

Rene Girard, was a French born thinker that was born in 1923 and died in 2015.

He will I'm sure in years to come be regarded as a Doctor of the Church such is the influence of his thought in the modern world. Of course we do not have the time to dive into his thought in any great depth, this would take a significant portion of one's life time to achieve. To get a glimpse at what this man thought is to begin a process that enables you to see the world and indeed the Christian faith in a developed manner. It can begin to place us upon the right path in attempting to understand many of the profoundest matters, questions of desire, society, violence, Christ, war, love, history to name but a few.

The structure of Girard's thought can be discerned as three separate and yet sequential pillars namely: Mimetic Desire, Scapegoating and Ritual.

Let's have a quick look at the first, Mimetic Desire. Girard notes that whenever people think about desire they have in their mind something like this:

Subject -----> Object

This model illustrates how many understand desire to work. The subject (me or you) desires or longs for an object/person/reality. Girard states that this is not the case, moreover desire works more like this:

Object
↗ ↖
Subject < -----> Mediator/Other

So who is this mediator or other? Put simply Girard notes that desire is triangular or even mimetic. As basic needs are met (food and shelter etc) the desires of men and women do not cease, moreover they actually turn to mimic and imitate the desires of the community in which one lives. We can observe this on a number of levels: Children with toys, music, fashion, possessions, employment etc. It is a point that is broadly accepted by most. This mimetic quality can bring about good benefits, if there is a shared desire many people can be inspired by this collective vision and produce something astonishing. One can think here particularly of architecture and the collective efforts that have left this land spread with jewels in the form of Cathedrals and the like. However mimetic desire always leads to conflict, such crippling conflict that it is surprising that there is any society or progress at all. If an object of desire is finite or limited in anyway then the mimetic form of desire means that conflict will inevitably arise because all desire it. He writes "When we describe human relations, we usually make them better than they are: gentle, peaceful, and so forth, whereas in reality, they are often competitive". The biblical story of Cain and Abel highlight this but we see it expressed in the world: wars over resources, office arguments over promotion opportunities or the race that took place to bulk buy toilet roll and soap. Whilst some of these examples may seem trivial they are not. The competitions for resources have always been carefully managed for many of us. If we ever endured any real meaningful scarcity that many of the socialist countries have throughout this century, we notice a break down in civic order and the breakdown of the community such that no reconciliation or progress is possible. This has been evidenced across histories long line towards our

modern day. Violence it seems is endemic to the human story and above all the potency of vengeance is king. The retributive action that usually follows injustice and violence makes it impossible for peace to ever truly reign in a community, vengeance is simply too strong. An examination of the Israel and Palestinian conflict may serve our argument here.

So with a society in a Mimetic breakdown what mechanisms have humanity developed to ameliorate this impasse? This brings us to our second stage- scapegoating.

The word scapegoating first appears in Tyndale's translation of the bible. It is a biblical concept sketched out in Leviticus 16 in which the priests drive out the goats in to the wilderness having had the sins of the nation of Israel ceremoniously placed upon its head.

Many anthropologists undertook an important task in which they took all the myths and legends of the world and understood that most of them contained an identical theme. The myths all focus upon turmoil in the land, a great chaos that consumes the community. An individual is usually identified who sits on the fringes of the society upon whom the ills and vengeance of the society can be placed. Many examples can be drawn from myth throughout world history. As one that shamefully knows only the myths of the west we can think of Pandora, Romulus, Osiris, Prometheus, Orpheus and Oedipus. All these figures commit a crime and as such are killed or condemned by the society in which they live. What is critical to the selection of the scapegoat is that the individual being scapegoated or indeed their immediate followers are in no position to enact retribution for the act of being scapegoated. Victims are often poor, marginalized and on the main young. So how does this macabre and nefarious behavior manifest itself into something boundless and enduring?

Ritual is the most important and yet nuanced of the three stages. Ritual is principally concerned with the purifying and sanctifying of intrinsic violence held by the community. Whilst the myth admits that the individual being scapegoated is indeed guilty (Oedipus did, albeit unknowingly, kill his father) it also admits that the effects of the scapegoats death is that it reconciles the community. The death of the scapegoat nullifies the violence and mitigates the vengeance in that the scapegoats death cannot bring about any further retribution. This process of reflection on the murder of the scapegoat is a process in which the scapegoat is divinised. It is not the murder of the scapegoat that is necessarily important but the way that it is retold and understood. The scapegoat is interpreted as divine, he/she is both capricious and the bringer of peace and harmony. This model of divinity matches perfectly the characters of the old gods of antiquity.

The completion of this trinity was the beginning of world cultures and religions. For many Christianity is explained away by this understanding of the reality of a myth. Not so, moreover the inverse is true. "The true Resurrection is based not on the mythical lie of the guilty victim who deserves to die, but on the rectification of that lie, which comes from the true God and which reopens channels of communication mankind itself had closed through self-imprisonment in its own violent cultures". Christianity is the first time the myth undoes itself by revealing the innocence of the scapegoat. Indeed the case stated implicitly by Caiaphas in John 11.50, yet because of Christ we are removed from this process and are able to live in love. There can only be one; love or mimetic desire. Can we unshackle ourselves from mimetic desire?