René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture and Crisis

Scott Cowdell


Cowdell here continues his exploration of the work of Girard as a resource for Christian theology and for its relevance to the current cultural crisis. The author, a Fellow in Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University, is an eminent Australian theologian and a specialist in Girardian studies. Girard himself occupies a special place in the anthropological and literary scene, and increasingly now in Christian theology. His researches over the years have led him to a new appreciation of Christian revelation and the redemptive power of the Gospel in a violent world. Cowdell has been at the forefront in realising that Girard's writings can offer a fresh appreciation of the Gospel in its provocative relevance to cultural anthropology, religious studies, theology, ethics—and any program designed to promote peace and reconciliation.

This a serious study in terms of content and a reliable and patient exposition of the basic terms and ideas found in Girard's long life of writing. For the more advanced Girardian student, Cowdell is not afraid to extend the master's method and illustrate it in new ways in a rapidly changing world. The lethal and pervasive character of violence remains massively obvious—while Good News of Christ is still provocatively embodied in the hundreds of thousands of Christian martyrs in this era.

The exposition of Girard is at its most intriguing in chapter 1, “Mimesis, Modernity and Madness.” From a range of perspectives, Cowdell analyses mimetic desire as “the real unconscious” governing human behaviour. Our violent propensities might strike most readers as conscious enough, but such cultural realities are also so masked that the better term might be “subconscious” in that they inhabit conscious but in an unobjectifiable twilight zone where the demons of envy and violence lurk. This chapter is far from being a mere exposition of Girardian terms. It presents a bracing account of Girardian challenge to standard psycho-therapeutic approaches. It leaves the reader with the impression that that “depth psychology” is being invited to become a “breadth psychology”, taking in society, culture and history in a new way. A rich seam of exploration is opened up as Cowdell explains Girard’s view of public communication in the social sphere—the area where our idolatrous projections demand so much human sacrifice and the culture as a whole is driven by murderous envy and rivalry. However, I am not sure what Girard would make of Cowdell’s “mirror neurons” (51-56). Can cognitive science extend that far?

Chapter 2, “Violence, the Sacred Canopy”, takes us to a crucial point of breakdown. The violence that helped to tame society and contain it within certain limits, is now showing signs of breaking down. This presupposes more elusive and even controversial aspects of le système Girard, such as the founding murder, the surrogate victim, and so forth. Despite the way we may legitimate out enmities, Girard opines that “the entire world swarms with scapegoats” [81]—and the meaning of religion becomes more ambiguous. Even if Girard is
not like Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, searching for "the key to all mythologies", the French savant has certainly come a long way, and taken many with him!

Chapter 3, "Scripture and Secularisation" follows nicely at this point and shows how biblical writings educate religious consciousness to be alert to the cry of the victim. In that light, biblical revelation amounts to slow release from sacred violence—and from the religion that depended on it. So much of the Biblical narrative leaps into new life with a touch of Girardian analysis as Cowdell applies it. This chapter illuminates the legitimacy of genuine secularity, inspired and blessed by the Gospel. Slow developments over fifteen hundred years have come to allow for a genuine and decent secularity and to undermine the inhumanity of false religion: the danger now is not a humane secularity, but a new paganism intent on defending itself against the provocation of the Gospel.

Chapter 4, "Modern Institutions and Violence" impressively surveys and diagnoses the awkward shape of modern public institutions unrestrained by both genuine secularity and redemptive religious faith in ways that undermine law, democracy itself, technology and the market. Cowdell cites 2 Thessalonians 2:7 to good effect at this point. This is a stimulating chapter and provides a new angle from which to view everything from abortion to anorexia, to say nothing of the "religious" character of capitalism.

Chapter 5, "War, Terror, Apocalypse", ominously follows—and leads the reader into familiar territory of fear, tales of terror, rogue states and cataclysmic events. The old securities operating behind nation states are now confused as to just who or what the enemy is in our globalised world. Mimetic desire and the conflicts it engenders now come into the open—and rogue states keep it there. Terrorism keeps whole societies on edge, and the solutions available tend to make the problems worse. With no hope-filled sense of proportion, there is a sense in which conflict is now a battle to the end. How much disaster will occur before the healing power of the Gospel can reshape violent humanity in an increasingly violent world is the question Girard and Cowdell put before us.

The book concludes with a rich reflection, not without both ominous and defiantly hopeful elements. It recognises that the seeds of secular modernity are to be found in ministry of Jesus himself and the Kingdom of God he proclaimed. Post- or anti-Christian ideologies claim too much credit for themselves for ridding the world of superstition, for they have opened the way to the "false sacred" of cultural idols still demanding so much human sacrifice and familiar demons still possessing the body politic. The original Christian apocalypse promised a new world, while the post-Christian variety veers toward self-destruction. Girard’s message, as interpreted by Cowdell, calls for a renewal of hope in the practice, not of further mimetic madness, but of the wisest and creative mimesis, the *imitatio Christi*. Deep theology, bracing spirituality and courageous cultural critique combine to produce a valuable book. The author promises a more philosophical investigation as his next project, and a deeper engagement with Girard’s critics. Girard reports that he was converted to Christianity some fifty years ago. Cowdell clearly shares in that conversion, as must every reader of this thoughtful and inspiring book.

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