

# Breaking the cycle

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [December 12, 2001](#) issue

*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. By René Girard. Translated by James G. Williams. Orbis, 199 pp., \$20.00 paperback.

René Girard, a French scholar who recently retired from Stanford University, is one of the most creative and provocative explorers of mimesis, violence and religion in recent years, and a growing school of followers is applying his thought to a wide range of topics. This book is the clearest and most accessible introduction to Girard's theory. For new readers it is a clear and helpful statement of his positions, recapping the development of his thought. The translator, James G. Williams, a biblical scholar who has accepted Girard's framework, writes a helpful foreword with questions and answers regarding Girard's terminology and claims. He also provides explanatory footnotes for the uninitiated. Since Girard argued his positions at greater length and in greater detail in earlier works, readers seeking justification for his views will have to consult his other books to appreciate the full range of his system.

After receiving his doctorate in history, Girard turned his attention to the modern novel and developed a mimetic theory of the self which stresses the power of models in teaching us what to desire (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, 1961; English version, 1965). Because of the double bind in which models place their disciples (imitate me, but not to the point of threatening my position), conflicts inevitably arise from mimetic rivalry, leading to the threat of violence. The role of mimesis in constituting desire, however, is usually hidden from awareness, since humans like to think of their desires as original and spontaneous.

Girard then turned his attention to early anthropological data and to ancient Greek literature and culture, developing a theory of early religion that highlighted the role of the surrogate victim mechanism, or scapegoating (*Violence and the Sacred*, 1972; English version, 1977). From the earliest times, Girard argued, religions have channeled violence onto sacrificial victims, human or animal, to prevent uncontrolled outbreaks of violence. With the death or exclusion of the victim, a temporary sense of peace discharged the tensions, often leading to the deification of

the victim. To be effective, the process of scapegoating must remain hidden from consciousness, and mythologies around the world justify and cover up this process. According to Girard, the unending cycle of mimetic rivalry, violence and religiously authorized scapegoating dominates all early human culture and history. Religion and culture are founded on mimesis, exclusion and violence.

For Girard, the one ray of hope in this dismal narrative comes from biblical revelation, which he explored in a dialogical work, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort* (1978; English version, 1987). Girard finds that in ancient Israel biblical writers brought the age-old dynamic of mimesis and religious violence into consciousness, and they repeatedly took the side of the victim. In the Bible God appears not as the one demanding sacrificial victims but as the advocate of the persecuted. God vindicates victims such as Joseph in Genesis, the Psalmist, Job and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. In Jesus a nonviolent God accepts violence without retaliation, breaking the cycle. The resurrection reveals the innocence of the victim. The Holy Spirit is the *parakletos*, the defense attorney for the accused.

In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard's style of argument can be frustrating for those who have not accepted his system. He often makes broad generalizations with little citation of supporting evidence (e.g., "In mythology no dissenting voice is ever heard"); he does a close reading of one story of the Hellenistic miracle-worker Apollonius of Tyana and draws from it conclusions regarding the mythologies of the entire world. At times he makes biblical allusions that force the text to fit his theory. For example, to illustrate the power of mimetic contagion in creating unanimity, Girard states that "even the two thieves crucified at either side of Jesus are no exception to universal contagion: they too imitate the crowd, like it they shout insults at Jesus." This claim ignores the famous account of the "good thief" in Luke 23:39-43. Commenting on the beheading of John the Baptist, Girard argues that "the guests unanimously demand the head of John." Matthew and Mark note that Herod acted "because of his oaths and guests" (Matt. 14:9; Mark 6:26), but there is no indication in the biblical texts themselves that the guests unanimously demanded John's head.

Girard's method will also appear puzzling to many. He claims to write as an anthropologist, not as a theologian, presenting a social scientific apology for the persuasive power of Christianity without appeal to supernatural agency. But his style of reading biblical texts and his conclusion, "This enlightenment can only come from

the Cross," will strike most social scientists as belonging to the realm of Christian theology.

Discussions of Girard have usually divided into either uncritical adulation or skeptical dismissal. This is unfortunate, for the force of Girard's insights does not require a total acceptance of his theory. His interpretations of scandal as the stumbling block of desire and of Satan as the mimetic power of accusation are insightful and evocative. His analysis of Nietzsche calls attention to troubling aspects of the philosopher's thought that his postmodern disciples often prefer to ignore. Despite the problems of overgeneralization, Girard's work deserves a broad hearing and vigorous discussion.