

"Christianity and myth" means for him not primarily the valid points of comparison, which of course must be noted, but above all the differences that disclose the truth of Christianity.

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Part I Overview of the Mimetic Theory

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Chapter 1 Mimesis and Violence

The most convenient single summary of Girard's mimetic model including its relation to the Bible, is this article, "Mimesis* and Violence: Perspectives in Cultural Criticism," which appeared in the now defunct *Berkshire Review* 14 (1979): 9-19. It is essential reading for the beginner in Girard's work, and may be useful to others who are already acquainted with his thought.

If you survey the literature on imitation, you will quickly discover that acquisition and appropriation are never included among the modes of behavior that are likely to be imitated. If acquisition and appropriation were included, imitation as a social phenomenon would turn out to be more problematic than it appears, and above all conflictual. If the appropriative gesture of an individual named A is rooted in the imitation of an individual named B, it means that A and B must reach together for one and the same object. They become rivals for that object. If the tendency to imitate appropriation is present on both sides, imitative rivalry must tend to become reciprocal; it must be subject to the back and forth reinforcement that communication theorists call a positive feedback. In other words, the individual who first acts as a model will experience an increase in his own appropriative urge when he finds himself thwarted by his imitator. And reciprocally. Each becomes the imitator of his own imitator and the model of his own model. Each tries to push aside the obstacle that the other places in his path. Violence is generated by this process; or rather violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means. Under the influence of the judicial viewpoint and of our own psychological impulses, we always look for some original violence or at least for well-defined acts of violence that would be separate from nonviolent behavior. We want to distinguish the culprit from the innocent and, as a result, we substitute discontinuities and differences for the continuities and reciprocities of the mimetic escalation.

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Violence is discussed, nowadays, in terms of aggression. We speak of aggression as an instinct that would be especially strong in certain individuals or in man as a zoological species. It is true, no doubt, that some individuals are more aggressive than others, and that men are more aggressive than sheep, but the problematic of aggression does not go to the root of human conflict. It is unilateral, it seems to suggest that the elimination of something called aggressivity is the problem. Violence is also attributed by many economists to the scarcity of needed objects or to their monopolization by a social élite. It is true that the goods needed by human beings to sustain their lives can be scarce but, in animal life, scarcity also occurs and

it is not sufficient, as such, to cause low-ranking individuals to challenge the privileges of the dominant males.

Imitation or mimicry happens to be common to animals and men. It seems to me that a theory of conflict based primarily on appropriative mimicry does not have the drawbacks of one based on scarcity or on aggressivity; if it is correctly conceived and formulated it throws a great deal of light on much of human culture, beginning with religious institutions.

Religious prohibitions make a good deal of sense when interpreted as efforts to prevent mimetic rivalry from spreading throughout human communities. Prohibitions and taboos are often ineffectual and misguided but they are not absurd, as many anthropologists have suggested; they are not rooted primarily in irrational fears, as psychoanalysts have suggested, since they bear on violence, on mimetic behavior, and on the potential objects of mimetic rivalry. Rituals confirm, I believe, that primitive societies are obsessed with the undifferentiation or conflictual reciprocity that must result from the spread of mimetic rivalry. The chaos, the absence of order, and the various disorders that prevail at the beginning of many myths must also be interpreted, I believe, in terms of mimetic rivalry; and so must the natural disasters such as plagues, great floods, or other mythical scourges that often include an element of conflict between mythical partners generally conceived as close relatives, brothers, or identical twins. These themes represent what mythology is unable to conceive rationally, the undifferentiated reciprocity of mimetic conflict.

Many rituals begin with a mimetic free-for-all during which hierarchies disintegrate, prohibitions are transgressed, and all participants become each other's conflictual doubles or "twins." Mimetic rivalry is the common denominator, in my opinion, of what happens in seasonal festivals, of the so-called ordeal undergone by the future initiates in many initiation rituals, as well as of the social breakdown that may follow the death of the sacred king or accompany his enthronement and rejuvenation rituals. The violent demonstrations triggered in many communities by the death of a member must also be interpreted as mimetic

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rivalry. All these rites amount to a theatrical reenactment of a mimetic crisis in which the differences that constitute the society are dissolved. Why should communities, at certain appointed times and also at times when a crisis threatens, mimic the very type of crisis they dread so much at all times -- that generalized mimetic conflict which prohibitions, in normal circumstances, are intended to prevent?

The inability to find a satisfactory solution to the mystery of ritual has spelled the failure of religious anthropology. This failure is not diminished but compounded by the present tendency to deny it as failure, by denying the existence of the problem and minimizing the role of religion in all aspects of human culture.

I believe that the key to the mystery lies in the decisive reordering that occurs at the end of the ritual performance, normally through the mediation of sacrifice. Sacrifice stands in the same relationship to the ritual crisis that precedes it as the death or expulsion of the hero to the undifferentiated chaos that prevails at the beginning of many myths. Real or symbolic, sacrifice is primarily a collective action of the entire community, which purifies itself of its own disorder through the unanimous immolation of a victim, but this can happen only at the paroxysm of the ritual crisis.

I am aware that not all rituals fit that definition exactly, and I do not have enough time to show you that the apparent deviations can be brought back to the single common denominator of the sacrificial immolation. Why should religious communities believe they can be purged of their various ills and primarily of their internal violence through the immolation of a victim? In my opinion, this belief must be taken seriously, and the variations as well as the constants of sacrificial immolation suggests a real event behind blood sacrifice that takes place in all human communities, as a general rule, and that serves as a model for religious ritual. The religious communities try to remember that event in their mythologies, and they try to reproduce it in their sacrifices. Freud was right when he discovered that this model was a collective murder, but he was wrong, I believe, in his interpretation of that murder. The problem is made difficult by the necessary misinterpretation and transfiguration of the event by the religious communities themselves. This misinterpretation is an essential aspect of the collective murder itself insofar as it effectively resolves and terminates crises of mimetic rivalry among human groups.

Sacrifice is the resolution and conclusion of ritual because a collective murder or expulsion resolves the mimetic crisis that ritual mimics. What kind of mechanism can this be? Judging from the evidence, direct and indirect, this resolution must belong to the realm of what is commonly called a scapegoat effect.

The word "scapegoat" means two things: the ritual described in Le-viticus

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viticus 16 or similar rituals which are themselves imitations of the model I have in mind. I distinguish between scapegoat as ritual and scapegoat as effect. By a scapegoat effect I mean that strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters. They feel relieved of their tensions and they coalesce into a more harmonious group. They now have a single purpose, which is to prevent the scapegoat from harming them, by expelling and destroying him.

Scapegoat effects are not limited to mobs, but they are most conspicuously effective in the case of mobs. The destruction of a victim can make a mob more furious, but it can also bring back tranquility. In a mob situation, tranquility does not return, as a rule, without some kind of victimage to assuage the desire for violence. That collective belief appears so absurd to the detached observer, if there is one, that he is tempted to believe the mob is not duped by its own identification of the scapegoat as a culprit. The mob appears insincere and hypocritical. In reality, the mob really believes. If we understand this, we also understand that a scapegoat effect is real; it is an unconscious phenomenon, but not in the sense of Freud.

How can the scapegoat effect involve real belief? How can such an effect be generated without an objective cause, especially with the lightning speed that can often be observed in the case of the scapegoating mobs? The answer is that scapegoat effects are mimetic effects; they are generated by mimetic rivalry itself, when it reaches a certain degree of intensity. As an object becomes the focus of mimetic rivalry between two or more antagonists, other members of the group tend to join in, mimetically attracted by the presence of mimetic desire. Mimesis is mimetically attractive, and we can assume that at certain stages, at least in the evolution of human communities, mimetic rivalry can spread to an entire group. This is what is suggested by the acute disorder phase with which many rituals begin. The community turns

into a mob under the effect of mimetic rivalry. The phenomena that take place when a human group turns into a mob are identical to those produced by mimetic rivalry, and they can be defined as that loss of differentiation which is described in mythology and reenacted in ritual.

We found earlier that mimetic rivalry tends toward reciprocity. The model is likely to be mimetically affected by the desire of his imitator. He becomes the imitator of his own imitator, just as the latter becomes the model of his own model. As this feedback process keeps reinforcing itself, each constitutes in the other's path a more and more irritating obstacle and each tries to remove this obstacle more and more forcefully. Violence is thus generated. Violence is not originary; it is a by-product of mimetic rivalry. Violence is mimetic rivalry itself becoming violent as

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the antagonists who desire the same object keep thwarting each other and desiring the object all the more. Violence is supremely mimetic.

The antagonists are caught in an escalation of frustration. In their dual role of obstacle and model, they both become more and more fascinated by each other. Beyond a certain level of intensity they are totally absorbed and the disputed object becomes secondary, even irrelevant. Judging from many rituals, their mutual fascination can reach the level of a hypnotic trance. That particular condition becomes the principal goal of certain religious practices under the name of possession.

At this paroxysmic level of mimetic rivalry, the element of mimicry is still around, more intense than ever. It has to focus on the only entities left in the picture, which are the antagonists themselves. This means that the selection of an antagonist depends on the mimetic factor rather than on previous developments. Transfers of antagonism must take place, therefore, for purely mimetic reasons. Mimetic attraction is bound to increase with the number of those who converge on one and the same antagonist. Sooner or later a snowball effect must occur that involves the entire group minus, of course, the one individual, or the few against whom all hostility focuses and who become the "scapegoats," in a sense analogous to but more extreme than our everyday sense of the word "scapegoat." Whereas mimetic appropriation is inevitably divisive, causing the contestants to fight over an object they cannot all appropriate together, mimetic antagonism is ultimately unitive, or rather reunitive since it provides the antagonists with an object they can really share, in the sense that they can all rush against that victim in order to destroy it or drive it away.

If I am right, the contradiction between prohibitions and rituals is only apparent. The purpose of both is to spare the community another mimetic perturbation. In normal circumstances, this purpose is well served by the prohibitions. In abnormal circumstances, when a new crisis seems impending, the prohibitions are of no avail anymore. Once the contagion of mimetic violence is reintroduced into the community, it cannot be contained. The community, then, changes its tactic entirely. Instead of trying to roll back mimetic violence it tries to get rid of it by encouraging it and by bringing it to a climax that triggers the happy solution of ritual sacrifice with the help of a substitute victim. There is no difference of purpose between prohibitions and rituals. The behavior demanded by the first and the behavior demanded by the disorderly phase of ritual are in opposition, of course, but the mimetic reading makes this opposition intelligible. In the absence of this reading, anthropologists have either minimized the opposition or viewed it as an insoluble contradiction that ultimately confirmed their

conception of religion as utter nonsense. Others, under the influence of psychoanalysis, have viewed the transgressive aspect of ritual, in regard to prohibitions,

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as an end in itself, in keeping, of course, with the contemporary ethos and its predilection for disorder, at least among intellectuals who feel, perhaps, they do not have enough of it in their own lives.

Religion is different, and the purpose of ritual is reconciliation and reordering through sacrifice. The current views of ritual as essentially transgressive are given a semblance of credibility by the fact that long before anthropologists and psychoanalysts showed up on the scene, the religious believers themselves had often lost touch with the unity of purpose of their various religious practices and begun to perceive the opposition between prohibitions and ritual as an unintelligible contradiction. And they normally tried to cope with this contradiction either by minimizing it and making their prohibitions less stringent as well as their rituals less disorderly or on the contrary by emphasizing and "maximizing" so to speak the opposition and turning their rites into the so-called festival that presents itself explicitly as a period of time in which the social rules and taboos of all kinds do not apply.

Modern theorists have some support from late religious developments, in other words, when they try to elude or give trivial answers to the problem posed by the behavioral opposition between prohibitions and rituals. This is the wide road of modern interpretation, and it has turned out to be an impasse. We will not take that road, therefore, and we will face the contrast between ritual and prohibition in all its sharpness, not to espouse some psychoanalytical view, of course, but to perceive the true paradox of ritual -- which is the genesis and regeneration as well as degeneration of the cultural order through paroxysmic disorder.

Mythology and religious cults form systems of representation necessarily untrue to their own genesis. The episode of mimetic violence and reconciliation is always recollected and narrated, as well as reenacted, from the perspective of its beneficiaries, who are also its puppets. From the standpoint of the scapegoaters and their inheritors -- the religious community -- there is no such thing as scapegoating in our sense. A scapegoat effect that can be acknowledged as such by the scapegoaters is no longer effective, it is no longer a scapegoat *effect*. The victim must be perceived as truly responsible for the troubles that come to an end when it is collectively put to death. The community could not be at peace with itself once more if it doubted the victim's enormous capacity for evil. The belief in this same victim's enormous capacity for doing good is a direct consequence of that first belief. The peace seems to be restored as well as destroyed by the scapegoat himself.

An arbitrary victim would not reconcile a disturbed community if its members realized they are the dupes of a mimetic effect. I must insist on this aspect because it is crucial and often misunderstood. The mythic systems of representation obliterate the scapegoating on which they are

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founded, and they remain dependent on this obliteration. Scapegoating has never been conceived by anyone as an activity in which he himself participates and may still be

participating even as he denounces the scapegoating of others. Such denunciation can even become a precondition of successful scapegoating in a world like ours, where knowledge of the phenomenon is on the rise and makes its grossest and most violent forms obsolete. Scapegoating can continue only if its victims are perceived primarily as scapegoaters.

Traces of an act of collective scapegoating that has effectively reconciled a community are elusive since the phenomenon is necessarily recollected from the deluded standpoint it generates. At first sight, this situation seems discouraging, but in reality it is highly favorable to the demonstration of my thesis: features that characterize the deluded standpoint of the scapegoaters are easily ascertainable. Once they are ascertained, we can verify that they are really present in primitive mythology; they constitute the constants or near constants of that mythology, in contradistinction to the variables, which are quite significant as well but demand lengthier analysis. The victim cannot be perceived as innocent and impotent; he (or she, as the case may be) must be perceived if not necessarily as a culprit in our sense, at least as a creature truly responsible for all the disorders and ailments of the community, in other words for the mimetic crisis that has triggered the mimetic mechanism of scapegoating. We can verify, indeed, that the victim is usually presented in that fashion. He is viewed as subversive of the communal order and as a threat to the well-being of the society. His continued presence is therefore undesirable and it must be destroyed or driven away by other gods, perhaps, or by the community itself.

The Oedipus myth does not tell us Oedipus is a mimetic scapegoat. Far from disproving my theory, this silence confirms it as long as it is surrounded by the telltale signs of scapegoating as, indeed, it is. The myth reflects the standpoint of the scapegoaters, who really believe their victim to be responsible for the plague in their midst, and they connect that responsibility with anti-natural acts, horrendous transgressions that signify the total destruction of the social order. All the themes of the story suggest we must be dealing with the type of delusion that has always surrounded and still surrounds victimage by mobs on the rampage. In the Middle Ages, for instance, when the Jews were accused of spreading the plague during the period of the Black Death, they were also accused of unnatural crimes à la Oedipus.

The most interesting question is: Why are we able to see through this type of delusion in some instances, and unable in others, especially in the case of that vast corpus of mysterious *révits* we call mythology? Why are the greatest specialists in the field still fooled by themes which historians of the Western world have long ago recognized as indicative of perse-

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cution in their own areas of research? Historians are working in areas with which they feel more at ease and are more knowledgeable because they are culturally closer, but this is part of the story; it may account for the tortuous nature of our progress toward a greater understanding of persecution everywhere but not for the progress itself. So-called primitive or archaic people are fooled by their own myths as much or even more than by the myths of others. The amazing thing about us is not that so many are still fooled but that many are not and that suspicion, as a whole, is on the increase. Our sterility as creators of myth must not be deplored because it is one and the same with our inability to transfigure our victims, with our growing ability, therefore, to see through the collective delusions of scapegoating. This ability has grown enormously in the last centuries and, in my opinion, it is still growing. The recognition of mimetic victimage as the major "referent" behind mythology is about to occur,

and it will be only one more step in an advance that began a long time ago and that is not yet over.

The views I am now expressing seem paradoxical because purely formal, structural, and nonreferential readings are now in vogue, but this state of affairs is only the most visible and limited consequence of a development which had to take place before the mimetic victimage hypothesis could appear, and it is the radical critique of all efforts so far to ground mythology in psychosocial phenomena. The current vogue is short-sighted only in its failure to realize that mythological systems as a whole may be amenable to an entirely new type of hypothesis regarding their ultimate origin. These structuralists and poststructuralists who describe my hypothesis as theoretically regressive have not fully assessed its nature and its significance.

If a society's growing awareness of victimage effects and the weakening of these effects are correlated, the phenomena we are dealing with are ruled by something like an "uncertainty principle." As our knowledge of them increases, they tend, if not to disappear, at least to become marginalized, and that is the reason why some people object to my thesis on the grounds that victimage phenomena are not effective enough to account for the religious practices and beliefs of primitive people. This is true, indeed, of the victimage phenomena we ourselves can observe. At the root of primitive religion, phenomena must be postulated that are analogous to but not identical with those still taking place around us. If phenomena completely identical with those we must postulate were still present among us, they would still generate primitive religion and could not be scientifically observed; they would appear to us only in the transfigured and unrecognizable shape of religion.

Victimage is still present among us, of course, but in degenerate forms that do not produce the type of mythical reconciliation and ritual practice exemplified by primitive cults. This lack of efficiency often means

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that there are more rather than fewer victims. As in the case of drugs, consumers of sacrifice tend to increase the doses when the effect becomes more difficult to achieve.

This last metaphor is not quite satisfactory, of course, if victimage and sacrifice are the means through which human societies have always been created and perpetuated. In our world, sacrificial means have degenerated more and more as victimage, oppression, and persecution have become predominant issues. No return to the rigidities of prohibition and ritual is in sight, and some very special cause must be found to account for this unique evolution.

I have an answer to propose, and it is the presence of the biblical text in our midst. This answer is bound to surprise and even scandalize an intellectual world for which the complete exclusion of that text is a prerequisite of rationality and scientific research. No one is disturbed when religious texts that are not specifically our own are assumed to be important for our modern psyche and for our modern society. But believers and unbelievers alike tend to become upset when our own religious texts are brought into the picture.

The biblical tendency to "side with the victims" is obvious, but modern students of the Bible tend to limit its consequences to ethical and purely "religious" considerations. If the preceding is true, this tendency must have epistemological consequences as well. Even in the most archaic texts, the collective violence that constitutes the hidden infrastructure of all

mythology begins to emerge, and it emerges as unjustified or arbitrary. Behind the story told by the eleven brothers to their father Jacob, after they violently expel from their midst their twelfth brother, Joseph, there is the vengeful consensus of this violent group. Unlike mythology, the biblical text rejects that perspective and sees Joseph as an innocent scapegoat, a victim of his brothers' jealousy, the biblical formulation of our mimetic desire. Later on, in Egypt, the same mimetic consensus reappears when Joseph is imprisoned. Everybody believes Joseph has betrayed his adoptive father, Potiphar, and committed with the latter's wife an action analogous to the incest of Oedipus. The biblical text, unlike the Oedipus myth, disbelieves this accusation, recognizing in it the kind of story that can be expected from a community that, for a number of possible reasons, happens to be disturbed and is mimetically, i.e., unconsciously, looking for scapegoat relief.

The scapegoat in that story is the main subject under investigation, as in countless other stories, as in the book of Job, as in many of the psalms, and a profound reflection is at work, everywhere in the Bible, regarding the ethical demands that a revelation of victimage and its refusal places upon human beings. In the Joseph story, again, this time in the last episode, we see the hero himself engineer a scapegoat *mise en scène* in order to test the possibility of a change of heart in his brothers.

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These had come a first time to beg for grain, and Joseph, now the most powerful man in Egypt, had warned them that they would not be supplied with it a second time unless they brought with them their youngest brother, Benjamin. Besides Joseph, Benjamin is the only other son of Jacob by his most cherished wife, Rachel.

The famine becomes so serious that the brothers come back, this time with Benjamin. On Joseph's orders a precious cup that belongs to him is placed in Benjamin's bag. When the eleven brothers are searched on their way back to Palestine, the youngest appears guilty of theft and Joseph announces he will be detained. At this point, Judah, one of the ten brothers, offers to take Benjamin's place as a prisoner of Joseph, for fear, he says, that his father might die of grief. This dedication of Judah stands in symmetrical opposition to the original deed of collective violence which it cancels out and reveals. As he hears Judah, Joseph is moved to tears and identifies himself.

Unique in many of its features, of course, this story is nevertheless typical of the Bible in the sense that it exemplifies its counter-mythical thrust in the treatment of victimage. This thrust is also present not only in other similar stories, but in countless other texts that espouse the perspective of the victim rather than the mythical perspective of the persecutors, such as the penitential psalms or the book of Job. Prophetic inspiration focuses on the revelation of victimage and the famous songs of the Servant in Second Isaiah constitute its summit; they provide a complete revelation of collective victimage as the founding mechanism of human culture. The responsibility for the victim's death is placed squarely upon the community even though in other parts of the same text God is presented as responsible. The same ambiguity or even contradiction remains in Christian theology but not in the text of the Gospels, which replaces the violent God of the past with a nonviolent one whose demand is for nonviolence rather than sacrifice. The Christ of the Gospels dies against sacrifice, and through his death, he reveals its nature and origin by making sacrifice unworkable, at least in the long run, and bringing sacrificial culture to an end. The word "sacrifice" is not important in itself, but the singularity of the Passion is obscured if the same word is used for the Passion and for what

takes place in sacrificial rituals. ¹Can we use the same word for the deed that is committed at the beginning of Joseph's story, when the eleven brothers expel their own brother, and for Judah's willingness to die, if necessary, in order to prevent the sacrifice of his brother?

The sacrificial misreading common to Christians and non-Christians alike has obscured the nonsacrificial significance of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures but not entirely suppressed its impact. Thus, our society could

¹See the introduction to chapter 6. - J.W.

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result from a complex interaction between the Judeo-Christian and the sacrificial. Acting upon the latter as a force of disruption -- as new wine in old wine-skins -- the former would be responsible for our constantly increased awareness of victimage and for the decadence of mythology in our world.

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Chapter 2 The Surrogate Victim

This excerpt is the conclusion to *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 309-18. In it Girard does not develop his concept of mimetic desire* as such, but focuses on the surrogate victim as the cultural antidote to violence that is represented in sacrifice,* scapegoating,* Greek drama, and other great literary texts. His understanding of sacrifice has been modified since the publication of *Violence and the Sacred*. On this shift see the introduction to chapter 6.

A theory of the nature of primitive religion has emerged from the foregoing inquiry into the origins of myth and ritual. . . .

My theory depends on a number of basic premises. Even if innumerable intermediary stages exist between the spontaneous outbursts of violence and its religious imitations, even if it is only these imitations that come to our notice, I want to stress that these imitations had their origin in a real event. The actuality of this event, over and above its existence in rite and record, must be kept in mind. We must also take care not to restrict this event to any one context, any one dominant intellectual framework, whether semantic or symbolic, which lacks a firm basis in reality. The event should be viewed as an absolute beginning, signifying the passage from nonhuman to human, as well as a relative beginning for the societies in question.

The theory of the surrogate victim is paradoxical in that it is based on facts whose empirical characteristics are not directly accessible. These facts can be drawn exclusively from texts that invariably offer distorted, fragmentary, or indirect testimony. We can gain access to the generative event only through constant reference to these

enigmatic sources, which constitute at once the foreground in which our theory situates itself and the background against which its accuracy must be tested.

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The theory of evolution depends on the comparison and linkage of evidence -- the fossil remains of living creatures -- corresponding, in the case of my hypothesis, to religious and cultural texts. No single anatomical fact studied in isolation can lead to the concept of evolution. No direct observation is possible, nor form of empirical verification even conceivable, because evolution occurred over a span of time entirely out of scale with the span of human existence.

In the same way no single text -- mythic, religious, or tragic -- will yield the operating procedures of violent unanimity. Here, too, the comparative method is the only one possible. If this method has not been successful to date, that is because there are so many variables at work; it is hard to locate the single underlying scheme that controls them all. The theory of evolution, too, constitutes a hypothesis.

The surrogate victim theory presents, as a theory, a distinct superiority over the theory of evolution. The inaccessible character of the generative event is not merely an obstacle unrelated to the theory, an aspect that contributes nothing of positive value; rather, it is an essential part of that theory, something we cannot do without. In order to retain its structuring influence the generative violence must remain hidden; misapprehension is indispensable to all religious or postreligious structuring. And the hidden nature of the event corresponds to the researcher's inability to attribute a satisfactory function to religious practices. My theory is the first to offer an explanation of the primordial role that religion plays in primitive societies, as well as of man's ignorance of this role.

This hidden nature is much less problematic than a notion like the unconscious of Freud. ^{1:} A comparison of certain myths and rituals, viewed in the light of Greek tragedy, leads to the theory of the surrogate victim and violent unanimity through a path much more direct than that of "verbal slips" to such psychoanalytic concepts as suppressed desires and the unconscious. Surely such slips can be attributed to many different causes. But the surrogate victim theory is the only hypothesis that accounts for all features of the cultural phenomena presented here. Unlike the psychoanalytical explanations, it leaves no areas in shadow and neglects no major aspects.

Although generative violence is invisible, it can logically be deduced from myths and rituals once their real structures have been perceived. The further one advances along this path and the more transparent the true nature of religious thought appears, the clearer it becomes that there is nothing here to suppress or to hide. There is no justification for the idea that religious thought either represses or deliberately refuses to acknowledge a threatening self-awareness. Such awareness does not yet

¹See chapter 15, "Freud and the Oedipus Complex." -J.W.

present any threat to religion. It is we who are threatened by it, we who flee from it.

If religious misapprehensions were to be regarded in the same light as psychoanalysis regards its material, we should require some religious equivalent to the Freudian repression of the patricide/incest desire, something that must be hidden and kept hidden. Yet such is hardly the case. To be sure, there are many details of the generative event that have dropped out, many elements that have become so warped, misshapen, and transfigured as to be unrecognizable when reproduced in mythical or ritualistic form. Yet no matter how gaping the lacunae may appear, no matter how grotesque the deformations, they are not ultimately indispensable to the religious attitude, the religious misapprehension. Even if it were brought face to face with the inner workings of the mechanism, the religious mind would be unable to conceive of the transformation of bad into good, of violence into culture, as a spontaneous phenomenon calling for a positive approach.

It is natural to assume that the best-concealed aspect of the generative mechanism will be the most crucial element, the one most likely to render the sacrificial system nonfunctional if it becomes known. This aspect will be the arbitrary selection of the victim, its essential insignificance, which contradicts the meaning accumulated upon its head by the scapegoat projections.

Close examination will reveal that even this aspect is not really hidden; it can be readily detected once we know what we must look for. Frequently the rituals themselves are engineered so that they include an element of chance in the choice of the victim, but mythologies have never taken this into account.

Although we have already called attention to those rites designed to give a role to chance in the selection of the victim, it may be that we have not put sufficient stress on this essential aspect.

Sporting contests and games of chance appear to modern man most incongruous as ritual practices. The Uitoto Indians, for example, incorporate a balloon game into their ritual; and the Kayans of Borneo use a top in the course of their religious ceremonies.

Even more remarkable, apparently even more incongruous, is the game of dice that figures in the funeral rites of the Canelos Indians. Only the men participate in this game. Divided into two rival groups and lined up on either side of the deceased, they take turns casting their dice *over* the corpse. The sacred spirit, in the person of the dead man, determines the outcome of each throw. The winner is awarded one of the dead man's domestic animals, which is slaughtered on the spot, and the women prepare a meal from it for the assembled mourners.

Jensen, in citing these facts, remarks that the games are not simply

additions to established religious practices.² If one were to say that the Canelos Indians "play at dice during the funeral rites of their parents," one would be conveying the wrong idea of the ceremonies. For this game takes place only in conjunction with these funeral rites. It is modern man who thinks of games of this sort as exclusively secular, and we must not project that idea onto the Canelos Indians. This is not to say that our own games have nothing to do with rites; in fact, they originate in rites. But, as usual, we have got things reversed. For us, games of chance are a secular activity upon which a religious meaning has been superimposed. The true state of affairs is precisely the opposite: games originate in rites that have been divested, to a greater or lesser degree, of their sacred character. Huizinga's famous theory of play should be inverted. It is not play that envelops the sacred, but the sacred that envelops the notion of play.

Death, like any passage, entails violence. The passage into the beyond by a member of the community may provoke (among other difficulties) quarrels among the survivors, for there is always the problem of how to redistribute the dead man's belongings. In order to meet the threat of maleficent contagion the community must have recourse to the universal model, to generative violence; it must attend to the advice of the sacred itself. In this particular case, the community has perceived and retained the role of choice in the liberating decision. If violence is given free play, chance alone is responsible for the ultimate resolution of the conflict; and the rite tries to force the hand of chance before violence has had the opportunity to act. The rite aims straight at the final result, achieving, as it were, a minimum expenditure of violence.

The Canelos dice game offers a clue to the reason why the theme of chance recurs so frequently in folklore, myth, and fable. Oedipus, it will be remembered, refers to himself as the son of *Tychè* -- that is, Fortune or Chance. There were towns in the ancient world in which the selection of magistrates was made by drawing lots, for the power bestowed by ritually regulated chance always contains a sacred element, the sacred "fusion of opposites." Indeed, the more we reflect on this theme of Chance, the more universal it appears. In popular legend and fairy tale Chance is often invoked to "find" kings or, conversely (and the converse is always the other face of the same coin), to designate someone to undertake a difficult or perilous mission, a mission that might involve self-sacrifice for the general good -- someone, in short, to assume the role of surrogate victim:

*On tira-t à la courte paille
Pour savoir qui serait mangé*

²Jensen, *Mythes et cultes chez les peuples primitifs*, trans. M. Metzger and J. Goffinet (Paris: Payot, 1954), 77-83.

(One drew for the short straw

to know who would be eaten.)³

Yet is there any way of proving that the motif of Chance has its origin in the arbitrary nature of the violent resolution? There are numerous instances in which the drawing of lots so clearly supports the meaning proposed here that it is virtually impossible to doubt the connection. One such example is the Old Testament Book of Jonah. God tells Jonah to go forth and warn the people of Nineveh that their city will be destroyed if they do not repent of their ways. Hoping to evade this thankless task, the reluctant prophet embarks on a ship sailing for Tarshish:

But the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.

Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.

So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.

And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. (Jonah 1:4-7)

The ship represents the community, the tempest the sacrificial crisis. The jettisoned cargo is the cultural system that has abandoned its distinctions. The fact that everybody calls out to his own particular god indicates a breakdown in the religious order. The floundering ship can be compared to the city of Nineveh, threatened with destruction unless its people repent. The forms may vary, but the crisis is always the same.

The passengers cast lots to determine who is responsible for the crisis. Chance can always be trusted to reveal the truth, for it reflects the will of the divinity. The lot designates Jonah, who proceeds to confess his culpability:

Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

Then they said unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous.

³From "*Il était un petit navire*," folkloric French song. -Ed.

And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. (Jonah 1:10-

12)

The sailors attempt to gain the shore by their own efforts; they would like to save Jonah's life. But they finally recognize the futility of their efforts, and address themselves to the Lord -- even though he is Jonah's Lord and not their own:

Wherefore they cried unto the Lord, and said, We beseech thee, O Lord, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased thee.

So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea; and the sea ceased from her raging.

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the Lord, and made vows. (Jonah 1:14-16)

What we see here is a reflection of the sacrificial crisis and its resolution. The victim is chosen by lot; his expulsion saves the community, as represented by the ship's crew; and a new god is acknowledged through the crew's sacrifice to the Lord whom they did not know before. Taken in isolation this story tells us little, but when seen against the backdrop of our whole discussion, each detail acquires significance.

Modern man flatly rejects the notion that Chance is the reflection of divine will. Primitive man views things differently. For him, Chance embodies all the obvious characteristics of the sacred. Now it deals violently with man, now it showers him with gifts. Indeed, what is more capricious in its favors than Chance, more susceptible to those rapid reversals of temper that are invariably associated with the gods?

The sacred nature of Chance is reflected in the practice of the lottery. In some sacrificial rites the choice of victim by means of a lottery serves to underline the relationship between Chance and generative violence. In an essay entitled "*Sur le symbolisme politique: le Foyer commun*," Louis Gernet cites a particularly revealing ritual, which took place in Cos during a festival dedicated to Zeus:

The choice of victim was determined by a sort of lottery in which all the cattle, which were originally presented separately by each division of each tribe, were mixed together in a common herd. The animal ultimately selected was executed on the following day, having first been "introduced to Hestia," and undergone various rites. Immediately prior to the ritual presentation, Hestia herself receives homage in the form of an animal sacrifice.⁴

⁴Gernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique* (Paris: Maspero, 1968), 393.

Hestia, the common hearth, in all probability marked the place where the original act of communal violence was perpetrated. It seems more than likely, therefore, that the selection of the victim by lottery was meant to simulate that original violence. The

selection is not made by men, but left to divine Chance, acting through violence. The mixing together of the cattle that had originally been identified by tribe or by division of tribe is particularly revealing. This deliberate confusion of distinctions, this merger into a communal togetherness, constitutes an obligatory preamble to the lottery; clearly it was introduced to reproduce the exact order of the original events. The arbitrary and violent resolution that serves as a model for the lottery takes place at the very height of the sacrificial crisis, when the distinctions delegated to the members of society by the cultural order succumb to the reciprocal violence and are merged into a communal mass.

A traditional discussion of Dionysus involves a demonstration of how he differs from Apollo or from the other gods. But is it not more urgent to show how Dionysus and Apollo share the same characteristics, why the one and the other should be called divine? Surely all the gods, despite their differences, have something in common, something from which all their distinctive qualities spring. Without such a common basis, the differences become meaningless.

Scholars of religion devote themselves to the study of gods and divinity. They should be able to provide clear and concise definitions of these concepts, but they do not. They are obliged, of course, to decide what falls within their field of study and what falls outside it, yet they leave the crucial and most decisively scientific task of *defining* their subject to uninformed public opinion. Even assuming that it is possible -- or justifiable -- to stretch the concept of divinity to include each and everybody's idea of the divine, the so-called science of religion can neither do without this approach nor provide a convincing defense of it.

There is no true science of religion, any more that there is a science of culture. Scholars are still disputing about which cult Greek tragedy should be ascribed to. Were the ancients correct in assigning tragedy to Dionysus, or does it rightfully belong to another god? Undoubtedly this is a genuine problem; but it is also, I think, a secondary one. Far more important, but far less discussed, is the relationship between tragedy and the divine, between the theater in general and religion.

Whether my theory proves to be true or false, it can, I believe, lay claim to being "scientific," if only because it allows for a rigorous definition of such terms as "divinity," "ritual," "rite," and "religion." Any phenomenon associated with the acts of remembering, commemorat-

ing, and perpetuating a unanimity that springs from the murder of a surrogate victim can be termed "religious."

The surrogate victim theory avoids at once the impressionism of the positivist approach and the arbitrary and "reductivist" schemata of psychoanalysis. Although this theory brings together many crucial aspects of man's experience, it offers no simple substitute for the "wondrous profusion" of the world's religious systems. Indeed, one ought perhaps to ask whether this "profusion" is really as wondrous as all that; in any case, the mechanism proposed here carries us beyond the mere cataloging of characteristics. The endless diversity of myths and rituals derives from the fact that they all seek to recollect

and reproduce something they never succeed in comprehending. There is only one generative event, only one way to grasp its truth: by means of my hypothesis. On the other hand, there are innumerable ways of missing it; hence the multiplicity of religious systems. My thesis results from an eminently positive line of inquiry. I have a certain confidence in language -contrary to some modern thinkers who, at the very moment when truth becomes accessible in language, declare that language is incapable of expressing truth. This absolute distrust of language, in a period of mythic dilapidation like our own, may well serve the same purpose as the excessive confidence that prevailed before the dilapidation, when no decisive truth was in sight.

Our theory should be approached, then, as one approaches any scientific hypothesis. The reader must ask himself whether it actually takes into account all the items it claims to cover; whether it enables him to assign to primitive institutions an origin, function, and structure that cohere to one another as well as to their overall context; whether it allows him to organize and assess the vast accumulation of ethnological data, and to do so in a truly economical manner, without recourse to "exceptions" and "aberrations." Above all, he must ask himself whether this theory applies not in single, isolated instances but in every conceivable situation. Can he see the surrogate victim as that stone initially rejected by the builders, only to become the cornerstone of a whole mythic and ritualistic edifice? Or as the key that opens any religious text, revealing its innermost workings and rendering it forever accessible to the human intellect?

That incoherence traditionally attributed to religious ideas seems to be particularly associated with the theme of the scapegoat. Frazer treats this subject at length; his writing is remarkable for its abundance of description and paucity of explanation. Frazer refuses to concern himself with the formidable forces at work behind religious significations, and

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his openly professed contempt for religious themes protects him from all unwelcome discoveries:

The notion that we can transfer our guilt and sufferings to some other being who will bear them for us is familiar to the savage mind. It arises from a very obvious confusion between the physical and the mental, between the material and the immaterial. Because it is possible to shift a load of wood, stones, or what not, from our own back to the back of another, the savage fancies that it is equally possible to shift the burden of his pains and sorrows to another, who will suffer them in his stead. Upon this idea he acts, and the result is an endless number of very unamiable devices for palming off upon someone else the trouble which a man shrinks from bearing himself. In short, the principle of vicarious suffering is commonly understood and practiced by races who stand on a low level of social and intellectual culture. ^{5.}

However, the disrepute in which he is held today is far from justifiable, for few scholars have labored so diligently in the field or set forth their findings with such admirable clarity. And many later writers have in effect done little more than repeat in somewhat different form Frazer's own profession of ignorance.

Anyone who tries to subvert the sacrificial principle by turning it to derision invariably becomes its unwitting accomplice. Frazer is no exception. His work contributes to the concealment of the violent impulse that lurks within the rite of sacrifice. Such phrases as "physical loads" and "bodily and mental ailments" recall nothing so much as the platitudes of second-rate theologians; and Frazer treats the act of sacrificial substitution as if it were pure fantasy, a nonphenomenon. Yet authors closer to our time have done the same and with considerably less excuse, for the Freudian notion of transference, inadequate as it is in some respects, should at least have alerted us that something vital is missing from the picture.

The modern mind still cannot bring itself to acknowledge the basic principle behind that mechanism which, in a single decisive movement, curtails reciprocal violence and imposes structure on the community. Because of this willful blindness, modern thinkers continue to see religion as an isolated, wholly fictitious phenomenon cherished only by a few backward peoples or milieus. And these same thinkers can now project upon religion alone the responsibility for a violent projection of violence that truly pertains to all societies including our own. This attitude is seen at its most flagrant in the writing of that gentleman-ethnologist Sir James

⁵J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1 vol., abridged (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 624.

Frazer. Frazer, along with his rationalist colleagues and disciples, was perpetually engaged in a ritualistic expulsion and consummation of religion itself, which he used as a sort of scapegoat for all human thought. Frazer, like many another modern thinker, washed his hands of all the sordid acts perpetrated by religion and pronounced himself free of all taint of superstition. He was evidently unaware that this act of handwashing has long been recognized as a purely intellectual, nonpolluting equivalent of some of the most ancient customs of mankind. His writing amounts to a fanatical and superstitious dismissal of all the fanaticism and superstition he had spent the better part of a lifetime studying.

The *sacrificial* character of this misunderstanding should remind us that today, more than ever before, we will encounter resistance when we try to rid ourselves of ignorance -- even though the time has come for this ignorance to yield to knowledge. This resistance is similar to what Freud calls resistance, but is far more formidable. We are not dealing with the sort of repressed desires that everyone is really eager to put on public display, but with the most tenacious myths of modernism; with everything, in short, that claims to be free of all mythical influence.

What I have said of Freud holds true for all modes of modern thought; most particularly for ethnology, to which Freud was irresistibly drawn. That ethnology is alive today, when the traditional modes of interpretation are sick unto death, is evidence of a new sacrificial crisis. This crisis is similar but not identical to previous ones. We have managed to extricate ourselves from the sacred somewhat more successfully than other societies have done, to the point of losing all memory of the generative violence; but we are now about to rediscover it. The essential violence returns to us in a spectacular

manner -- not only in the form of a violent history but also in the form of subversive knowledge. This crisis invites us, for the very first time, to violate the taboo that neither Heraclitus nor Euripides could ever quite manage to violate, and to expose to the light of reason the role played by violence in human society.

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Part II Triangular Desire

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Chapter 3 Triangular Desire

"Mimesis" or "mimetic desire" is the single most important concept for understanding Girard's thought. His main reason for using the Greek word rather than "imitation" is that it "makes the conflictual aspect of mimesis conceivable," something not possible with the drained and feeble imitation (Girard, *Things Hidden*, 18). "Triangular Desire" is an excerpt taken from the first chapter of Girard first book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1-17). It includes the triangular structure of desire: self, other as mediator* (later he would switch to "model"*), and the object that the self or subject desires because he or she knows, imagines, or suspects the mediator desires it. Internal* and external* mediation (see under Model/Mediator),* rivalry, resentment, envy, and vanity are discussed in the course of Girard's argument that the romantic concept of a spontaneous desire is illusory. The only essential aspect of mimesis that Girard did not emphasize in this early analysis is the reality of mimesis as a capacity and force which operates prior to cognition and representation, although of course it becomes intertwined with representation in all the forms of human culture.* For further reading on mimesis as precognitive and prerepresentational, see *Things Hidden*, 1-23, and "To Double Business Bound,"200-203, as well as the interview that constitutes the epilogue to the Reader.

"I want you to know, Sancho, that the famous Amadis of Gaul was one of the most perfect knight errants. But what am I saying, one of the most perfect? I should say the only, the first, the unique, the master and lord of all those who existed in the world. . . . I think . . . that,