



“I would be curious to have your age...”¹

René Girard

Abstract

*On the 29th of September 2008, Pierre Farge interviewed René Girard at Stanford University. This text is now made available in English for the readers of the Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence. In this interview, René Girard briefly summarizes the salient features of his apocalyptic thinking developed in *Battling to the End*. On this occasion, he especially reminds us of his conception of archaic religions and Christianity. He also relates his theories to the epoch-making change of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.*

Keywords

Apocalypse; Globalisation; Mimetic theory; Terrorism; War; Carl von Clausewitz.

¹ René Girard, “Je serais curieux d’avoir votre âge”, *Contrepoints* (November 11, 2015). The original French version of the text established by Pierre Farge is accessible via the following link : <https://www.contrepoints.org/2015/11/11/228619-je-serais-curieux-davoir-votre-age-rene-girard#fnref-228619-1> (accessed August 29, 2017).

Pierre Farge: You gladly define yourself as an “apocalyptic thinker”: you state that “to understand the world is to understand the threat, the apocalyptic atmosphere.” But, for a Christian, the Apocalypse is something else, it is the fulfilment of the Good News of the Gospel, the Revelation, the advent of God’s Kingdom. You should therefore be happy to be part of the world that you are living in, should you not?

René Girard: You are right. This text is far more contemporary than we believe. The atmosphere is more and more apocalyptic: the globalisation ensures the triumph of the mimetic desire which is at the source of rivalry, chaos and conflict, and therefore of violence.

Pierre Farge: Could you be more specific?

René Girard: First of all, violence prevails because technology, which was the monopoly of the West, is spreading, in accordance with the mechanism of mimetic desire. Everyone wants the same thing as his neighbour.

We are witnessing a nuclear proliferation, an escalation to extremes as I say. Countries want to acquire nuclear weapons, not for a deterrence strategy as during the Cold War, but in order to actually use it. The established bipolarisation of our era is not meant to last permanently. This is what I call the mimetic rivalry on a planetary scale.

Another example of the apocalyptic atmosphere is 9/11: for the first time, men turned technology against themselves.

These examples, indeed, show that for the first time in history Man has the possibility of self-annihilation, of Apocalypse, do they not?

Pierre Farge: But, after all, was it not Jesus who said: “knock and the door will be opened for you”?

René Girard: It is a way of seeing things.

Pierre Farge: You have deciphered the founding mechanisms of violence; how do you explain this accelerated escalation to extremes starting with the 20th century?

René Girard: Through globalisation which accentuates mimetic desire; and through the decline of Christianity which accentuates it even more.

In the Bible, mimetic desire is denounced several times. The Book of Genesis gives a series of examples:

- The story of Adam and Eve with the apple is an obvious mimetic string.
- Similarly, the issue of envy in the murder of Abel by Cain is a founding event because, immediately after it, the law against murder is created: “*whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold.*” This law represents the foundation of culture, the capital punishment, the original murder is repeated: everyone takes part and no one is responsible.

- Eventually, the last of the Ten Commandments: "*You shall not covet your neighbour's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbour's house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*" This Commandment is listing all the objects that we must not desire, but stops at some point for it is impossible to list everything. In order to forget nothing, it is sufficient to name the common denominator: the neighbour. Thenceforth, mimetic desire is forbidden. Jesus recommends us to imitate him rather than the neighbour so that to avoid mimetic rivalries which are the only source of violence.

At the same time, the decline of Religion fosters violence. As I said, human relations are necessarily competitive. Consequently, Religion alone helps society maintain itself through sacrificial means, Religion appeases. Every religion is grounded on a scapegoat. Archaic religions, the Aztec wars, for instance, were led to attain prisoners and thus have sacrificial victims at disposal. They were therefore directly related to the religious but not understood as such by the group. Christianity will denounce this mechanism for the first time, because before "Jesus as consenting scapegoat" (an innocent victim who accepts to be sacrificed), war is essential in order to maintain stable relations within society.

The scapegoat is sacralized because it has reconciled the community. But this mechanism works only if it is not understood, only if it is not theorized as it is today. Thus, Christianity is at the same time everything and its opposite.

Pierre Farge: So, from your perspective, the Good News of the Kingdom of God is that if we want to escape from this escalation into the abyss, it is sufficient to go back to the Biblical message which proposes to choose between Desire (leading to nowhere but violence) and Love. According to you, only a God can save us. And this is extremely simple, it is enough to believe in God. But what is your advice to those who lost their faith? Is there another alternative?

It is complicated, isn't it?

René Girard: I could not give you an answer. Through my work I achieved Christianity's Truth; through the discovery of the fundamental opposition between the Biblical texts (where Christ denounces the scapegoat mechanism for the first time), the sacrificial origin of the world, and the myths which endorse it. It is a more of an intellectual conversion than a spiritual one.

Pierre Farge: The last sentences of *Battling to the End* sound like your motto. You write that "we have to wake up our sleeping consciences. Seeking to comfort is always to contribute to the worst." What would be your answer to those who criticize the complete lack of proof in your reasoning, the lack of scientific references?

René Girard: The Truth of the Biblical text is not a matter of referentiality/non-referentiality. The Bible does not need to be referential in order to be true. The Bible is true to the extent that it is the negation of myths which are, on the contrary, lies; because, as I said, they always endorse the scapegoat mechanism, violence.

The Truth of the Bible is illustrated in the story of Joseph who goes against this mythical spirit which is the source of lies and betrayal. The latter is always saved and never put to death. See in particular the theme of forgiveness granted to those who charged a scapegoat. See also that Christ is a consenting victim. This illustrates, indeed, the end of the sacrificial order, the denunciation of the scapegoat system.

Pierre Farge: Is this the keystone of your reasoning?

René Girard: I have devoted my career to the study of the relationship between violence and the sacred and I hope to have changed the Archaic religions into an enigma which can be deciphered.

As for the Biblical religion, Christianity operates a unique revolution in the universal history of mankind. By suppressing the role of the scapegoat, by saving the lapidated, by proclaiming the value of innocence and forgiveness, Christian faith abruptly deprives ancient societies of their usual sacrificial victims. Evil is no longer expelled by jumping on a designated culprit, whose death only provides a false peace. On the contrary, one takes the side of the victim by refusing the vengeance, by accepting the forgiveness of the trespasses. This presupposes that each one watches on the other with respect to fundamental principles, and that each one monitors himself. Yet, at first, it is a great state of confusion.

Pierre Farge: Let us return to your last book. According to Clausewitz, "War is the continuation of politics by other means." Nowadays, war does not have the same meaning it had during the time of the Prussian general: you previously mentioned the rebirth of terrorism starting with 9/11. Are Clausewitz's ideas outdated?

René Girard: Indeed, the destruction of the World Trade Center signalizes a change of an epoch.

We moved from the era of international wars to the era of terrorism. While international wars are decided and, in a certain way, controlled by politics, terrorism is completely out of political control. Hence, this inevitable escalation to extremes. We are powerlessly witnessing this explosion of violence through terrorism.

Getting back to mimicry, the suicide bombers of 9/11, by their effectiveness, their knowledge of the United States, their training conditions, were a bit American...

Pierre Farge: To sum it up, without Christianity we are witnessing the Apocalypse because we have no possibility to recourse to sacrificial supports?

René Girard: This is exactly the apocalyptic principle. As soon as there is no possibility of the slightest recourse, there is violence. A Christian who lives by his religion feels that. Therefore, even if he is mistaken, he always considers the very near end, and the experience becomes apocalyptic.

Are you aware of what has been going on in the U.S. Congress over the past few days? The Republicans refuse to grant Henry Paulson the bailout plan by buying up to 700 billion dollars' worth of American toxic assets. If this is not Apocalyptic...

Pierre Farge: You said that you would like to be a young man nowadays, what advice could you give me?

René Girard: I would be curious to have your age and that awareness concerning the future. You are lucky, aren't you?

Interviewed by Pierre Farge in September 29, 2008

Translated by Andreas Wilmes

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