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Girard and the Sacred: A Mimetic Approach to Religion

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Abstract

This article explores René Girard's anthropological perspective on religion, extending its application beyond conventional religious spheres to encompass broader societal phenomena. Girard's theory illuminates how mimetic processes influence cultural norms and institutions, particularly in the formation of religious practices and societal structures. At the core of Girard's framework lies the notion of the scapegoat mechanism, whereby communal tensions are alleviated through the scapegoating of a sacrificial victim, temporarily restoring social harmony. This article not only examines Girard's viewpoint but also critically engages with post-structuralist and substantive approaches to religion in religious studies. It will also contend how Girard's mimetic theory provides a valuable lens for analyzing the intricate dynamics of religion and societal order as it offers significant insights into the nexus of sacred beliefs, violence, and cultural narratives in contemporary contexts, underscoring the profound impact of religion on human behavior and social cohesion.

Keywords

René Girard, mimesis, religion, violence

Introduction¹

Durkheim, Geertz, and Asad are certainly among the first names that arise with a rapid peak into the anthropology of religion. Like all other fields of study, certain individuals seem to occupy positions as primary deities among other less visible ones. In this secluded demarcation of scholars, we find a deceased French polymath who was hesitant to formalize his inclusion into a specific field of study: René Girard. The purpose of this article is to discuss Girard's approach to religion not only understood within the field of religious anthropology but also as a conceptual framework valid for the analysis of cultural and societal phenomena. To do this, we will first explore the basic concepts of mimetic theory and its functionalist approach to religion. This approximation will then be contrasted to substantive and poststructuralist definitions of religion to demonstrate mimetic theory's position as a viable alternative for the study of historical events such as the so-called war

¹ Editorial work on the article was conducted by Mgr. Matouš Mokřý.

on terror, thus taking the idea of religion beyond religion. To exemplify the dynamics of Girardian thinking, the more or less “orthodox” or “standard” version of mimetic theory will be used throughout the paper without significant alterations and critical remarks. In this didactic illumination, as the author believes, the distinctiveness of the Girardian approach to religion and its relation to other theoretical understandings of religion could be portrayed more clearly.²

The understanding of Rene Girard’s approximation of religion takes us to the fundamental concept of his work: mimesis (Girard, Oughourlian, & Lefort, 1982: 231; Oughourlian, 2016: 37). According to his theory, mimesis is the key to understanding the formation of religion, culture, and society itself. Mimesis constitutes humans into social animals by our tendency to imitate the most basic forms of coexistence: language, actions, judgments, values, beliefs, thoughts, etc. This means that “it is by imitation that relations with the other and the gradual integration of the newborn into humanity are achieved” (Márquez Muñoz, 2020: 26, author’s own translation). However, among the natural categories of imitation, one stands as most problematic: desire. We desire what the other desires. Unfortunately, due to the limits of the material and metaphysical world, the majority of objects that construct desire cannot be possessed or shared by all. Examples such as sex, money, land, and statuses such as prestige, honor, and popularity are always limited. Due to these very precise limitations, conflict and violence naturally arise, it is instructed within our mimetic nature.

Mimesis is then to be understood as the creator and destructor of society. The creator in the sense of providing the basic human institutions of socialization and the destructor in the fact that it is both the solution and the major source of violence. This last element is found specifically within the mimetic nature of desire. After this initial conclusion, Girard now faced the question of how this escalated violence is managed and controlled. Human communities have been capable of containing this imminent conflict through one crucial apparatus, the scapegoat mechanism. Activated when conflict within a community becomes unsustainable, violence is then redirected towards a specific individual or group of individuals, a propitiatory victim. This individual is seen as the culprit of all evils and his assassination or substitution is, therefore, justified (Girard, 2005: 4). What does this process represent in terms of religion and culture? To Girard, the scapegoat mechanism is the primal example of how “the emergence of culture presupposes the development of mimetic forms of control of the violence mimetically engendered” (Márquez Muñoz, 2020: 14, author’s own translation). With the assassination of the scapegoat, a new duality is born, the victim previously seen as the ultimate source of evil is now also responsible – postmortem – for a new state of peace and reconciliation. The propitiatory victim has now turned into a god.

This initial sacrifice is to Girard the very founding moment of religion and consequently, of culture. Once the sacrifice of the scapegoat is committed, post-mortem rituals and myths are generated. Myths that represent the persecution of the victim and rituals that stand as symbolic repetition of this primal murder with the intention of giving continuity to the order generated from it. Lastly, taboos and

² For the critical remarks on mimetic theory, see Kirwan (2004: 90–111); Pommier (2010); Van Beek (2012: 97–98).

prohibitions naturally arise as they symbolize the risk of repeating the same mistakes committed by the propitiatory victim, establishing the rules of social conduct and thus the first human institutions (Girard, 2005: 67). Girard's mimetic understating of religious anthropology can be comprehended as the following:

1. All human institutions (e.g., family, power, money, war, the judicial system, the state) stem from religion.
2. Among the three dimensions of all religious systems – rituals (practice), myths (beliefs), prohibitions and obligations (morals) – the most fundamental, since the most originary, is the ritual.
3. All rituals stem from sacrificial rituals. (Dupuy, 2018: 4).

Once this has been established, the next logical question is how this applies to current religious manifestations. Has the scapegoat mechanism remained intact? Does it continue to operate in the same way? In the forthcoming chapters, we will contrast Girard's mimetic approach to religion with substantive and poststructuralist alternatives and examine its applicability to the analysis of modern religious and cultural phenomena. Let us start with the first task, examining Girardian theory vis-à-vis substantive and post-structuralist understandings of religion. In order to proceed with both steps, however, we must first turn our attention to developments within Abrahamic, and generally axial, religions, which, according to mimetic theory, contributed with significant developments to religious and cultural history and helped to form current societal order.

Mimetic Theory and the Study of Religion

According to Girard, there was an important breakthrough that modified this previous paradigm constructed around the scapegoat mechanism, and that is the biblical or Abrahamic distinction. However, it is important to mention – as a brief parenthesis – that Girard was highly criticized for this apologetic attitude towards Christianity, which he openly recognized. It was only in his later work, and through successor scholars, that this difference attributed to the Abrahamic traditions was recognized in other religions and it does not in any way exclude them, we will return to this idea at the end of this chapter.

What the Abrahamic religions demonstrated within their sacred texts is firstly, that they rejected human sacrifices and secondly, that the narratives sided with the victims instead of the persecutors! This meant that the victim was now demystified, it broke the social unanimity over the responsibility of said individual (Girard, 1987: 129). It can better be understood in the following way, Abrahamic religions revealed that:

- i) sacrifice is a social mechanism, not an act of heavenly justice; ii) that the immolated victims are not guilty of atrocious crimes, but are taken as substitutes for the members of the entire society; iii) that the restoration of order, once the victim was immolated, is due to the belief, on the part of the community, that the one was indeed the cause of the evils that afflicted society; iv) that true pacification only comes when men control themselves and

take responsibility for their actions. (Márquez Muñoz, 2020: 92, author's own translation).

The evidence backing the rejection of human sacrifice and the demystification of victims is according to Girard and other mimetic theorists found repeatedly among the Abrahamic texts (Girard, 1987; Petropolou, 2008: 283–284; Gilhus, 2006: 262–263; Daly, 1978: 214). The story of Abraham and the sacrifice of his son Isaac, who would eventually be replaced by the ram, is perhaps in their view the best example of this rejection. The Binding of Isaac clearly demonstrates a religious detachment from the past and from archaic practices that were centered around human sacrifice. It was this anti-sacrificial nature that would pave the way for demystification, illustrating how Isaac was nothing more than an innocent victim. The Passion of Jesus is also a clear example of demystification, the whole narrative is constructed from the victim's perspective as Jesus states: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23: 34), thus exposing the reality of the scapegoat. Jesus sacrificed himself in order not to participate in murder, exposing the true reality of the scapegoat mechanism.

Among the first criticisms evoked by Girard's scholarship is his blunt alignment to evolutionist or Darwinist narratives, which can be seen in the transition from sacrificial religions rooted in the scapegoat mechanism into the Abrahamic religions that demystified propitiatory victims, in other words, an evolutionary path from sacrificial to anti-sacrificial traditions (Palaver, 2013: 537–540). Girard does have an evolutionary conceptualization of religion, nevertheless, he observes the exact same mechanisms and functions among both sacrificial and anti-sacrificial traditions (that is to say, religions that have and have not demystified the propitiatory victim) and even notes how sacrificial religions were under this same logic, much more effective. All religions – and thus cultures – are born out of the same objective, which is to overcome violence.

However, the question of how this particular approach contributes to the study of religious phenomena, especially modern or contemporary ones, is not sufficiently explained by these past models, they are best understood as the pillars of his theory. We will now discuss the application of mimetic theory to the study of religion in contrast to substantive and poststructuralist approaches and worldviews, especially those referred to in Talal Asad's work.

Girard's theories regarding the demystification of the scapegoat mechanism were – to a certain degree – overshadowed by the structuralist and poststructuralist tendencies that dominated the second half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, Girard belonged to the same theory of thought as Émile Durkheim, who emphasized the study of religion in terms of social construction. Both Durkheim and Girard highlighted the importance of concepts such as the sacred and rituals. While Durkheim stressed the importance of the ritual in constructing the sacred, Girard further developed this idea to argue that all rituals stem from an initial sacrifice. This demonstrates the functionalist nature of religion in mimetic theory as an element of social cohesion and the role of violence towards this same objective.

In contrast, substantive understandings of religion are characterized by focusing “on the *content* of religion, specific ideas, beliefs, practices, doctrines or ideologies concerning gods, the sacred or the transcendent” (Thomas, 2015: 63, emphasis original).³ Examples of substantive definitions can be seen with prominent scholars such as John Hicks and Lawrence S. Cunningham and John Kelsay who define religion respectively as “understanding of the universe, together with an appropriate way of living within it, which involves reference beyond the natural world to God or gods or to the Absolute or to a transcendent order or process” (Hick, 1973: 133) and “Religion signifies those ways of viewing the world which refer to (1) a notion of sacred reality (2) made manifest in human experience (3) in such a way as to produce long-lasting ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (4) with respect to problems of ordering and understanding existence” (Cunningham & Kelsay, 2010: 21).

These definitions are certainly useful regarding the elements that constitute religion. However, they do not explain in the least what religions actually imply as functional categories. For mimetic theorists, it is very complicated – or perhaps even impossible – to define why religion has been so correlated with violence throughout history or why it has been the cause of so many conflicts with conceptualizations like the previous ones. Mimetic theory, on the contrary, states that religion cannot simply be understood as an explanation of the world in substantive concepts, it played a far too important role in evolution as the pivotal factor in controlling and overcoming violence and consequently, guaranteeing human co-existence.

The correlation between religion and violence is perhaps best understood in what is known as the “ambivalence of the sacred” (Appleby, 1999; Thomas, 2015: 61), that is, the idea that any given religious experience embodies both positive and negative qualities simultaneously. Utilizing Rudolph Otto’s concept of the “numinous” (Otto, 1958: 5), R. Scott Appleby argues that the duality of religious experiences shifts constantly from tranquil mental states of worship to authentic outbursts of violence. Religion as the ultimate source of all beings in the universe has the power to create but also to destroy:

Most religious societies, in fact, have interpreted their experience of the sacred in such a way as to give religion a paradoxical role in human affairs—as the bearer of peace and the sword. These apparently contradictory orientations reflect a continuing struggle within religions—and within the heart of each believer—over the meaning and character of the power encountered in the sacred and its relationship to coercive force or violence. (Appleby, 1999: 27).

³ In this regard, “functional” approach to religion focuses on the role religion plays in human lives, rather than on the content of religious beliefs and practices. However, it should be noted that “functional” and “substantive” understandings of religion represent rather ideal types useful for delimiting the most fundamental theoretical positions, with elements of both substantive and functional thought usually being discernible in each theoretical understanding of religion (see Pals, 2006: 13). Nevertheless, while Girardian approach share some substantive understandings (Girard, 2005: 333), its clear focus on the effects of religion on society makes it more fitting to posit it in the functionalist camp.

Taking this correlation between religion and violence into account, Girard's mimetic approach to religion stands out among other functionalist approaches because it provides a more comprehensive explanation of the linkage of religion to other concepts such as violence and culture. For Girardian theorists, this ambivalent nature of religion is explained by simply pointing out the defining acts of sacrifice – it is the victim that is the evil responsible for the violence of sacrifice, yet who is at the same time made into a divine protector of order by the very same act. Religion as a category is thus defined in terms of its role and function. That is, creating and maintaining order:

It is that generative and protective aspect of culture that serves to control mimetic desire and violence through sacrifice [...] which is at the center of ritual and closely connected to prohibition and myth [...] The violence at the heart of the traditional sacred is therefore twofold: the negative sacred of the collective violence that is associated with the dangerous aspects of the god or the hero, which may become split off into a devil or demon or trickster; and the positive sacred that is associated with the formation and maintenance of order. (Williams, 1996: 291).

Girard also rejects those that sustain a multiplicity of distinct worldviews of equal validity. That is to say that those who dis-privilege any claims to trans-culturally valid truths maintain that any given conceptualization of religion can only be understood within the same context of its own production. Thus, opening the world to the existence of multiple and equally valid coexisting realities. This last characteristic regarding ontological multiplicity is a byproduct of the poststructuralist influence on religious studies which have emphasized the strong bias around concepts such as religion, culture, and modernity and consequently generating an impossibility of generating universal approximations and secondly, of defining realities or concepts that are different from one's own (Carrithers, Candea, Sykes, Holbraad, & Venkatesan, 2010).

Furthermore, mimetic theory confirms, accepts, and actually takes seriously any religious understanding under the same principle (regardless of their content), no religion has the higher ground, nor do they differentiate from each other in their function – in that in which someone could see the theoretically privileging of anti-sacrificial religions, mimetic theorists actually simply try to depict all religions as different ways of pacifying communal conflicts and analyze them empirically, without any value judgments and without any uncritical acceptance of emic narratives. Mimetic theory has no concern for the truths of religion or the lack of them, it does not aspire to deconstruct the value or origin of concepts, it simply seeks to understand their tangible function in society. Regarding the recent poststructuralist deconstructive turn, Kevin Schilbrack famously asked: "After we deconstruct 'religion', then what?" (Schilbrack, 2013: 107). It is precisely at this moment that mimetic theory offers a viable option to proceed with the study of religion, setting the basis for an academic approach that studies religion through its material reality in the world and through its interaction with (more securely delimitable) non-religious phenomena, without the need to anchor its understanding of religion in often changing and context-dependent contents of belief and practice of entities

whose status as “religion” is problematized by the poststructuralist turn, as it is the case with substantive theories.

In terms of Girard’s specific acquaintance with Abrahamic religions and particularly, Christianity, he and other mimetic theorists would expand this understanding beyond the Christian revelation. Traditions that have demystified scapegoats can be seen in numerous examples, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, and Greek tragedies, to mention a few (Girard, 2011: xi-xii, 87–93; Márquez Muñoz, 2014: 94). All these traditions share what is known as axiality or axial values, that is, they are characterized by worrying “critically about individual and universal *salvation*”; they seek to “mitigate earthly sufferings by some kind of systematic moral life plan available to everyone, regardless of class or particularistic identity” (Mann, 1991: 431, author’s own translation, emphasis original). A broad way to define all these understandings is simply that they are of an anti-sacrificial nature with respect to humans. Their understanding of the egalitarian and universal dignity of men implies that no class of people can legitimately be designated as scapegoat victims.

This emphasis on religions that demystify scapegoats through notions of axiality serves therefore as the primary argument for extending an initially Christian and Eurocentric conclusion to other concurrent religious expressions. Axiality was precisely created to free global history from Athens and Jerusalem (Casanova, 2020: 45). This premise embraced and expanded by theorists of Girardian thought, argues that the dismantling of the scapegoat mechanism is a common feature in other religious and philosophical traditions of the Axial Age. For example, the Buddha proposed a path for liberation from suffering that did not rely on violence or sacrifice, but on understanding and compassion. Similarly, Confucian ethics emphasize social harmony and the cultivation of personal virtue without resorting to sacrificial mechanisms. These traditions are just a few examples of the multiple ways to comprehend universality, salvation, and the pacification of violence.

Simultaneously, as mentioned above, mimetic theory does not aim to discriminate between sacrificial and anti-sacrificial traditions. If the judgment rests on the effectiveness of religions in pacifying society-wide violence, Girard clarifies that sacrificial or pre-axial religions are, in fact, much more effective because they still maintain unanimity regarding the victims. Once the scapegoat mechanism is demystified, creating a lasting order of peace becomes much more complicated, as the mechanism loses its efficacy. This distinction however does not constitute a moral breakthrough:

But this important distinction does not have to be understood as a radical separation negating any connection between archaic religions and the Judeo-Christian revelation. According to Girard, a “paradoxical unity of all that is religious” exists if we take the whole of human history into account, referring with this expression indirectly to an ontology of peace that is rooted in creation and has a forming influence on the archaic religions too (Girard 1995: 27). Whoever rejects this unity – we modern people are tempted to deny it – easily turns toward scapegoating, because by occupying a seemingly innocent and pure position one thinks one is legitimated in condemning all archaic attempts to make peace. Modern massacres – the slaughter of indigenous people in Latin America legitimated by the rejection of their reputed human

sacrifice is one telling example – are the result of this moralistic and puritan attitude of a *corruptio optimi pessima*, a corruption of the best always leading to the worst. (Palaver, 2013: 540).

Therefore, mimetic theory not only embraces religious manifestations beyond the Abrahamic traditions under the same functional value but also integrates sacrificial and anti-sacrificial religions in terms of the primary objective of the religion which is expressed by the pacification of violence within the society at large.

Finally, it's also essential to remark on one last characteristic that both Girard and other scholars have noted: albeit the logic behind the scapegoat mechanism has been revealed, we do not renounce sacrifice (Girard & Schwager, 2016). In Yoshiko's Reed (2014) analysis of sacrificial discourses and civilizations through human relationships with meat and animals, she was able to demonstrate how there is a very evident retention of sacrificial language, practices, and ideas in what are assumed to be more advanced religious systems:

Early Christians, indeed, rarely claimed that the rituals or blood of ancient Israelite sacrifice were inefficacious. Rather, they tended to appeal to the (past, "Jewish") sacrifice of animals in the Temple so as to posit the superiority of the (present, "Christian") sacrifice of the human [...] What they argued, in effect, was that the deaths of Jesus and Christian martyrs held even more power to cleanse, to atone, and to connect human with divine—even while agreeing that "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins" (Yoshiko Reed, 2014: 143).

Girard, with this same awareness, put great emphasis on the impossibility of the existence of a world without violence, without sacrifice. It is perhaps better to state that this "evolution" is not to be understood as the transition from sacrificial to anti-sacrificial traditions, but instead from traditional models that have unanimity over the guilt of the scapegoat victim to post-traditional models that have demystified the scapegoat mechanism but do not renounce its violence (Márquez Muñoz, 2014: 95). This is the face of not only axial traditions, but also modernity, meaning here civilizations that have demystified scapegoats but that still practice sacrifice. The following chapter will discuss this apparent contradiction with respect to the contemporary situation.

The Religious Beyond Religion

Once this is understood we can now move on to our next objective: how can mimetic theory be utilized to analyze contemporary religious and cultural phenomena? As stated in the last chapter, even though humanity is currently dominated by the presence of post-traditional orders and, furthermore, evinces a significant increase of religious and cultural plurality not only in the West but also elsewhere, the scapegoat mechanism and most importantly, violence, is simply impossible to avoid. Our nature remains mimetic and hence, conflict is bound to occur. In fact, violent outbursts tend to happen more in post-traditional orders because the unanimity over the guilt of the propitiatory victim is broken and the scapegoat mecha-

nism loses its efficiency. Mimetic theorists under this awareness of the necessity to alleviate violence coined a new concept to understand sacrificial mechanisms in modernity: *katechons*. *Katechons* are institutions, mechanisms, and channels that contain and retain mimetically engendered violence within certain limits:

The katechon implies that the sacrifice works badly, but we do not renounce it; it is also called “the mark of the sacred” and does not aspire to eliminate violence, but to exercise it in a reasonable way. What is rationally acceptable in terms of sacrifice? A type of sacrifice that prevents a greater number of deaths. Of course, given the nature of plural societies, there are no “completely rational” sacrifices, since contagion and victim solidarity are never total. There is never agreement on whether a decision caused more deaths than it would have prevented, and even less so when those evaluating it are competing political parties. (Márquez Muñoz, 2020: 97, author’s own translation).

To be put in context, *katechons* are consequently placed as the new sacred, the primal institutions for the pacification of violence. In this world, religion – understood as organizations with doctrines and rituals recognized as belonging to a distinct social system of “religion” by a society (Beyer, 2006) – is just another example of a *katechon* that has the capability of generating a specific order and that also utilizes the scapegoat mechanism distinguished in the form from other competing religions. Other examples include the nation-state and the legitimate monopoly of violence, or democracy with its party system in which each participant proposes an order and utilizes its rivals as scapegoats. The physical and meta-physical institutions that maintain order and establish within their realms what is considered “good violence” and tolerated sacrifices are according to mimetic theory, religiously born institutions. Girard’s distinct approximation to religion is thus, not to be understood simply as church-like structures or institutions. Girard takes the religious out of religion and into all other spheres of human coexistence which is constructed by said institutions.

However, as explained by Scott M. Thomas (Thomas, 2015: 64), this does not mean that we fall into the trap of understanding every institution exclusively as a religious institution, this universal approach would eliminate any usefulness of religion as a concept and position it as just another participant – “floating signifier” – within the poststructuralist and ontological multiverse. The idea of expanding the religious factor into the universal has no intention of replacing social or cultural understandings or culture as a concept. For mimetic theorists, it simply emphasizes and provides an analytical method, perspective, or approximation based on religion and the sacred that allows us to study humanity without falling into scapegoat logic and highlighting the normality of violence as an entity prior to and necessary for peace. As stated previously, mimetic theory – with clear proximity to Durkheim – consequently describes religion in terms of its function: “Religion in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man’s efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence” (Girard, 2005: 24). According to mimetic theory, it is thus this understanding of religion that enables a scholar to delimit religion productively and analyze its interaction with surrounding society and culture.

In a poststructuralist narrative, Asad unveiled the true nature behind concepts such as the “secular” and openly expressed the “impossibility” of defining religion but missed the tangible and direct relationship that exists between religion and violence (Asad, 2013). It is not only that terms such as religious violence are the result of a specific Western ontology that has divided its apparent secular existence in contrast to a religious and irrational one in the Eastern and specifically Islamic world so that “religious violence” attributed to Islam is a non-sensical phrase in terms of Islamic cultures, does not naturally exist within Islam and serves the painting of Muslims as irrationally violent by Westerners. Religion and violence are for mimetic theory inseparably intertwined in both stances of this binary construction or any construction for that fact. In the Foucauldian style of tracing the genealogy of the secular, Asad did not notice that religion cannot be understood without violence and treated “violence” only in terms of irregular outbursts of destructive power directly recognized by the perpetrators and their society (see also Asad, 2007). It is thus actually true that the Islamic world has a tendency for violence, however, this is also true in every single other world!

Violent doctrines or types of political theology do not cause mimetic rivalry, violence or sacrifice. Violence is not originary in mimetic theory, that is, it is the other way around. Violent political theologies and religious violence – war, civil war and terrorism – are a by-product of mimetic desire, rivalry and sacrifice. ‘In the traditional view’, that is, the view of mainstream political science, ‘the object comes first, followed by human desires that converge independently on the object. Last of all comes violence, a fortuitous consequence of the convergence’. However, from a mimetic perspective, ‘we must invert the usual order of things in order to appreciate the import of tragic rivalry’ (Thomas, 2015: 65).

It is possible here to make a parallel with Žižek’s distinction between objective and subjective violence (Žižek, 2008). While subjective violence is undoubtedly much more visible, for example, terrorism and war, objective violence is naturally inscribed within the world order, it has no apparent visible perpetrator and has come to be accepted as normal, such as class structure and institutional racism. This is precisely Girard’s approach to religion and culture; violence is the key to understanding the origin and maintenance of such realities. Outbursts of violence cannot be understood as unique and individual experiences distant from normality. Asad’s conceptualization of violence is based on the premise of subjective violence, on discussing the content of such manifestations, much of his objects of study surround this idea, such as terrorism and suicide bombings (Asad, 2007). Girard and mimetic theorists, on the contrary, affirm the normality of violence, they focus on its objective component. Human coexistence in its mimetic nature is inherently violent and, in that sense, much more important for our understanding. Asad was correct in his diagnosis but mistakenly focused on the wrong manifestations, acts of subjective violence are just abrupt and small components of a complete order of violence.

Finally, it is also important to mention that Asad’s contribution to defining religion as an undefinable and transculturally useless category fully dependent

on modern Western power relations and hence, opening the scientific field to the poststructuralist relativism of multiple conceptualizations, has had the countereffect of supporting and validating ontologies in which violence can be described in terms of a specific religious expression, in this case Islamic (Asad, 1993: 29). The poststructuralist deconstruction of definitions and narratives has unveiled the ideological tools and power dynamics behind such conceptualizations. The counter effect of denying the existence of a substantive definition, however, positions the differential factor into the universal. When it is impossible to delimit what religion expresses in a substantive definition since the empirical existence of religion as an entity “out there” is denied, religion, then, as a purely analytical scholarly construct could be defined arbitrarily, without any recourse to empirical data belonging to the non-religious, that is the only thing left when we discard the empirical existence of religion. The opening of this Pandora’s box essentially signifies that in the face of this legacy of the lack of non-ideological determined truths, all existing definitions are positioned as legitimate and true within their own specific domain and most notoriously, because they share the same foundation on the inexistence of absolute truths. The prospects of mimetic theory in solving these problems in approaching religion will be treated in the following conclusion.

Conclusion

Functional definitions of religion, in which Girard is just another contributor, transcend mere content analysis and actually delve into the tangible effects and practical manifestations of religious phenomena also in non-religious and society-wide domains, making thus understanding and defining “religion” more feasible after the poststructuralist critique. The mimetic theory concludes that understanding the sacred will undoubtedly lead to the study of violence. To briefly illustrate the interpretative application of mimetic theory to recent events, the ongoing war against the Islamic “threat” can be understood as a war of different sacred values. Just as the Western or most notably, the American world, utilizes the primal religious mechanism of the scapegoat with its victim in Islam, they in return, invert their position of apparent responsibility into victimization of others and thus, the West as their own propitiatory victim. The present-day hostilities between Israel and Palestine have well represented this dynamic in which the two participants share the same mimetic desire, that is, absolute control over the same territory, and place the other as their *de facto* scapegoat. The narratives born from both sides of the conflict share more similarities than actual discrepancies as they manifest the same reactionary justification for a supposed unprecedented attack, the Arab-Israeli conflict is authentically mimetic.

In conclusion, this article has argued that the Girardian or mimetic approach to religion could be a suitable alternative to the study of religious phenomena in its intention of placing and remarking on how religion, culture, and violence cannot be understood as separate entities. In stressing the ways religion generates and mitigates violence, mimetic theory could offer a needed enrichment to our theorizing of religion and its possible social workings. The article also emphasizes the functional understanding of religion in order to focus on a factual material reality

that needs to be analyzed and discerned as it is quickly becoming more apparent in the current state of human existence.

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