

# *A Tribute to René Girard on his 70th birthday*

*It is fitting that the first issue of Contagion should be dedicated to René Girard on his 70th birthday (12/25/93). He is the inspiration for the Colloquium on Violence and Religion in which the idea for the journal first took shape and the originator of the idea that metaphysical desire is contagious. Indeed, one should emphasize his thought at the beginning of the journal lest a reader think that it is a medical publication in epidemiology. Contagion is a property of mimetic desire especially in its metaphysical stage, and this is a finding not of medical science but of literary criticism and anthropology. Contagion is, therefore, an interdisciplinary journal devoted to cultural studies chiefly because Girard inspired it by his profound and far-reaching reflection and analysis, and technical terms like mimetic and metaphysical desire, which originate in this reflection and analysis, require explanation.*

*Girard's thought has two significant moments, mimetic desire and the surrogate victim. The former causes the problem that the latter solves. The problem is the problem of violence caused by the fact that desire imitates desire and thus inevitably enters into a rivalry of desires, and the latter solves it by causing rival desires to coalesce in a unanimity of violence against a single victim who is surrogate for all potential victims. Thus the victim gives the group the unanimity necessary for culture and generates the category of the sacred with its sub-categories of prohibition, ritual, and myth. "Mimetic" used before desire indicates the imitative and inevitably rivalrous nature of desire, and "metaphysical" indicates that the competition is not simply for some external good but for personal significance understood as substantial being, which we all assume the other to possess. Metaphysical desire is an instance of the Augustinian confession, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." It is the nemesis of a deviated transcendence. When human desire deviates from its true divine end a metaphysical void opens in us. That void drives us to seek fulfillment from our fellow human beings, whom we mistakenly believe to possess the*

*ontological fullness that we lack. Thus we fall into a war of desire for empty prestige and hollow pre-eminence.*

*Some of us have called this double insight a theory but Girard resists such grandiosity. For him it is simply common sense. It is obvious that we imitate each other's desires and that this leads to rivalry, and it is equally obvious that the unity of groups is threatened by rivalry until the members find a unifying force, and that historically, ethnographically, and psychologically the unifying force has usually been the scapegoat. If one simply pays attention one can observe these factors at work in the human world. They are the plague of metaphysical desire. Furthermore, this knowledge of the plague is not new but has been available in the religious wisdom of the race for millennia, especially in great literatures, and most especially in the Bible. We have always known, more or less clearly, more or less willingly, that the race is afflicted with a contagion of desire. But this knowledge is resisted. Attempts to uncover the generative, mimetic, scapegoating mechanism at work in religions, political or academic institutions are met with incredulity, indignation, and scorn. Girard's common sense is controversial.*

*Girard is a Christian thinker. He is an expert in the etiology of original sin, reminiscent of great predecessors like Pascal, recalling the classical period when Jansenius was a force and Port Royal a presence. His reflections on Satan and the scandal in the gospels are theologically of the utmost importance, and his deployment of mimetic theory for biblical interpretation is giving new theological life to a discipline that is in many respects paradoxically anti-theological. He is, however, no Jansenist, as his close association with the Jesuits of Innsbruck might have attested in another time. Now such association proves only that he is an important theological thinker. The common sense of his epistemology and his robust confidence in the capacity of human reason are the substantive proof of his membership in the mainstream of Catholic thought.*

*For this reason he is unacceptable to deconstructive post-modernism, considered old-fashioned, or worse, a theological apologist. He, in return, takes the deconstructionist position*

*seriously, engaging creatively with the work of Heidegger, whom he considers one of the few philosophers to have seen through the veil that philosophy draws over violence, and Derrida, whose understanding of origins is close to Girard's belief that a supplement in the form of the scapegoat is always necessary at the beginning of a system. If he is old fashioned it is not because he has ignored the more up to date alternatives but because he has found them wanting by comparison with his own position.*

*If he is a Christian apologist it is not for propagandistic reasons, but because of a combination of personal and intellectual experience. He considers religious conversion a possibility because he experienced it, and he considers the novelistic return from romance to reality to be a sort of conversion because the texts affirm it. There was, to be sure, a synergy between these two aspects of his experience, a synergy which strengthens rather than weakens each. If there is a hard edge to some of his criticism of the current intellectual scene it is because that scene makes so little place for Christian religious experience and insight. Christianity is the last politically correct scapegoat.*

*Girard also stands in the tradition of French sociology represented by Durkheim, Hubert, Mauss, and Tarde, and of English social anthropology represented by Frazer and Evans-Pritchard. In this vein his thought has been religious in the general sense of the science of religion, and has been subject to criticism by representatives of interpretive rather than comparative social science. Girard continues to maintain the possibility of a generalizing, comparative human science, while interpretivists, for a number of good reasons, doubt the validity of transcultural comparison. The controversy between these two methods is joined at present in the social sciences, and Girard is by no means alone or idiosyncratic in his position.*

*It is a measure of his genius that Girard has been able to integrate so effectively literature, the human sciences, and theology. Those of us who have tried to think his thoughts after him and to apply his insights in fields that interest us have been led beyond the limits we thought were natural to our fields of enquiry. It stands to reason of course that the strategy of divide and*

*conquer in the realm of knowledge should produce a race of intellectual Cyclops, one-eyed monsters guarding a precious flock whose contours conceal rather than reveal the humanity hidden beneath them. It stands to reason too that given the limitations of the average intellect most of us should be content to be one-eyed shepherds because we are not fit for anything else. For this reason alone René Girard is such a precious gift to us.*

*How can one say it without sounding a false note? I have had the rare privilege of being his close colleague for more than ten years. For the last five of those we have held a bi-weekly seminar at the Center for International Security and Arms Control, of which we are both members. The seminar is attended mostly by visiting scholars who come from all over to study with Girard. This regular exposure to his mind and person has been nourishing for my mind and soul. Many have been nourished by him in this way. In the seminar and out, over meals at the club and coffee in the student union, he has been constantly gracious, kind, and self-effacing, so self-effacing that one often forgets what a remarkable presence this is. But then there come those moments when even the most obtuse must sense that here is someone special, that here is a rare creative spirit, that one is participating, if only as an onlooker, in the saving work of the intellect in our needy times.*

*René Girard has given us a method and many coruscating readings that show its power to illuminate; but for those of us who have had the privilege of his friendship, and the friendship of Martha his wife, the pleasure of their company transcends even the power of the work. Their home has been open to wandering Girardians and there has always been time for lunch at the club. Their gift of friendship to us has been warm and unwavering in good times and bad. If my muse were as cunning and clear-sighted as his I would do justice to René Girard, but alas, this poor offering is all mine can muster. Thanks to the editors and to all the friends and beneficiaries of René and Martha for allowing me to write on their behalf.*

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