

WHY DO HUMANS COMMIT VIOLENCE?

Violence, War and Rioting in the Modern World and René Girard's Mimetic Theory

JOEL HODGE

WHY DO HUMANS commit violence? Why do humans cause suffering to others? These are some of the most difficult and heart-breaking questions of human life. The power of violence and its reciprocal nature is ever-present. Take, for example, the riots in London or the trans-national tit-for-tat between the American Pastor, Terry Jones, and Afghani Muslims over the burning of the Koran. The provocative moves of the Pastor and the ferocious nature of the mob violence in Afghanistan in response were disconcerting. Similarly, the meaningless gang violence in London by young people without strong social ties and looking to acquire capitalist goods was very confronting and surprising to the West. Yet, as the renowned scholar of violence, René Girard¹, claims, we should not pinpoint this violence necessarily on any particular religion or culture. Instead, as Girard has famously argued, violence itself is religious and cultural, *i.e.*, it creates religious and cultural structures by which humans reconcile themselves to each other transcendently. Thus, the reversion to mob violence is a deeply engrained human mechanism to resolve problems and construct social identities.

Yet, why does violence occur in the quick and frightening patterns that it has appeared in, for example, the Koran-burning case or in the London riots? Girard argues that this is so because violence is *reciprocal* in nature. In other words, humans imitate each other's violence to the point of destroying each other. Humans experience an imperative to imitate

and reciprocate the violence of one's rival in order to gain identity and power. What is the root of this reciprocity in humans? According to Girard, it is rooted in the nature of human desire that he argues is *mimetic*, *i.e.*, humans desire according to the desire of another:

Professor Girard has made what he takes to be an authentic anthropological discovery (something true independently of its discoverer), to wit: that human desire is *triangular* and *mimetic*. It is mimetic in that it is to do with imitation; it is triangular in that transaction is three-cornered: the source (model) which stimulates the desire, the respondent (disciple) in whom the desire is implanted, and the thing (object) then desired (J. Alison, 'Girard's Breakthrough', *The Tablet*. 29 June 1996, p. 1).

In analyzing the major literary works of modern Western culture, Girard identified the nature of mimetic desire as a dynamic force that moves human beings into action. He sees it as good in that it enables humans to gain consciousness, form relationships, and learn language and love. Advertising is one of the most powerful exploiters of mimetic desire as it establishes trends by stimulating desire through modeling products as necessary to 'keeping up' and maintaining one's identity.

This power could even be seen in the London riots where young people just broke into shops where they knew they could acquire the capitalist goods they 'needed' to maintain their identities, often revolving around the latest technology goods and gang-related attire. Interestingly, even the gang identities of the

young people were formed and beholden to the market. Yet, because the market to which they were drawn gave no positive social ties, particularly lacking family context and supported by welfare, the young people felt able to acquire what they wanted.

Girard has effectively shown how mimetic desire is intimately connected to acquisition. For Girard, desire in its distorted form leads to acquisitiveness, rivalry and violence. Girard (1977, 145) noticed that mimetic desire became pathogenic and distorted as objects of desire become so alluring (that is, when someone else has it or the market constantly advertises a product) that it is violently grasped at and even fought over. When law or moral conscience becomes weak, the imperative of desire triumphs. Denial of the other occurs when the model becomes a rival as the subject wishes to acquire what the model desired by grasping at the object of desire. In this circumstance, the subject asserts the ownership and priority of his/her desire over the other's desire (Oughourlian, 1991, 18). At the heart of distorted human relations, then, is a grasping and possessiveness that Girard calls acquisitive desire (and which the Bible represents in such stories as the Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel narratives). This grasping desire can lead to rivalry and scandal:

As rivalry becomes acute, the rivals are more apt to forget about whatever objects are, in principle, the cause of the rivalry and instead to become more fascinated with one another. In effect the rivalry is purified of any external stake and becomes a matter of pure rivalry and prestige. Each rival becomes for his counterpart the worshipped and despised model and obstacle, the one who must be at once beaten and assimilated (Girard, 1987, 26).

Thus, once the conflict and rivalry are established, the object is usually forgotten and the rival becomes the focus of *scandal* for the subject. Girard (2001, 16) calls this state of rivalry the *skandalon*, in which the rival becomes a block to the subject's desire so that the rival takes the subject's focus, rather than



Dr Joel Hodge lectures in theology in the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy of the Melbourne Campus of the Australian Catholic University.

the original object.

For example, in the case of the Pastor and the Afghan people, the object that each desires is the honour, protection and supremacy of their tradition, and each believes that the other is an obstacle to achieving this desire. This dispute itself can be seen within the broader context of US-Islamic relations: as the traditional victor in the cycles of violence (the US) is challenged by a usurper (Islamic groups) in which both desire to possess and hold power. The Pastor's action cannot be seen in isolation, but must be placed in a context where he feels threatened religiously and culturally by the onset of Islamic claims to power and truth. As groups and traditions meet, they become aware of the relative nature of their truth claims and pretence at supremacy, which provokes the desire to achieve it as the other desires the same thing.

In a similar way, the marketplace (within a cultural setting) can become a block or scandal to desire. For example, if the market is stimulating desire through advertising and social modelling, yet does not give the means to achieve that desire, then violence can result. In the case of the London riots, certain subsections of the populace were attracted to certain products because they identified with gang models as well as the more general modelling for new technology. As social order disintegrated and the system of exchange that regulates desires and acquisition no longer could be protected by the state, young people saw their chance to acquire what they wanted in mob-like actions.

Thus, a shared desire can lead to scandal and rivalry which escalates into mob violence. Girard argues that this movement toward escalation and crisis is a perennial problem for human societies and is that which is most feared culturally, particularly by primitive societies without a complex security apparatus (as is seen in archaic myths which seek to guard against and create order out of chaos). Despite even the sophistication of the state (that gives us some sense of security), crisis and social violence can still occur, as was shown in the London riots. A point of provocation and scandal, such as the death of a young man shot by the police, can set off a mimetic cycle of violence, where violence imitates and reciprocates violence to establish the supremacy or rights of one group over another. In the case of the London riots, the state was drawn into a rivalry with some sections of its own populace as each side sought to establish its claims to justice and supremacy, particularly in the use of violence.

The nation-state, of course, must maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, and wipe out any illegitimate use, to maintain security and order. It does this through a controlled use of group violence. Yet, this controlled violence is never sustaining and permanent as it requires constant 'vigilance', that is, use of force to maintain order. Yet, as the state applies more force, the criminals or enemies of the state escalate in their use of violence (as is seen in gang warfare or even in the current war on terror).

This escalation occurs as each side provokes the other and attempts to defeat the other. For example, the Pastor burns the Koran and the Afghan mob takes vengeance, which leads the Pastor to claim he will not retract his position but perhaps even go further. As this rivalry becomes more extreme, each party becomes a scandal to the other heightening and solidifying each other's desire to the point that the object is forgotten and victory becomes the priority. The scandalous nature of the other is pathogenic to the point of in-

flicting fatal violence where the rival/victim is believed to deserve death so the subject can achieve the object of desire. The cycle of violence moves from a sole focus on the object of desire to being fuelled by the mob seeking to achieve what they supposedly didn't have: justice and retribution for wrongs and for a share in the honour and status that the other supposedly had prevented them from having.

Yet, even the nature of desire and rivalry cannot fully explain why humans embark on such fool-hardy and destructive rivalries. Ultimately, according to Girard, the subject's attempt to grasp at the other's object of desire is an effort to gain the ontological depth which the model seems to have in possessing a certain object (Girard, 1987, 296-7). For example, in the London riots, the products were attractive and taken because they gave a certain sense of identity. As one acquired them, one could feel more complete, based on the social modelling prevalent through the market, media and friendship groups. Girard (1987, 296-7) calls this 'metaphysical desire' where the radical distortion of mimetic desire from a pacific and autonomous relation with the model-other to rivalry over a common object of desire results in the denial of the other and the insistence on the priority of 'me.' In the process of building identity and being, I acquire the other's desire which I then mistakenly try to grasp because I believe I should be the only one to have it. In this grasping, there is angst and fear originating from the sense of ontological 'lack' in human being that drives the subject to assert itself and grasp at that which the other seems to possess: 'ontological density' and wholeness of being (Henri de Lubac in Bailie, 1997, 132). This lack that leads to distorted desire can be identified with what the book of Wisdom (2:24) calls 'the devil's envy'. This envy causes a vicious cycle of violence originating from the inability to acquire what the other has in order *to be* like or better than the other.

This rivalrous violence is not consistent with the inner workings of mimesis itself, but

is a distorted possibility that results from the denial of the anteriority of the other's desire (Girard, 2001, 15-16). Mimetic rivalry results from a pathological self-deception based on a false view of the self and one's desire; a self that cannot pacifically come to terms with the other *and so must assert itself over against the other*. Violent rivalry is used to fill the hole created by the human inability to pacifically come to terms with the other, resulting in a violent mechanism that builds distorted identity.²

Reconciling Human Beings: The Victim at the Heart of Human Culture

Girard (1977, 148) argues that, while mimetic rivalry gives the human a sense of identity built over against the other, rivalries aggregate in human groups and eventually result in collective violence. This collective violence, according to Girard (1977, 68-88, 1986, 12-23, 1987, 24-5, 2001, 24), is resolved through the expulsion or killing of a victim.³ This act of 'victimage' unites and reconciles human desire through the transformation of acquisitive mimesis into conflictual mimesis, *i.e.*, from the acquisition of desire to the conflict over desire which may eventually lead to the unification of desire against some object or other (Girard, 1987, 26). This kind of mob violence is exemplified by the Afghani mob which takes vengeance that unifies and reconciles them against the Pastor (and the foreign substitutes for him).

Girard's account of violence contrasts with conventional views. Girard says the conventional view of violence is that it is a spontaneous act of aggression from a subject to an object. Girard argues that this is a superficial view, which allows a violent person to be identified as different and deviant from the rest of 'peace-loving' humanity (Girard, 1997). Girard (1997) claims that, in fact, violence comes from competition and rivalry over common desires, which implicates all humans in violence, not just 'deviants'.

Moreover, Girard (1997) argues that violence and rivalry are not caused by differences between human beings, such as differences over culture or religion or between 'good' and 'bad' people. On the contrary, violence displays a lack of difference between desiring subjects and models. The fear (discussed above) of having nothing in one's self—that we have no ontological density but are only disguise—leads us to grasp for being through that which animates being, desire. This fear—which Herbert McCabe (2003, 70) says is a 'disbelief in oneself'—is accentuated (as Girard points out) when we encounter the other and realise the lack of difference between oneself and the other; that there is nothing definitive that differentiates 'me' from you and makes me better. In this circumstance, we need to manufacture differences and claims that give me priority over you. This grasping at desire and power makes the current rivalry between the Pastor and Afghan mob seem arbitrary.

The establishment of a victor is the beginning of difference, which serves to obscure the fact that all humans are the same; that they contain no original desire or identity apart from that formed with the other.⁴ Differences are used as a means to define one's self or group over against the other and control competing desires.

In analysing ancient myths and modern anthropological studies, Girard found that the crises of human groups are resolved through the scapegoating of a victim. Seeking to scapegoat is the first reaction of the Afghan mob to resolve the crisis. Girard says that the way that vengeance and mob violence give satisfaction to our desires, and so fulfilment to our sense of being and identity, is at the foundation of group and personal identity. Vengeance and mob violence seek to recover a loss of identity and being by imitating the violent desires of the other (for status and victory) and inflicting that violence back onto those accused. According to Girard, these kinds of rivalries are resolved in the unification of desire that occurs in scapegoating a rival or victim.

The victim is not actually the real cause of the crisis, but is identified in some way with the rival or problem as *scapegoat*. Girard argues that the scapegoat is a *substitute* by implication because he/she is not the real reason for the crisis, but is labelled as such. In the case of the Afghan mob, they undertake a conscious process of substitution by killing foreign victims for their real rival and crisis. For the London riots, the police become the scapegoat, though this recedes as the media and general public side with the police to stamp out the violent actions of ‘deviant’ young people (whose delinquency, or family, were to blame).⁵ In the end, the victim is inconsequential as long as he/she can be blamed for whatever problem or crisis the group is facing. In making this accusation and carrying out the punishment, the group is able to resolve their crisis and re-gain unity and power. This scapegoating produces a newfound cultural unity and order built on the lie of unanimous violence that the victim is guilty (of some crime or problem). In this way, the mimetic *contagion* of violence snowballs and spreads like a disease that collapses differences and cultural institutions and structures (Girard, 2001, 21-4).

After the expulsion or killing of the victim, a ‘miraculous’ unity can be seen to be given to the group. The group is fascinated by the power of their unified desires that they cannot believe they were the only ones responsible for their unification. In archaic myths, the victim is believed to be the ultimate mediator/model and reconciler of mimesis because all desire has been satisfied and reconciled in the expulsion or killing of him/her. The victim is claimed to have some supernatural power to mediate and unify all desire. In myth, Girard (1977, 275, 2001, 65-72) argues, the victim is represented as a god or demon who had manufactured the whole violent process. Thus, the supernatural victim deserved to be killed because he was a threat who wished to reveal his/her power to the community. Thus, there is an appeal to transcendence where the

mimetic power of the mob violence is recognised to not subsist in the human agents themselves (Girard, 2001, 96). In fact, the mob violence had provided a definitive mimetic movement toward and reconciliation with the other, for which the human longed. Therefore, the mimetic power of the mob violence leads to the demonisation or deification of the victim who had reconciled all desire. The victim is both malefactor and benefactor—the cause of crisis and its solution (Girard, 1977, 251).

Girard (1977, 257-64, 2001, 71-2) says the twin nature of the victim results from the ‘double transference’ where both order and disorder, good and evil, are ascribed to the victim through supernatural agency. Drawing on Rudolph Otto’s observation about the dual nature of ‘the sacred’ in primitive or archaic cultures, Girard argues that this dual nature is based on the transference of blame for crisis and praise for restoring order onto the victim. The good and evil traits of the victim provide the foundation for culture to define difference between people, particularly by establishing the definitive difference about who is in the group and who is out of the group (Girard, 1977, 251). The deified victim also structures and orders human desire in ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ways based on the original cycle of violence. These structures are institutionalised in law and prohibitions (made in order to avoid violence). Meanwhile, rituals are also developed to imitate the original mob violence, so to reproduce their miraculous effects. Myths are used to justify and make sense of the power of mob violence and the victim.

The Hebreo-Christian Break-through

In his analysis of ancient and modern literature and culture, Girard found that the scapegoating that lay at the heart of human culture was discussed in a different way by the Bible than that seen in comparable myths. Girard argues that the victim’s role in culture and myth is steadily exposed by the Hebrews and is definitively revealed in Christ, who is

killed as victim and is claimed to reveal God as his forgiveness exposes the distorted cycle of desire and violence. Christ breaks through violence and death with an alternative to the vengeful desires of the mob in self-giving love, which definitely overcomes violence. Jesus' words on the Cross, 'Forgive them for they know not what they do' (Lk 23:34; King James Version), highlights the burgeoning Christian consciousness of the victim in forgiveness and the mob's amnesia in violence.

The Resurrection, according to Girard (2001, 123), vindicates Jesus as the innocent victim. The Gospels show that death does not have the ultimate say over the victim, nor is violence the ultimate arbiter of human life. Instead, the victim is revealed and humans are shown that they can live without violence, which most importantly subverts the power of the mob by disrupting its unanimous support:

The essential factor ... is that the persecutors' perception of their persecution is finally defeated. In order to achieve the greatest effect that defeat must take place under the most difficult circumstances, in a situation that is the least conducive to truth and the most likely to produce mythology. This is why the Gospel text constantly insists on the irrationality ('without a cause') of the sentence passed against the just and at the same time on the absolute unity of the persecutors, of all those who believe or appear to believe in the existence and validity of the cause, the *ad causam*, the accusation, and who try to impose that belief on everyone (Girard, 1986, 109).

By taking Jesus as the central reference point, Girard argues that the Gospels expose and disrupt the unanimous power of mimetic violence in the crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. The association of God with the victim and forgiveness is a distinctively Christian belief as the divinity is usually associated with death and violence:

The problem is that the social other which forms us is, and was before we came along, a violent other, full of the distortions, cruelty, murder and exploitation which abound all over the planet. ...There would be no way for us even to per-

ceive fully the violence of the other which forms us unless there were something different, if you like, a different sort of other, which is not part of the violent other which forms us. That is precisely what is made present by the gratuitously self-giving victim [Christ].⁶

By providing a real point of differentiation, it is possible for the early Christians to recognize the true nature of human violence, culture and religion. For example, in the case of Jesus' crucifixion, violence encompassed all people, even Jesus' friends and fellow Jews, in what Girard defines as 'false transcendence' (Girard, 1986, 105-6 & 150-64; 1987, 217; 2001, 96-8). This false transcendence even overcame the Israelites of Jesus' time, who were meant to be free from the violent idol worship of the surrounding peoples. This false transcendence of violence was exemplified in the disciples led by Peter, who were ready to fight for Jesus' Kingdom; and in the Israelite leaders who goaded Jesus to come down from the Cross to inflict his vengeful power.

Furthermore, Girard (2001, 103-36) argues that the anthropological and interpretative power of Jesus' death and Resurrection is reflected in how the Gospels contrast to and deconstruct conventional mythic stories of the gods. Girard makes this claim by outlining important distinguishing markers between the Gospels and ancient myths. These include: the representation in the Gospels of the unanimous and overwhelming power of mimetic violence, which even encompasses Jesus' followers; the death of Jesus as a human (not as a monster or supernatural god); the lack of supernatural power exercised by Jesus, particularly surrounding his death; Jesus non-involvement in the cycle of mimetic rivalry and violence; Jesus' Resurrection not being immediate and not a direct result of the mob violence; Jesus' return from the dead not as a vengeful god but as loving human being; the repentance from and recognition of mob violence after the Resurrection by the small minority who had abandoned Jesus; the lack of demonisation of Jesus by this minority, who recognise his divin-

ity in his loving self-giving and pacific being; the demonisation of Jesus by a majority who deny Jesus' divinity; and the development of a new understanding about mob violence, ritual and myth in a new form of mimesis that establishes self-sacrifice for the other as the perfect mimetic model, rather than sacrifice against the other (cf. Girard, 1987, 215-5).

In particular, Girard (1986, 100-164; 2001, 19-31 & 121-60; 2004) explains that the Gospels disclose the power of mimetic violence through a number of events and themes: Roman Governor Pilate's lack of control of the crowd and his attempted appeasement of them, such as with a substitute victim, Barabbas; the crowd's satisfaction in achieving the guilt of its chosen scapegoat; the effect of the scapegoating cycle that overpowers the authorities and even unifies them, such as by making Pilate and King Herod into friends after being lifelong enemies; and, the unanimous nature of the scapegoating exemplified when Jesus' leading follower, Peter, denies Jesus. Girard (1987) also highlights important statements within the Gospels, some of which draw on and re-interpret the Hebrew Scriptures. These statements show the Gospels' complete awareness of the scapegoat mechanism: 'You fail to see it is better for one man to die than for the whole nation to be destroyed' (Jn 11:50) that highlights the nature of culture in victimage; 'They hated me without a cause' (Jn 15:25) that shows the baseless nature of the mob's accusations and mimetic violence; 'He let himself be taken for a criminal' (Lk 22:37; Mk 15:28) that shows Jesus' willing sacrifice in being accused of guilt by the violent human crowd; and, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do' (Lk 23:24) that expresses Jesus' faithfulness and self-giving to both God and humanity in the midst of victimisation and despair and shows the unconscious dictatorship of violence and distorted desire over human beings.

There are two important themes that Girard particularly highlights about the Gospels. Firstly, the Gospels' awareness of the mimetic

violence of the mob that seeks a victim. Girard (2001, 128) says the 'two words, *without cause*, marvellously describe the behaviour of human packs.' Girard (1986, 111) also highlights a text from Acts of the Apostles that shows the ignorance of the mob: 'Now I know, brothers, that neither you nor your leaders had any idea of what you were really doing.' This last passage is from Peter, who after the Resurrection suddenly understands the cycle of violence that had occurred and preaches Christ crucified as God. Secondly, the Gospels' realisation of Jesus' conscious and purposeful sacrifice in which he accepted death on a cross *for* humanity. This realisation enabled them to see how Jesus lived outside of mimetic violence and offered a new, loving way of being to loose humanity from their 'persecutory unconscious' (Girard, 2001, 126): 'A non-violent deity can only signal his existence to mankind by having himself driven out by violence —by demonstrating that he is not able to establish himself in the Kingdom of Violence' (Girard, 1987, 219). The Gospels' recognition of the injustice and self-sacrifice of Jesus' death, which led to their awareness of mimetic violence, saw them re-locate the experience of the transcendent Other in the non-violent love of Jesus, rather than in the violence of the mob (Girard, 1987, 169-70; 2001, 96-8).

In this new experience of loving and pacific transcendence, Girard (2001, 131) argues that Jesus' Resurrection provided the Gospels with the anthropological key to see the innocence of the victim and the lies of the mob. The mob's story is finally defeated because their distorted *belief* in violence and envy is overcome by the gratuitous mimesis of God as victim, who offers a new avenue for faith and human being in mimesis. For this reason, the Resurrection shows itself to be different from pagan 'dying-and-rising' stories. It is not a miraculous event that involves subservience to an all-powerful deity, but a personal encounter with a gratuitous Other who brings humanity to a new understanding of life and new actions that are self-giving.

For example, the Gospels particularly expose the false belief in the transcendence of the mob by contrasting what Girard (2001, 131-6) calls the false and true resurrections. In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, the story of John the Baptist's death is recounted in which Herod and others believe John has been 'raised up' (Mk 6:16) (Girard, 2001, 134). The Gospels clearly show that Herod's belief in the resurrection of John is linked to his death because after Herod makes a statement of his belief, John's death is recounted in which Herod is involved (Girard, 2001, 134). Herod is afraid of John returning from the dead after having been involved in his death. The Gospels are giving a case of where the victim is divinised by his murderers in a false resurrection based on a sacred fear that the victim will return with vengeance. The Gospels show that this false resurrection is based in the false transcendence of the mob violence that divinises the victim as part of its persecutory unconscious (Girard, 2001, 126 & 134).

The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus, then, is not a violent, exclusive act made to appease God but an inclusive one: it offers humanity a way out of violence through God's non-violent love. By dying on the Cross and being raised, Jesus is believed to be making present God's gratuitous mimesis to all humanity. In other words, Jesus' return from the dead is not as a vengeful god but as loving human being, whose divinity is recognised in his loving self-giving and pacific being. According to Girard, this encounter with Jesus' perfect loving self-giving develops a new understanding about mob violence, ritual and myth amongst the early Christians. This new understanding is grounded in a new form of mimesis that establishes self-sacrifice for the good of the other as the perfect mimetic model, rather than sacrifice over and against the other. It is this model that is implemented within the life of the Christian community and is particularly exemplified by the martyrs.

According to Girard, because of the effect of the Hebreo-Christian revelation, it is almost

impossible (at least in the West) to scapegoat a rival or victim without some pang of conscious awareness at the time or at a later date. This revelation of the victim has disrupted the unanimity of the mob. For Girard this is exemplified in the stoning of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in the Acts of the Apostles. The crowd that stones Stephen must place its hands over its ears in order to complete the mob violence. In other words, Stephen's proclamations of Christ and his forgiveness to the persecutors were having such an effect on the mob that they had to purposefully try to block them out in order to complete their violence. Ultimately, this effort is ineffectual (as witnessed by the eventual conversion of one of the members of the mob, St Paul).

Girard argues that the concern for victims has slowly permeated Western culture to the point that the victim has become a sacred category. The awareness of the victim has become so widespread in the West that Western culture can no longer effectively and unanimously scapegoat its victim. For example, the scapegoating of Saddam Hussein could not be effectively accomplished by the Americans because no good accusation could really be found to get rid of him. Further, the actual killing of Hussein was greeted with horror in the West for its brutal mob-like character. The dissenting voice that raises objections cannot be silenced. Unfortunately, however, those who are accused of being victimisers can still be scapegoated (*e.g.*, dictators, paedophiles, mobs). Girard calls this victimising the victimisers the final sacred category in the West because it can justify mob violence (at least in the short-term).

The final answer for Girard lies within the Christian tradition itself. Only as we can be immersed in the life of God's pacific and loving mimesis can we escape the cycles of violence and fulfil our ontological yearning for fullness of being and relationship. Only an effective mimetic alternative will rid humanity of its constant reversion to violence. However, this Christian path is not easy as it requires

giving up on the priority of the self and opening oneself to the Other who stands outside human violence in loving relationality:

‘...God is utterly *Other*, forming no part of our violent stories, and entering into no sort of rivalry with us. It is only thanks to the fact

of being so totally other, so without possible rivalry or comparison with us, that God is capable of entering into a purely gratuitous, non-violent way into our story to empower us to learn to forge another story.’ (Alison 1996, 167).

NOTES

1 A literary-critic and anthropologist, Rene Girard, is Professor emeritus at Stanford University, chair in France’s most prestigious academic body *L’Académie française* (‘The French Academy’) and recipient of the Modern Language Association’s award for Lifetime Scholarly Achievement. Girard’s major epistemological break-through was the discovery of what has been termed ‘the mimetic insight’. From this discovery, there developed two other major insights. To summarise, Girard’s mimetic theory has three major parts:

A) human desire is mimetic or imitated, i.e., humans desire according to the desire of the other; B) human cultures use scapegoats or victims to resolve mimetic conflict and create unity; and, C) the Hebreo-Christian revelation, in contrast to myth and sacrificial ritual, reveal the scapegoat mechanism within culture as well as human desire as mimetic, and provides an alternative way for structuring desire and culture.

2 The biblical book of Genesis describes this situation in the scene in which humans reject loving *communio* with God (the complete mimetic triangle) to grasp at the object of their desire. This desire is stimulated by the serpent, which precipitates the human’s (*adam*) envious denial of its own mimetic creatureliness²: ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God*, knowing good and evil’ (Gen 3:4-5; italics added). Good creation is distorted by envy in which humanity grasps at its desire to be like and better than its Creator and model. The human beings’ attempt to grasp the object of their desire in a false autonomy based on the imitation of the serpent results in their rejection of the communion with the Other. This false autonomy results in the formation of self-identity and consciousness, though in a distorted and violent form that becomes ingrained in human culture.

3 Through studying ancient literature such as the

Greek tragedies, Girard (1977 & 1987) discovered the same mimetic interactions in ancient literature as in modern literature, but also noticed the added feature of collective violence centred on sacrifice and victims. He began to observe how human culture has tended to be characterised by violent, rivalrous webs of human relations based on misunderstanding and denial. The distorted mimetic formation of the human self in its relation to others is resolved through the unification of desire against a victim. The ontological confusion at the heart of human being and culture is resolved by victimage.

4 When difference ostensibly leads to violence, such as between cultural or religious groups, it usually masks the fact that there exists a crisis of difference and identity within the groups involved. In other words, the groups have begun to lose their own identity as feel that it is threatened and need to re-define it over against others.

5 The rioting young people in London were labelled and abused in different kinds of ways as ‘deviant’, who should be eliminated. Certainly their actions were reprehensible and some commentary sought to understand them, yet much of the commentary went beyond this into sensationalism and blame. While it can be justified to restrain unjust violence, this restraint is only effective if repentance and conversion are made possible following this. Thus, while each individual has a moral responsibility for their actions, this responsibility should be seen in some context so that the conditions for repentance and change are at least made available, that is, we should analyse the actions in the light of stimulated desires fed by gang identity, the market and state welfare. I am in agreement with some commentators that state welfare can isolate people from real social networks, yet so can the capitalist market in its worst form as we each become individual consumers acquiring what we want.

6 Alison, 1998. *Knowing Jesus*, 98.

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As you pointed out in your speech, your Government wishes to employ policies that are based on enduring values that cannot be simply expressed in legal terms. This is especially important in the light of events in England this summer. When policies do not presume or promote objective values, the resulting moral relativism, instead of leading to a society that is free, fair, just and compassionate, tends instead to produce frustration, despair, selfishness and a disregard for the life and liberty of others.

—Pope Benedict to the Ambassador of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the Holy See, 9 September, 2011.