The prophet warns King Herod, who won over his brother's wife, thereby representing the typical pattern of mimetic desire. With the exception of the prophet the text is exclusively dealing with “mimetic twins”, such as mother and daughter, Herod and his brother, Herod and Herodias. Girard points out, that “it is John the Baptist's warning of these kind of people that – although seemingly insignificant at first – ultimately leads to the killing of the prophet.”<sup>21</sup> And it is the banquet and Salome's dance that accelerated the mimetic process. Her wish, to have John's head on a platter, clearly represents the mimetic desire. And although the story has quite a sacred meaning (i.e. it is being set within the context of the King's birthday), the victim – John the Baptist – is not being made sacred. Instead his killing is being understood as a murder. In a sense, the sacred ritual is being perverted, in that the murderous origin of the sacrifice is finally being unveiled. Thus, the text discloses the mimetic mechanism. It unveils, and thus disrupts the effect of mimetic desire.

Girard's interpretation of this text intends to serve as an example of other NT texts that demythologise the myths of the sacrifice (cf. Mark 14:66-72; Mark 5:1-17; and Acts 7:51-58). All these texts deal with the phenomenon of the “foundational murder” (*Gründungsmord*) and its effect, thus de-masking the myth of the sacrifice. Reconciliation is possible through other means than by sanctifying violence.

### 2.3.

Girard points out how the victim is innocent. For him this insight marks the gospel of the gospels and the passion of Jesus. The story of the suffering of Christ reproduces almost all rituals and myths: Jesus is the innocent victim of a community in crisis. His death unites the community – at least for a little while – since all

the individuals and all groups that were involved in the life of Jesus give their explicit consent to his death at the height of the dramatic events.<sup>22</sup> ... Thus, on the one hand, the crucifixion is the result of a legalised proceeding (i.e. a law suit). On the other hand, it represents the zenith of spontaneous violence, thereby resembling not so much a ritual sacrifice, but the fundamental event of the “foundational murder” (*Gründungsmord*). ... However, in order to have an effect as a sacrificial myth, the victim would have to be guilty and the members of the community would have to be relieved from guilt. Girard points out, that “it is rather the opposite: the passion of Jesus is being described as a deed of flaming injustice. ... Instead of supporting the collective murder, the text clearly points to the ones who are truly responsible.”<sup>23</sup> The gospel exposes the myth of the holy sacrifice as a simple lie. The victim is innocent... And God is being described as a God removed from all violence: “Whereas in the OT we still find traces of God’s revengeful, violent deeds, the most important parts of the synoptic gospels deny the fact that God has any of these characteristics.”<sup>24</sup> However, the NT does not at all talk about an indifferent God, rather it reveals a God who wants to be known, who wants to reach the people – or to say it in Jesus’ words: “reconciliation not by way of sacrifice; rather reconciliation that would allow God to reveal himself – for the first time in the history of humankind – as the God he really is. Harmony between the people would not have to be established by means of bloody sacrifices. ... After all, there exists a radical incompatibility between the God of the gospels and the gods who are satisfied by sacrifices only (*Opfergottheiten*).”<sup>25</sup>

For Girard the renewed sacralisation of Jesus’ death on the cross, that has its origin already in some texts of the NT (such as Rom 3:25ff; 1 Cor 15:3; Hebrews), represents a “betrayal” of the gospel. However, those texts would never go so far as to follow the patterns of the ancient sacrificial myths. Even in Hebrews Jesus is considered to be without sin. The victim is innocent. And even in medieval theologies (e.g. *Cur Deus Homo* by Anselm of Canterbury) this central part of the gospels is not betrayed. However, it is true that the message of Hebrews (i.e. the fact that the self-sacrifice of the high priest Jesus, is the ultimate, the final and the forever lasting sacrifice) has in the past served as a justification for all crusades and massacres against those people who refused to accept it.

### 3. Critique

In my critique of Girard’s theory I would like to refer to the above mentioned concept of “good reciprocity”, and Girard’s lack of incorporating it in his work.

#### 3.1.

It should be asked whether Girard’s partial “blind eye” *vis a vis* today’s economic sacrifices (This question has been discussed in detail among Girard and supporters of the Latin American Liberation Theology. The discussion was recently published as a book.)<sup>26</sup> ... is due to the fact that in his fundamental theory he already considers the “evil” reciprocity as an absolute fact, and thus, does not feel the need to address the notion of the “good” reciprocity anymore (i.e. the responsible integration of the human in his/her social order and natural environment). If one, however, interprets the sacrificial act as part of the operation of exchanging goods, and not as the consequence of ongoing violence, the paradigm shifts in a more or less radical way: One ultimately would have to critically examine the economic problem. Developing a solidarity with those people that are exploited

and mistreated by the world economy. Furthermore, the notion of solidarity would not arise as an ethical consequence, but would be part of the intrinsic way of thinking that should be fundamental to Christian existence today.

### 3.2.

In this light one could also put into perspective the partial intellectual violence with which Girard ignores the theological interpretation of Jesus' death on the cross as sacrifice. Even the most gruesome paintings of the crucifixion of Christ ... show that the Roman Catholic Church does not interpret the sacrament of the sanctification of the death of Christ as a deed of violence, but as a form of good or gift. And it is precisely in such a tradition that Martin Luther ... interprets the gospel as an economic interaction, as "an act of merry exchange and trading" that stands in opposition to the legislative texts. Luther points out that it is in the midst of this mutual exchange, Jesus – the groom – offers his justice and in turn takes on all human sins. In this light justification has to be understood from the perspective of an economic sacrifice, rather than as an act of violence.

### 3.3.

Consequently, one would have to interpret the gospel's message differently from Girard. For him Jesus only serves as the model of non-violence and the educator of the violent mechanisms. Here Girard thereby follows the interpretations of the post enlightenment. In other words, one could say that Girard's Jesus could all too easily mutate into the prototype of Bultmann's, Käsemann's and Conzelmann's research. More to the point: Jesus is threatened to become the "pilot issue" of an existential production of the self, or the product of an anti-ritualistic world order. It is easy to understand the helplessness of a merely internal faith that operates on a moral and intellectual basis – *vis a vis* the present day economic and political constellations of power, and in light of today's mimetic crises of violence (as described in the beginning of my lecture). All too often the trans-national enterprises and their economic interests have made short work of moralists. Furthermore, all attempts to terminate violent crises with the help of education and role modelling, e.g. in Ex-Yugoslavia, have failed quickly. Whoever is concerned with religious education and the processes involved, knows of the importance of rituals and myths in the life of young adults, who otherwise are not at all concerned with the anti-ritualistic introspection of today's Christianity.

### 3.4.

I still think that any kind of interpretation of Jesus' death on the cross as "good" or "gift" should be enlightened by Girard's notion of the mechanism of violence. ... Wherever Christians do not experience the gospel as a word of freedom and consolation (and – here I would like to add to Girard – wherever they do not celebrate this by way of worship services or simply in the community) they are tempted to assert their understanding against "all others". And they become slaves to what Girard describes as the "mechanism of violence".

### 3.5.

I certainly do not understand my critique as a depreciation of Girard's theory, but as a necessary supplementation. How and if one could put them in connection to his theory we might have to discuss. In any case, I hope that my critique will question the absolute claim of his theory. There is no doubt that I have always learned a great deal by reading his books. And I still think that his theory of the

mimetic desire/violence is better equipped to explain today's crises of violence, than many others. Consequently I believe that it may even serve to dis-empower them.

## References

- 1 Ch. Büttner: *Video-Horror. Schule und Gewalt*, Weinheim 1990, p. 87ff.
- 2 Cf. N. Elias: *The Civilizing Process*, New York: Urizen Books, 1978.
- 3 R. Girard: *Das Heilige und die Gewalt* (1972). Zürich 1987, p. 104ff; 211ff; 248ff. (English edition: *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press 1977.)
- 4 Cf. S. Freud: *Totem und Tabu* (1917/19), in: S. Freud: *Kulturtheoretische Schriften*, Frankfurt/M. 1986, p. 287ff.
- 5 R. Girard: *Der Sündenbock* (1982), now published as *Ausstoßung und Verfolgung. Eine historische Theorie des Sündenbocks*. Frankfurt/M. 1992.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.7f.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.8.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.40.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.47.
- 10 R. Girard: *Wenn das alles beginnt... Ein Gespräch mit Michel Treguer*, Thaur 1997, p.32.
- 11 London/New York 1989 (originally published 1925). Quotations from the German version: *Die Gabe*, 1978, p. 7ff.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 13 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 31.
- 14 Cf. J. Baudrillard: *Der symbolische Tausch und der Tod* (1976), München 1982, p. 206ff.
- 15 M. Godelier: *Natur, Arbeit, Geschichte* (1984), Hamburg 1990, p.52; 64. Cf. also the study of Helen Codere on the Indian Potlatch (*Fighting with Property*, 1950), which shows clearly that the agonistic form of this competition is only a consequence of the confrontation between the Indian culture and money economy.
- 16 Godelier, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- 17 R. Girard, *Das Ende der Gewalt* (1978). Freiburg 1982.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.150.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.161.
- 20 R. Girard, *Ausstoßung und Verfolgung* (*op. cit.*), p. 183ff.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.189.
- 22 Cf. R. Girard, *Das Ende der Gewalt* (*op. cit.*), p. 172.
- 23 *Ibid.*, S.175.
- 24 *Ibid.*, S.189.
- 25 *Ibid.*, S.191.
- 26 H. Assmann (ed.), *Götzenbilder und Opfer. René Girard im Gespräch mit der Befreiungstheologie* (1991),Münster 1996.