

The Dark Underbelly: Violence, Culture and Religion

Scott Cowdell

We all know about Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution by natural selection. It's really simple. The fittest survive to pass on their characteristics to the next generation. Those not strong enough, fast enough, or adaptive enough perish, before they can hand on their unlucky legacy. But if the theory of evolution explains life's development by a simple biological mechanism, can we reach a similar understanding of our human world? What about human behaviour: our communicating, our loving, our social arrangements, our violence and how we restrain it, our religious laws, rituals and myths—indeed, the whole cultural business of being human?

I've been working for a couple of years on a French-American genius called René Girard, who has been called 'the Charles Darwin of the human sciences'. He explains human origins and culture and religion from where Darwin left off, and as with Darwin there are only a few basic elements. Yet a lot of people don't like Girard's theory. They say it's too comprehensive to be believable, or that it's too dark and violent, but also I think because it's not a take it or leave it thing. To understand and appreciate it you have to open yourself to some uncomfortable home truths, and be willing to change—because only when *we* start to change can the world start to change.

This extension of evolutionary theory by Girard involves two simple but universal natural mechanisms. One has to do with human desire; the other with the role of sacrifice in controlling violence so that stable human communities can emerge. Let's start with desire.

Girard understands desire as a natural force that binds us closely with other people. We follow the desire of others because we have no authentic, independent desire of our own. Yes, we have natural appetites—thirst, hunger, sexual appetite—but without the desire of others to shape our desire, we don't know how to fulfil these cravings. Being thirsty won't make you choose Coca Cola or feeling horny won't make you choose this erotic image or that sexual partner over another. We need the desire of others to turn our appetites into desires. We drink Coke because the people we admire drink it, and because advertisers have learned how to direct our desire towards that product over another. We desire Coke rather than home brand cola because beautiful people in the adverts drink it, and we want to be like them. There are no ugly people in Coke adverts, and no obvious losers in the driver's seat for BMW or Mercedes Benz adverts.

But what if the one who awakens my desire then becomes an obstacle to my fulfilling that desire? What if my friend's crush on someone makes me fall for that person and then I become my friend's rival for that person's affections? Pretty soon, our rivalry escalates until it's not the person we're both keen on that I'm interested in any more. Instead we become

obsessed with our rival, desiring to defeat or even to kill them. This ‘borrowed desire’, as Shakespeare called it, or mimetic desire, as Girard calls it, is the basis of how we learn language and all the basic skills of life as children—it’s a good, simple, naturally evolved mechanism that has provided the human species with real evolutionary advantage. We now know that our brains have been wired to register and follow the desires of others—as the recently discovered mirror neuron system reveals, in support of Girard’s theory.

But nothing is more inflammatory than envy and rivalry—nothing is more mimetic. Violence emerges easily in human groups as the conflicting desires of individuals are suddenly drawn together into one desire, to fight and kill our rival, and we become mirror images of each other—we become ‘mirror doubles’, as Girard calls the increasingly indistinguishable rivals. You can see this in a violent crowd, where everyone looks and shouts and fights the same regardless of which side they’re on. The violent crowd is a mass of undifferentiated desire, rapidly fed back on itself and hence ramped up.

In modern society we’ve got the police to break up such violence, the courts to punish offenders, the threat of jail to stop us seeking payback, and a multitude of manufactured goods—you and I can both have a BMW instead of fighting over the only one available. But at the beginning of human evolution we had no such protections. Here Girard’s second big idea kicks in. He calls this the scapegoat mechanism, or the founding murder.

Instead of unified desires driving a whole crowd towards undifferentiation and mutual destruction, an individual gets noticed who might look a bit different—who might be disfigured or of a different race, and who draws attention to themselves somehow or other. Someone’s anger suddenly focuses on this one, then somebody else’s gaze follows theirs, with the violent desire of the whole crowd rapidly converging on that innocent one who is lynched, or stoned, or pushed off a cliff, or drowned, or whatever.

But then all of a sudden a miracle happens: the anger of the whole crowd has suddenly evaporated, and around the murdered victim an unexpected peace takes hold. People snap back to normal, and a sense of awe falls on the group. This is how culture forms, and part of culture is religion, which records and replays this crucial incident, providing the basis for how human groups might hang together in future without falling back into an escalating crisis of unstoppable violence.

The murdered scapegoat becomes the focus of group order. This is how gods emerge in human history. Religion is the combination of laws, rituals and myths that grow up to preserve the order that emerged unexpectedly from this founding murder. Laws direct our desire in non-rivalrous directions, while rituals let off steam by directing symbolic violence towards an animal or object rather than a human victim. Myths tell supernatural stories about the origins of society that are in fact stories encoding its founding murder. Girard has written whole books unpacking the myths of Greek and Roman antiquity, and of tribal

civilizations worldwide, to reveal recurring patterns. It's just that all these myths keep the violent origins of culture under wraps—why tempt fate by letting the memory of violence come out too clearly, in case it spurs more violence?

So when people tell you that religion is the enemy of human wellbeing and the cause of violence, as lots of atheists will, they're only half right. Yes, religion is linked to violence, but its aim is to deploy the repressed memory of violence to restrain worse violence from breaking out. So religion for Girard is a sort of necessary evil along the evolutionary path leading to stable human societies and institutions. Such religion he calls 'the false sacred', or 'deviated transcendence'.

You can see how a simple mechanism of desire, escalating rivalry then finally the discharge of violence on a scapegoat can make human life together possible, with religion—*re-ligio*—literally binding society together with these ligatures. But then Girard introduces a third element to the story, and one that's made him even more unpopular.

Girard was converted to Christianity as an adult because he realized that in the Bible, in the psalms and the prophets and especially in the Gospels and the passion of Jesus, something new and highly disruptive had emerged in human history. The innocent scapegoat suddenly finds a voice. The cry of the unjustly treated one erupts in the Bible for the first time ever, and in Jesus we see the false sacred mechanism fully revealed for the first time. The whole world, Jewish and Roman, ganged up to lynch Jesus because he called their law and religion into question. He told them after all that he came not to bring peace but a sword—that is, to disturb the false, edgy peace based on the threat of violence and the silencing of critical voices. But the violent cultural upheaval that Jesus brought was actually non-violent. His resurrection reveals God's desire to transform the world in peace, not the return of Jesus to usher in an angry judgement.

Christians and Churches have regularly misrepresented Jesus and his message, not least by violently sacrificial accounts of Jesus' death to 'satisfy' the supposed wrath of God. Nevertheless his impact remains. Jesus' death is anything but a typical religious sacrifice and his resurrection is anything but a typical religious myth. Jesus offers us a choice about our future: self-destruction through war and environmental crisis, or else conversion of heart, learning to desire as he does, non-rivalrously and hence non-violently—before it's too late.

Scott Cowdell is a Research Professor in Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University in Canberra, Australia and a scholar at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture . An Anglican priest, he is also Canon Theologian of the Canberra-Goulburn Diocese. He is the author of seven books, most recently *René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013). This essay

originated as an address to students, staff and parents at Radford Anglican College, Canberra, in August 2013.