

debates, in this case Hobbes's response to Bramhall in *The Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity and Chance* (1656). Nonetheless, the massive presence of Bayle's text and arguments throughout the *Theodicy* is a feature that can hardly be missed and that ought not to be ignored in a volume such as this one, which aims to provide a state-of-the-art examination of Leibniz's book.

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René Girard *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, Trevor Cribben Merrill (tr.) (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014). Pp. xii +140. \$19.95 (Pbk). ISBN 978 16 1186110 5.

The One by Whom Scandal Comes, M. B. De Bevoise (tr.) (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014). Pp. xii +139. \$19.95 (Pbk). ISBN 978 16 1186109 9.

These two books mostly comprise conversations between René Girard and Michel Treguer in the former, and Maria Stella Barbari in the latter. Both are publications in the Michigan series 'Studies in violence, mimesis, and culture' and although both are published for the first time in English this year, they were originally published in French in 1996 and 2001 respectively. Nobody can accuse Girard of having uninteresting titles, or indeed uninteresting content, and these two books do not disappoint.

The One by Whom Scandal Comes comprises twelve short chapters in two sections, 'Against relativism' and 'The other side of myth', which divide the book neatly into three chapters by Girard in which he outlines the theory of mimetic rivalry, and the dialogue with Maria Stella Barbari. The three opening chapters are an excellent introduction to Girard's work. He begins with the problem of what he claims is escalating violence in our world 'that may be likened to the spread of a fire or an epidemic' (p. 4), thereby challenging Steven Pinker's recent claim that violence in modern societies is decreasing. Girard's work is an attempt to explain this spread of violence and thereby offer an explanation of religion, culture, and indeed the whole history of humankind. To date there have been two approaches to violence: on the one hand a 'political and philosophical' approach that sees humans as naturally good but driven to violence through the imperfections of society, and on the other hand a 'biological' or 'genetic' approach that sees

humans in the context of the animal kingdom as the most violent species (p. 4). Both have failed, says Girard, because they do not take account of the centrality of imitation, which is a third approach. There are biological drives, which are unchanging because they are focused on fixed objects, but there is also passion and desire that is peculiarly human. Passion is born, according to Girard, when our 'vague longings' are focused on a model that points to what we should desire, 'typically the desiring model itself' (p. 5). The model could be a general notion such as 'society' but more often is an individual whom we admire and wish to emulate. This mimetic desire pervades our life. To use an analogy from one of Girard's lectures, one child desires the other's toy only because the first child covets it, and the first child wants it even more when s/he perceives the second child wants it too. This creates a mimetic rivalry; one child copies or reflects the other in his or her desire, which inevitably spills over into violence. Thus our desire is from others; we want what others want and this creates imitative tension. Mimetic rivalry is witnessed in other species such as the higher primates, but it seldom becomes fatal, whereas in humans mimetic violence often results in death when 'the imitator attempts to snatch away from his model the object of their common desire' (p. 5). The model naturally resists the imitator and so the rivalry becomes more intense.

Mimetic rivals come to resemble each other the more they imitate each other, and they may become indistinguishable. In terms of culture this process escalates through contagion in which rivalry boils over into violence and is channelled into a scapegoat. The innocent scapegoat absorbs the violence of a community that for a time goes back to a state of equilibrium until the mimetic rivalry builds up once more. For Girard human conflict is characterized by bad reciprocity in which pleasantries being exchanged between a pair can rapidly degenerate into 'perfidious insinuations' (p. 11). This can lead to violence in which one party kills the other, and so a spiral of vengeance is generated through generations. Culture is an attempt to prevent such violence through ritual. Thus sacrifice is foundational to culture in that it channels violence into the victim and protects society from its own violence. Citing Montaigne's essay 'On cannibals' in which he claims to have met three Tupnamba Indians from Brazil in Rouen, Girard tells us that their ritualized cannibalism was based on the mutual hatred of two rival tribes. Each tribe took prisoners during war, treated them well, and integrated them into the community, and then violently killed and ate them in revenge for the other's violence (pp. 24–26). For the sacrifice to be effective, the victim has to be one of us. Girard brings our attention to what he calls the sacrificial logic of Montaigne's essay, which for Girard contains a fundamental truth about rivalry becoming the violence of the sacrifice. The violence of a community is channelled into the sacrifice that becomes the scapegoat. Indeed, beyond the act of sacrifice the scapegoat fulfils the function of absorbing mimetic violence. The scapegoat is 'someone unjustly condemned by a group of people who have been mimetically

mobilized against him' (p. 33). This is the fundamental feature of human societies. Violent rivalry built up over a period of time is transferred into the scapegoat whom the community unites against in an act of solidarity in order to alleviate and release the tension.

This, in a nutshell, is Girard's thesis, which he has articulated in different ways through different levels of cultural analysis in all his publications. Girard reads the whole of human history through the lens of this simple idea of mimetic rivalry. In many ways his view resembles Freud's, especially in their shared conception of a primal murder at the origin of human culture. But Girard distances himself from Freud, claiming that their theories have 'almost nothing in common' (p. 109) because Girard's source for his theory is not psychoanalysis but the crucifixion. Indeed, Girard could have let his theory stand as a theory of culture, but he adds a further important dimension in which he shifts from cultural analysis to theology. This is the claim that Christianity, or more specifically the Gospels, reveals mimetic rivalry at the heart of human cultures and challenges its perpetuation. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ, borne witness to in the Gospels, both points out the pattern of mimetic rivalry and questions it, claiming that there is a better way to live. Christ is 'the one by whom scandal comes', who points out mimetic rivalry. For Girard humanity has hardly begun to understand Christ's message: that we must stop the pattern of mimetic rivalry through the non-violence of turning the other cheek.

In *When These Things Begin* Girard relates the theory of mimetic rivalry to traditional Christian terminology. Mimetic rivalry is a part of what is meant by original sin, in which the murder of Abel by Cain is 'the creation of human culture' (p. 31). Abel dies, according to Girard, as the consequence of mimetic rivalry, and the Gospels reveal this. Girard is very resistant to the idea of seeing the Bible, even the story of Cain and Abel, in terms of myth. Indeed, whereas myth justified violence against the scapegoat, always taking the side of the crowd as we see in the myth of Oedipus, the Gospels challenge violence through questioning the scapegoat mechanism. Although Christianity might seem to fall into the pattern of the dying and resurrected god of ancient mythology, in fact, claims Girard, it puts an end to sacrifice through challenging mimetic rivalry. Once we read the Gospels through an understanding of mimetic rivalry, all becomes clear. While myth 'can tell us nothing about the Gospels' (p. 33), the Gospels reveal that myth is dominated by a false accusation. This is a universal message against cultural relativism that wishes humanity to break out of the perspective limited by the particularity and closed nature of cultures.

When These Things Begin comprises twelve chapters of dialogue between Girard and Treguer. At one point Treguer asks Girard if mimetic desire only produces evil. Girard replies that this is only a consequence if mimesis leads to rivalry. In itself it is not bad and 'people can no more give it up than they can give up food or sleep' (p. 43). And if ritual is the source of human culture in evolutionary terms, then it

has spawned not only religion but science and technology as well. While most of the book is more or less a restatement of Girard's thesis, there are some new insights such as those concerning the link between science and Christianity. Nineteenth-century science, and Darwin in particular, failed to appreciate the creativity of ritual that 'gives birth to techniques' and later, when Christianity 'destroys' ritual by desacralizing the world, makes science possible (pp. 50–51). When challenged by Treguer's suggestion that the ancient, pagan world produced science and mathematics, Girard responds that in those cases an elite group controlled the observations that lead to science, while Christianity paved the way for the democratization that allows science as we understand it to develop. The ritual origin of technology and science is an interesting idea that Girard introduces here – although others have done so too, such as Frits Staal who claims that science in India, particularly the science of language and mathematics, was rooted in the science of ritual. But Girard seems unfamiliar with the scholarship on the origins of science in non-western civilizations, particularly Needham's work on science and technology in China.

Indeed, perhaps the one main criticism of Girard is that he tends to neglect the more complex and sophisticated civilizations of India, China, and the Middle East. It is certainly true that he mentions the Vedic sacrifice of Hinduism as an example of early sacrificial ritual, but most of the examples offered to support his thesis are taken from the history and literature of the West. If the Gospels question the efficacy of sacrifice and the scapegoat mechanism, what about the reactions of the Upanishads, and of the Buddha, to Vedic sacrifice? Buddhism is never mentioned by Girard, but surely within his own frame of reference the Buddha, like Christ, challenges sacrificial culture, claiming that the true Brahmin is not the one who performs sacrifice but the one who is morally upright. Of course, it would be unfair to ask a scholar to be conversant with all areas, but Girard wishes to make universalist claims against cultural relativism, and to be persuasive he would need to draw from a wider civilizational basis.

While many of Girard's books are in dialogue format, these two are particularly noteworthy in highlighting Girard's Christianity. Indeed the dialogue between Girard and Treguer is very interesting on this point. Through his persistent and insightful questioning, Treguer brings out Girard's Catholicism, which drives his intellectual project. This is a skilful interview and Girard responds positively to Treguer's sometimes provocative questions. There is a real sense of engagement between the two thinkers and a sense that Girard is telling us what he really thinks – for example, that the novel is far superior to telling truth than philosophy. He also reveals how the whole idea of mimetic rivalry came to him 'at once in 1959' (p. 128) as a dense insight. When he was writing his first book about the novel, Girard was reflecting on religious experience alongside that of the novelist who realizes that all he is writing is lies based on his ego. Girard understood that his life was in fact like that and became intellectually converted

to a faith characterized by a heightened sensitivity to music and to the aesthetic experience of everyday perception. This is also linked to the discovery of a cancer that he then has treated. The few pages covering this episode are surprisingly confessional, and Treguer successfully allows Girard to express this biographical information without indulgence or compromise of his intellectual integrity.

Both of these books are excellent introductions to Girard and clear statements of the thesis of mimetic rivalry. Even if one is not convinced, Girard has had a single, brilliant idea that he develops, in his publications, less through direct argument than through piling up illustration after illustration in support of his central insight. We need to understand Girard's thesis as part of a broader thematic trajectory that links violence to the sacred, such as in the work of Walter Burkhardt, and as part of the general emphasis on mimesis that understands human beings as fundamentally imitative of each other and so fundamentally social animals.

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