

Analyzing the Religious Nature of Mimesis and Desire in René Girard

By Per Bjørnar Grande
Associate Professor
Bergen University College
Norway

Desire and the Destruction of the Self

The reason why mimesis is so closely associated with violence is that it easily leads to rivalry. Violence always seems to be mingled with desire,¹ and, even if it is ‘righteous’, a response to some kind of injustice, violence is often located in some sort of rivalry.² Terms such as imitation, identification, and comparison do not have to turn out to be violent – even when a great deal of competition is involved.

However, I would disagree with Hamerton-Kelly that connecting mimesis with desire means that mimetic desire always is violent, thus restoring the insight of Heraclitus that violence is the source of all.³ The all-decisive factor is the shift from competition to rivalry, from being allies to becoming enemies. The transition from being competitive friends to rivals comes as the result of desire. Desire is the generative force behind violence, the snake that turns friends and lovers into rivals. Traditional societies tried, and often very successfully, to protect individuals through prohibitions and taboos. These prohibitions and taboos were directed against any kind of activity which could possibly unleash violent rivalry. The killing of adulterers, thieves and foreigners can be seen as a way of ridding society of pollution, and cleansing it from the potential imitation of bad desires. In this way the society’s violence functions in a protective and anti-mimetic way. The violence against transgressors is a kind of mimetic anti-mimesis, a way of telling people to follow the rules of society so that they would become mimetically immune to the forces that threaten society. Violent victimizing appears to

¹ See Girard. *Violence and the Sacred* (5th Ed.), Maryland Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986, 145.

² In cases where injustice and exploitation have been done against a community, desires are often initially sparked by the exploiters. This rivalry can also be manifested as rivalry among the exploiters, which is then materialized into further exploitation and easily calls for violence among the exploited victims, because of the rivalistic desires among the persecutors.

³ Hamerton-Kelly. *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, 132.

fulfil a generative function by preventing transgressions, 'cleansing' morally and restoring peace. But, at the same time, it bears (unconsciously for the participants) a similarity to what one wishes to expel, namely the feared violence and pollution of the person(s) victimized. Despite attempts to expel violent transgressions, the attempts themselves are quite similar to the violence they are trying to exorcise. Both Freud and Girard have seen that those who conduct a rite of sacrifice are projecting onto the sacrificial victim qualities that reflect some of their own innermost concerns.⁴

In demolishing the victim they are symbolically annihilating aspects of themselves. What is destroyed is destructiveness itself: the feelings of violence and hostility that lie behind attempts to carry out violent activities. Such feelings are antithetical to the ties of friendship that bond a community together, and feelings of violence towards one's peers and associates must be banished if a closely knit community – such as a tribal brotherhood, a spiritual fellowship, or a modern nation – is to survive. (Jurgensmeyer. 'Is Symbolic Violence Related to Real Violence?', 3.)

Sacrificial violence, seen from a modern, non-sacrificial standpoint, is a kind of suicide. By killing the other, one also kills something in oneself. Modern societies are full of these projections of one's own desires onto the other, which expose the modern variant of scapegoating and which are often less physically and more psychologically violent yet still victimizing in their attitude of projecting. This Freudian act of projection resembles the act of doubling, the intense mimesis of the other that creates doubles. From a Girardian perspective it is double desire that leads to violence.⁵ The imitation of each other's desires will sooner or later lead to rivalry, and then to violence.⁶ This doubling does not only have to involve two people; it can be two groups, two countries. But the effect is always negative. Schwager explains it in the following terms.

Whoever is desirous has to expect that the others will too. Whoever succumbs to rivalry arouses the same passion in others. Whoever resorts to violence is imitated in his or her actions until, sooner or later, the deed falls back upon his or her own head. (Schwager. Must There be Scapegoats?, 81.)

This excellent description of reciprocal violence shows just how inevitable the escalation of violence is. There is something organic in mimetic rivalry; the contamination is so strong that the way out of violent conflicts seems to require a change of heart, an act of forgiveness in order to

⁴ Jurgensmeyer. (Ed) 'Is Symbolic Violence Related to Real Violence?' in *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World*, London: Franc Cass, 1992, 3.

⁵ 'Mimesis and Violence' in *The Girard Reader* (Ed. James Williams). NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996, 12.

⁶ 'The more a tragic conflict is prolonged, the more likely it is to culminate in a violent mimesis; the resemblance between combatants grow ever stronger until each presents a mirror image of the other.' (Girard. *Violence and the Sacred*, 47.)

stop the never-ending cycle. The process of violence, as we can see, is only different variations on the structure of metaphysical desire as described in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. It is the desire between the subject and the mediator in different configurations. And the initial object, which started the rivalry, seems to get lost in the turmoil. Girard explains this escalation of violence as an increase in resistance.

The more desire is attached to resistance the more it is oriented towards violence. (Things Hidden, 334.)

According to mimetic theory, there is little rationality in violence because, in exactly the same way as in rivalistic love, violence seems to be motivated less and less by any object, and more and more focused on reciprocal violence. There is, of course, a rationality attached to the balance, the reciprocity, but the objects, which are usually seen to introduce and motivate violence, gradually become less motivational.

Any object at stake in conflict will ultimately be annulled and surpassed, and acquisitive mimesis, which sets members of the community against one another, will give way to antagonistic mimesis, which eventually unites and reconciles all members of a community at the expense of a victim. (Girard. Things Hidden, 95.)

Thus mimesis is the force which both begins and ends violence. And in this respect mimesis is primary to violence. First there is mimesis; violence then stems from the inevitable conflicts aroused by mimetic desire. In this respect violence is caused by mimetic desire. Violence is not originary. It is a by-product of mimetic desire.⁷

Violence is mimetic rivalry itself becoming violent as the antagonists who desire the same object keep thwarting each other and desiring the object all the more. Violence is supremely mimetic. ('Mimesis and Violence' in The Girard reader, 12-13.)

If there were a violent inclination in human beings, violence would have been instinctual and one would not label it as violence. Calling it violence means that the killing is not instinctual but is related to moral problems. The specificity concerning humans and killing is this lack of ability to kill without consequences, and without the accompanying moral and religious implications. This is the result of an expanded mimesis. Human violence has no braking mechanisms against intra-specific aggression. This means, according to Burton L. Mack, that rivalries and conflicts, once unleashed, cannot stop short of manslaughter.⁸ According to

⁷ 'Mimesis and Violence. Perspectives in Cultural Criticism' in *The Girard Reader*, 12.

⁸ Burton L. Mack. 'The Innocent Transgressor: Jesus in Early Christian Myth and History,' *Semeia* 33 (1985): 139.

Girard, the growth of violence among human beings is a result of mimetic activity linked to the increase in brain size.⁹ This does not mean that human nature has become more violent, on the contrary, but it does mean that increased intelligence makes violence more effective and far-reaching. Also, the fact that human beings have no instinctual stoppage mechanism makes violence complex and seemingly irrational because of the vast range of violent expressions caused by the variations in conflictual mimesis.

Violence and Desire in Myth

To grasp the acquisitive nature of mimetic violence, it may be important to introduce Girard's understanding of violence in myth. Violence, from a historical perspective, is, from a Girardian point of view, actually (textually) mediated through myths. The problem, however, when interpreting Girard's understanding of myth, is that it differs radically from the phenomenological understanding of myth. Girard's understanding of myth is hardly able to give a thorough account of what myth mean in general,¹⁰ as there are myths which are not describing a victimage situation. Also, the fact that Girard seems to give certain myths or narratives in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures an ontological privilege, makes his understanding of myths suspect from a religious scholar's point of view - even if he would probably claim that his understanding of myths is phenomenological. According to Girard, some stories in the Bible are not mythical because they do not build upon a sacrificial and violent ontology which transforms reality into fantasy.¹¹

Mimesis and violence play such an important role in Girard's understanding of myths that without the presence of violence and mimesis, a myth would not be a myth, but either a straightforward true story, or a fairy tale. Instead of seeing the homogeneity of myth in common textual structures, like Lévi-Strauss,¹² Girard sees the homogeneity of myth in the violence from which it stems and tries to hide. Myths try to cover up the violence which has been inflicted by divinizing the violence and transcribing the events in such a way that the violence of the society is not revealed as such.¹³ Myths function in a society both as

⁹ Girard. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, London: Athlone Press. 1987, 94-95.

¹⁰ Girard attempted to give a new and general understanding of myth in *The Scapegoat*. See Chapter 3. 'What is a Myth?'

¹¹ Girard. 'The Bible is not a Myth,' *Literature and Belief* 4 (1984): 7-15.

¹² Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Myth and Meaning*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995. See chapter four 'When Myth Becomes History'. See also 'The Structural study of myth' in T.A. Sebeok. *Myth - A Symposium*, Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1958, 83-84.

¹³ See Girard. *The Scapegoat*, Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University U.P., 1986, 23-99.

legitimation and preservation.¹⁴ In this way Girard's understanding of myth corresponds to that of Durkheim when the latter claims myths hide more than they reveal.¹⁵ According to Girard, one cannot trust the myth's message, one has to uncover layers of mythology in the myths to discover the real accounts hidden in myths.¹⁶

Golsan, in his book on Girard and myth, writes that while Girard 'shares the view that myths are not precise accounts of historical occurrences, he does argue that they originate in real or historical events.'¹⁷ Thus, one of the most important features in Girard's understanding of myths is that there are real events behind sacrifices.¹⁸ Despite his suspicion about the messages of myth, Girard believes they refer to violent historical events.

All myths...have their roots in real acts of violence against real victims. (Girard. The Scapegoat, 25.)

One of Girard's main hermeneutical challenges has been to find out how myth was transcribed.¹⁹ The attempt seems extremely hypothetical, built on an extraordinary confidence in modern rationalism as a tool with which to demythologize the non-violent cover-up. The hermeneutics of suspicion is so acute that Girard actually claims that myth basically tells the opposite of what really happened. This claim is only possible when seen from a non-sacrificial standpoint, where the sacrificer's point of view is questioned. The view that myths will always, in some way or another, refer to some kind of sacrificial event, differs dramatically from Levi Strauss' concept of myth as language without any necessary referentiality. The sacrifices or murders are the events from which the myths are compiled. Mythology partly distorts this reality, often by turning it into fantastic events, which shows a certain inability to cope with violence. Violence engenders myths, and turns the real events into something fantastic. As in a war, the real facts are censored. Violence distorts reality, and myths are one way of doing away with or transforming the actual events. At the same time, myths are often the only source for uncovering the events narrated, and it is through a suspicious reading that one can decipher the reality behind myths. This process of being able

¹⁴ Mariasusai Dhavamony. *Phenomenology of Religion*, Rome: Gregorian U.P., 1973, 140.

¹⁵ Ivan Strenski. *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth century History*, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1987, 138.

¹⁶ See Girard. *The Scapegoat*, 23-99.

¹⁷ Golsan. *René Girard and Myth, An Introduction*, New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1993, 61.

¹⁸ *The Girard Reader*, 12.

¹⁹ See Chapter 6, 7 and 8 in *The Scapegoat*.

to go behind the myths to discover real events, reveals Girard's belief in a structural thinking which is not governed by desire.²⁰

Myths are linked to sacrificial crises and thus to violence. Girard is totally attuned to Mariasusai Dhavamony's claim that the most important function of myth is to establish a sacred reality.²¹ The mythmakers are imitators of the norms of society; they are a kind of spiritual storyteller who produces myths within which a society can function. Both myths and rituals are rationalizations of the sacrificial crises that threaten to make their society dissolving into violence.

Myths are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crisis, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them. (Girard. Violence and the Sacred, 64.)

Myth and Ritual

Myths come into play following the sacrificial crises, and are interpretations of the mimetic turmoil which a society has gone through. But because the mythmakers imitate the norms of society, and tell/write from a society's victimizing point of view, mimesis is not drawn from the events themselves. There is actually an anti-mimetic tendency concerning the real event, which explains the blurred report of reality. The act which should be imitated is the act of *divinization, which is enacted through ritual*. Mimetic theory, when considering myths should, in my view, embrace Malinowski's claim that the power of myths does not stem from what Durkheim called the collective force, but rather that myths stem from the imitation of each other.²² This, as I see it, is going one step beyond a sociological reference when looking for the source of myths in mimetic desire. Ritual is a symbolic imitation of the events (sacrifice) as described in the myths.²³ In this respect there is a much simpler mimesis to ritual. Ritual re-enacts the mimetic crisis and the transformation brought through by the victimage mechanism. This theory is not new though; already in the book *Myth and Ritual: Essays on the Myth and Ritual of the Hebrews in Relation to the Culture Pattern of the*

²⁰ In a way Girard's trust in structure, science and rationality should make it more problematic to claim that everything is governed by mimetic desire as mimetic desire contains so much irrational behaviour.

²¹ Mariasusai Dhavamony. *Phenomenology of Religion*, 150.

²² Ivan Strenski. *Four Theories on Myth in Twentieth century History*, 52.

²³ Girard seems, in *Violence and the Sacred*, to agree with the anthropologists Hubert and Mauss in dismissing relating myth to ritual, and ritual to myth. (See *Violence and the Sacred*, 90). But as far as I can see, this is exactly what he does in his analysis of sacrifice as the centre in myth and ritual. (*Violence and the Sacred*, 90-96.) In later works he more or less admits this: In an article called 'From Ritual to Science' Girard writes: 'Far from opposing rites from myth, as is done today, we must bring them together as was always done before. We must recognize in the rite the operation of mythological speech, but without seeking to make the latter the original of the former, or vice versa. The original is elsewhere.' (Girard. 'From Ritual to Science,' in *Configurations*, Johns Hopkins U.P., 2000, 172-173.)

Ancient East, published in 1933, myth is seen to be the story which the ritual enacts.²⁴ In this way ritual does not necessarily imitate the real acts, but the acts described in the myths. Ritual is a mimetic representation of myths. (It can also, possibly, be the other way round: myths can be imitations of rituals.)²⁵ Ritual can be seen to be a rationalized, simplified and purified version of myths. One could say that myths transcribe and transform violent mimesis. In ritual, the violent mimesis is often removed when the violent acts are represented. Rituals seem, more openly, to represent the official version of the myths. Therefore, in rituals the censor's position is much weaker, because the myths have already censored the events. The myths have already done away with the original violence, while the rituals present the crisis in order to emphasize the way out of chaos into a new, differentiated existence. Therefore the imitation of the sacrifice through ritual is also largely preventive.²⁶ The attempt (in myth) to hide violence may be seen as the desire to establish a mythic representation. The act of purging the myth of its acquisitive and raw origin, is simultaneously an act of turning myths into representations of violence, not of violence in itself. This again underlines my view that representation is often established to moderate mimetic violence. But in so doing, it runs the risk of covering up the real violence.

The Anti-Mimetic Tendency in Myth

Myths are anti-mimetic towards the actual violent events, because they are restricted by the sanctions of society. Myths tend, just like rituals, to legitimate society. In this respect the killing (narrated in myth) is transformed. When claiming that there is an anti-mimetic tendency in myth, I mean that the myth, based on the persecutor's point of view, is usually written from the standpoint of a warning, of not enacting the violence. This is clearly the case regarding tragic myths, for example the Oedipus-myth. On the other hand, there are myths which require imitation. Myths of fertility, for example, clearly require imitation, as this fertility must be renewed. Girard's understanding of myth only considers violent myths.

For Girard myths are not basically concerned with identity and world-explanation, rather they function as a way of upholding society by means of a *cover-up*. Myths do not encourage

²⁴ Blackman/Hooke. *Myth and Ritual: Essays on the Myth and Ritual of the Hebrews in Relation to the Culture Pattern of the Ancient East*, London: Oxford U.P., 1933, 3.

²⁵ According to Walter Burkert, ritual probably is far older in the history of evolution than myths since it goes back even to animals. (Walter Burkert. *Homo Necans*, Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 1983, 31.)

²⁶ Girard. *Violence and the Sacred*, 102.

violence. On the contrary, they seek to hide the real violence. (Therefore they are mythical.) But, on the other hand, they do not intentionally reveal violence either. Rather, they indicate violence. Myths are violent in that they try to hide the persecutor's violence. The violence is the act of writing from the persecutor's point of view. Myth, despite its violent norms, hides a society's guilt at having killed the victim(s). It is this urge to hide the murder which makes myths anti-mimetic, and, usually, does not directly encourage violence. Nevertheless, such cover-up myths are violent in that they legitimate the killing (despite rewriting the cause). Myths, as they are written from a society's point of view, are mimetic in the way that they seem to propagate and uphold the norms of the persecutors in a society. Thus, violent events are not described from a totally non-mimetic point of view; rather, mimesis is primarily based on the mimesis of society, and the events can only be made mimetically acceptable when transformed by these norms. Myths are representational as regards the events, but the mimesis that dictates the myth is secondary, engendered by the norms of society. When historical 'reality' becomes transformed into myths (and rituals), it becomes mimetically acceptable.²⁷ *In fact myth and ritual represent the community's cultural foundation.* But myth, compared to ritual, is usually more complex textually, so there will always be room for heretical presentations of a society's myths, even if this is more an option for the modern scholar than for the individual in a traditional society, regulated as the latter is by a set of rigid norms. However, taking this heretical possibility into consideration, I would agree with Lévi-Strauss (against Girard) that myths have a more individualized tendency than rituals.²⁸ The myths presented from the persecutor's point of view may be seen as an attempt to hide the acquisitive tendency in the original. The mythmakers, however, expose and rewrite the events as representations of reality. In this way the mythic texts need to be demythologized in order to be seen as myths. By questioning the representation, the acquisitive dimension in myth suddenly exposes itself beneath the layers of representation. This is evident in the representations of the Passion where the death of Jesus is described as violent and sides with the victim against the aggressors. The aggressor's violence cannot easily be mythologized.

²⁷ According to Gebauer and Wulf, the great problem in Girard's understanding of myths is that Girard claims that all myths of cultural origins are encoded representations of real events in which order is established as the result of originally violent acts. Gebauer and Wulf claim that there is little basis for locating any original event: '(...) the analysis of the mythical series of events as crisis of the religious institutions is undertaken in regard to a text that does not exist, but must first be produced. The extant mythical texts are systematically distorted; they must be read anew with the distortion filtered out.' (Gebauer & Wulf. *Mimesis: culture-art-society*, California: University of California Press, 1995, 262.)

²⁸ See Lévi-Strauss. *The Raw and the Cooked*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1970, 53.

Demythologization in mimetic theory is based on the victim's revelation of violence. The victim's revelation of violence can only be a revelation so long as there is an understanding that the victim is innocent. By means by which Girard deconstructs myths is reflection on the Passion narrative. Through the Gospel stories of Jesus' innocence, the innocence of other passions and sacrificial deaths is illuminated. However, this intertextuality is hidden in Girard's work. He never explicitly tells the readers where he is speaking from. In *Things Hidden* he claims that he does not care to know where he is speaking from.²⁹ But now, as the theory seems to be fully developed and the Christian roots are more to the fore, the Passion drama plainly seems to be the main hermeneutical tool upon which the theory rests. This is, of course, more directly evident in relation to the scapegoat mechanism than to violence and myth. But if Girard had not seen violence and myth from a non-sacrificial Passion-perspective, he would probably *not have had such a negative view on both*.

Both myth and rituals must, in mimetic theory, be seen in the context of desire. The urge to hide desires means disregarding mimesis. Especially myth can be seen to be desirous; both in transforming the victim and in covering up of violence.

Acquisition and Rivalry: Mauss

Let us shift the perspective from myth to conflict, in order to grasp the acquisitive dimension in violence. Conflict can be seen as an initial stage of violence. In psychology, sociology and anthropology mimesis is understood, more than in philosophy and religion, as acquisitive mimesis, an acquisition which also is based upon the other. Marcel Mauss' work, *The Gift*, illustrates the acquisitive basis of human societies in a most intriguing way. The strength of Mauss work (a work on how primitive societies are governed by the laws of exchange) lies in the emphasis he puts on rivalry in the act of exchange. Mauss shows that all kinds of gifts (within the societies he has researched, mainly Polynesian) are based on a system of *reciprocity*. This reciprocity, which governs different kinds of exchange, clearly contains acquisitive elements. The balancing of accounts can contain virtually anything. This indicates a system of mimetic reciprocity. Mimesis, contained in the receiving of a gift in an attitude of reciprocity, could be labelled a mimetic bind. This double nature is, as Mauss writes, already inherent in the word *gift*, which in Germanic languages can mean both a gift and a poison.³⁰ In

²⁹ Girard. *Things Hidden*, 435.

³⁰ Marcel Mauss. *The Gift*, London, N.Y.: Routledge, 1990, 81.

receiving a gift all kinds of obligations are required. In this respect, reciprocal mimesis means surrendering to the laws of society. Also religious sacrifices are built upon a principle of reciprocity. When there is reciprocity, the system, according to its own laws, is governed by good mimesis. And when there is some kind of breach, bad mimesis is always near at hand. Among the Polynesian clans refusing to give, failing to invite, or refusing to accept, is tantamount to declaring war, indicating that violence is near at hand whenever there is a breach in reciprocity.³¹ Mauss writes in his *Conclusion* that throughout a considerable period of time, in a considerable number of societies (up until modern times) there was no middle way: either one trusts completely or distrusts completely, either one gives everything or one goes to war.³² The rivalry is not only limited to necessities, there is rivalry in all spheres, not least in the act of generosity; the will to outdo the other with presents and feasts³³ is also imbued with the same mimetic rivalry.

Mauss talks about the ability to attract and dazzle the other person.³⁴ At certain potlatches there is a rivalry over who is the richest and the most madly extravagant. Mauss clearly perceives rivalry in generosity, and cunningly concludes that ‘everything is based upon the principles of antagonism and rivalry.’³⁵ In some instances there is a violent transcending of the reciprocal system of giving and returning gifts. Instead of a controlled reciprocal mimesis, there is a purely violent mimesis where one destroys in order not to give the slightest hint of desiring one’s gift to be reciprocated. Mauss gives an example from the American Northwest where houses and thousands of blankets are burnt, and the most valuable copper objects are broken and thrown into the water ‘in order to ‘flatten’ one’s rival.’³⁶ This indicates a development from a rational and upholding mimesis based on reciprocity, to a violent, almost apocalyptic frenzy. In such cases it is *insufficient* to restrict mimesis to *reciprocity*. Mimesis based on exchange is only one part of mimetic desire. The more destructive examples given by Mauss indicate the metaphysical and non-materialistic forces in human societies. As long as there is reciprocity, everything is fine. But a breach in etiquette, a lack of honour (which is just as important in some primitive societies as in modern ones)³⁷ transforms the rationality of a mimetically based exchange system into other, destructive, forms, indicating that acquisitive

³¹ Ibid., 17.

³² Ibid., 104-105.

³³ Ibid., 20.

³⁴ Ibid., 36.

³⁵ Ibid., 47.

³⁶ Ibid., 47.

³⁷ Ibid., 48.

mimesis can mean something more and something worse than mere mimesis based upon exchange. The system of gifts, of exchange, has a balancing function, but its reasons and its dialectical nature are far from rational.

Mauss' research is limited to particular cultures, but, as he indicates, many of these phenomena or mechanisms have something universal about them.³⁸ And daringly, within an anthropological context, he claims that it is possible to extend his observations to our own societies.³⁹ In fact, it is difficult to find anything more universal than rivalry and violence even if the forms vary greatly. The strength of Mauss' research lies in the way he sees the rivalistic tendency in all kinds of exchange,⁴⁰ and therefore regards rivalry as something inevitable. Mauss' work on exchange clearly corresponds to the acquisitive nature of mimesis. It would appear to be one of the anthropological works which most clearly address mimetic conflict and rivalry. His research on exchange, in relation to gifts and commerce, shows, from an anthropological point of view, the acquisitive side to human coexistence.

The Economy of Rivalry

Girard does not limit rivalry to any specific object. He emphasizes rivalry in love, which indicates this special area as being potentially rivalistic. According to both Lacoue-Labarthe and Derrida, mimesis has always been a problem in relation to economy. When the economy is a part of the picture, there are possibilities for both rivalry and hatred, Lacoue-Labarthe writes.⁴¹ And the economy, alongside love, is the most common ground for rivalry. Economic rivalry, in its initial stages, has something clearly rational about it; for example, when applying for a job. If I don't persuade the committee that I can do a better job than the other applicants, I will be without work, meaning I will have less money, less social contact, a less bright future and so on. Economic rivalry in its initial stages is a kind of rationale for survival, a survival arising from a scarcity of goods and scarcity of jobs. When, however, rivalry is not based on survival, but on prestige, it becomes a part of metaphysical desire, a desire based on the other, on having a more exclusive car, house, boat than the other. The objective value, if one can use such a term, plays an entirely secondary role; the aim is to beat the rival in an ongoing economic race where things play a

³⁸ Ibid., 59.

³⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁰ Mauss' attempt to synthesize and show certain universal traits in his research actually corresponds to Girard's approach. There is, however, a tendency in Girard's work not to mention those critics with whom he is in tune. Instead his texts are written against a background of adversaries.

⁴¹ Lacoue-Labarthe. *Typography, Typography: mimesis, philosophy, politics*, Cambr. Mass.: Harvard U.P, 1989.

symbolic and highly decisive role. In economic rivalry, when scarcity is the problem, rivalry seems profound, and when we analyse the relationship between the economy and mimesis, money is very easily transformed into the cause of rivalry. The interesting fact is that it is the initial, more rational stages of economic rivalry that are the most violent. The scarcity of jobs, food or other goods will often spark off violence, while using the economy to enhance prestige, is, in a modern society at least, not directly violent, even if this kind of rivalry creates scapegoats among the rivals who do not make it, and also exploits suffering people in the Third World to an even greater degree.⁴²

When discussing mimesis in relation to violence, almost all variations of violent mimesis can be labelled acquisitive. There is a tendency to interpret mimesis as representation when the level of conflict is low. If, however, the level of conflict rises, it would seem that everything revolves around acquisition. Thus mimesis should be related to the desire to acquire goods, not least to obtain things which are difficult to obtain. But Girard only follows up to a certain point economists who attribute violence to the scarcity of essential objects,⁴³ as the connection between scarcity and violence is relative. In some cases there is only a minor degree of scarcity before there is violence, and in other cases there is no scarcity whatsoever. This means that the relation between violence and scarcity must be understood in the context of desire rather than in relation to the scarcity itself. Girard, however, has never related his understanding of mimesis to a real discussion related to the scarcity of goods. Clearly, scarcity is taken into consideration too little in mimetic theory, especially in the global perspective. This might possibly be because it would weaken his mimetic theory. The external desires due to scarcity of food and other goods are, in certain areas of the world, motivated by the *desires to survive and not by metaphysical desire*. Mimetic desire, when not confined to desires in the Western world,⁴⁴ would, I suppose, become less related to internal mediation, as the individual in most parts of the world is more regulated by sacrificial institutions.

Rivalry, Christianity and Capitalism

⁴² Although suffering people in the Third World are only indirectly a part of the metaphysical rivalry in the Western world, they become, partly, when considering the economic systems, the scapegoats of our metaphysically motivated mass consume.

⁴³ *The Girard Reader*, 10.

⁴⁴ Knut Kolnar, although supporting Girard's view on mimetic rivalry and the mediated nature of mimesis, criticizes Girard's understanding of desire as being too dependent on a certain historical epoch. (See Knut Kolnar. *Det ambisiøse selv*, Avhandling til dr.art.graden, Trondheim: Filosofisk institutt, NTNU, 130.) But, in my view, even if the work on desire starts with the European context, I can see few reasons as to why his theory on mimesis and violence should not be universally applicable (despite the enormous variations in mimetic forms). The reason for this is the common human tendency to imitate. Also the numerous historical documents concerning scapegoating indicate that this is a global phenomenon.

From an historical point of view, internal desire has become more acute, while external desire has, because of the lack of absolute and common collective goals, clearly weakened its effect on society, which means that in contemporary society it is difficult to motivate and stir desire around an external rival. And even if firms manage to create a rivalistic atmosphere towards other firms, all kinds of internal rivalries will arise within a group. This tendency is clearly not new, but the individuality stemming from the sacrificial breakdown, has made rivalry more internal, less clear cut, less based on collective desires. The sacrificial breakdown which clearly moderates scapegoating, however, produces more subdued, individual versions of expulsion. When the illusive balance between us and them crumbles, rivalry creeps into all private areas such as families, friendships, rivalry with relatives and colleagues and so on, leaving no stone unturned, unless there are prohibitions and ethical norms to stop the rivalry creeping in and disintegrating the smallest social entities.

This makes ethics and, in moderate forms, prohibitions so acute in the modern world. Without the sacrificial checking and balancing of our desires, desires threaten to rule the making of the world. Religion often questions different forms of desire, helping people quit desires which do violence towards the self and the other. But Christian mimesis, an imitation of Christ in the Western world, does not seem to propagate prohibitions against rivalry in itself. Violence brought about by the freedom to rival anyone and leading sometimes to a scapegoating, where people fall out of competitive niches, can, in fact, be seen as a modern form of victimizing. From such a point of view, the imitation of Christ consists in seeing Christ in any victim brought about by capitalism. The encouragement of this relatively new global ideology seems to create victims out of a market system where the most brilliant, the most lucky and, at times, the most brutal possess the greatest value.