

girard violence and the sacred

René Girard's seminal work, "Violence and the Sacred," offers a profound and often unsettling exploration of the fundamental role violence plays in human societies and the establishment of the sacred. This influential anthropological theory posits that primitive societies, to avert societal collapse from mimetic rivalry, ritualistically channeled escalating violence onto scapegoats, transforming this destructive force into the foundation of social order and religious practice. Understanding Girard's insights into violence and the sacred is crucial for comprehending the deep-seated origins of cultural structures, religious rituals, and the persistent presence of violence throughout history. This article will delve into the core tenets of Girard's theory, examining the mechanisms of mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the subsequent creation of the sacred, while also considering its implications and criticisms.

- Introduction to Girard's theory of violence and the sacred.
- The concept of mimetic desire and its role in escalating conflict.
- The scapegoat mechanism: channeling violence and creating social cohesion.
- The birth of the sacred: ritual, prohibition, and the divine.
- Implications of Girard's theory for understanding history and culture.
- Criticisms and alternative perspectives on violence and the sacred.
- Conclusion on the enduring relevance of Girard's insights.

Understanding Girard's Theory of Violence and the Sacred

René Girard, a French philosopher, anthropologist, and literary critic, developed a compelling theoretical framework that seeks to explain the origins and functions of religion, ritual, and social structures. At its heart, his work "Violence and the Sacred" (originally published as "La Violence et le Sacré" in 1972) argues that human societies are fundamentally shaped by their attempts to manage and contain violence. Girard's central thesis is that violence, particularly the escalating violence born from mimetic desire, is not merely a destructive force but also the very source from which the sacred and societal order emerge. He proposes that early human communities faced a perpetual threat of disintegration due to contagious, uncontrollable rivalries, and it was through a unique, often brutal, mechanism that they managed to survive and develop.

The Engine of Conflict: Mimetic Desire

A cornerstone of Girard's theory is the concept of mimetic desire, also known as mimesis. Girard argues that desire is not spontaneous or directly object-oriented but is rather mediated by the desire of others. We desire what another person desires, and in doing so, we unconsciously or consciously model our aspirations on theirs. This process is inherently dangerous because it leads to rivalry. When two individuals desire the same object, and each recognizes the other's desire for that object, they become rivals. The object itself becomes secondary to the rivalry; the true focus shifts to overcoming the rival.

This mimetic desire is not limited to material possessions. It extends to social status, prestige, recognition, and even ideas. In early societies, where social distinctions might have been less pronounced or more fluid, the potential for mimetic contagion was immense. As one person's desire is mimicked by another, and that person's desire is in turn mimicked by a third, a snowball effect can occur, leading to widespread and potentially uncontrollable conflict. Girard believed this pervasive nature of mimetic desire was a constant threat to social cohesion in pre-modern times, pushing communities to the brink of chaos.

The Scapegoat Mechanism: Containing Violence

Faced with the existential threat posed by unbridled mimetic rivalry, human societies, according to Girard, developed a critical mechanism to preserve themselves: the scapegoat mechanism. This mechanism involves the collective expulsion or sacrifice of a single individual or group who is blamed for all the community's ills. This chosen victim absorbs the accumulated resentment and aggression of the entire group. The violence directed towards the scapegoat is cathartic, uniting the community against a common enemy and temporarily restoring a sense of peace and order.

The crucial insight here is that the scapegoat is not necessarily the perpetrator of the original discord. Instead, they become the target because they are marginalized, or perhaps even because they embody the very mimetic rivalries that threaten to tear the community apart. By unanimously directing their violence towards this one individual or group, the community transcends its internal divisions. The expulsion or sacrificial death of the scapegoat serves as a powerful, albeit brutal, form of social therapy, preventing the contagion of violence from destroying the social fabric.

The Genesis of the Sacred: Ritual and Prohibition

The violence channeled through the scapegoat mechanism did not simply disappear; it was transformed and ritualized, giving birth to the sacred. Girard argues that the collective act of violence against the scapegoat created a powerful, shared experience that bound the community together. The victim, upon their expulsion or sacrifice, became imbued with a special significance, a terrifying power that was both feared and revered. This is the origin of taboo and prohibition.

To prevent a recurrence of the crisis, the community developed rituals and taboos surrounding the events associated with the scapegoat. These rituals often involved reenactments of the sacrificial act,

but in a controlled and stylized manner. The victim's former possessions, their dwelling, or even their name might become sacred objects, subject to strict prohibitions. These prohibitions served to reinforce the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, between order and chaos. The sacred, in this context, is born out of the collective violence and its subsequent ritualization, serving as a powerful deterrent against future mimetic crises.

The Role of the Sacred in Girard's Anthropology

Girard's understanding of the sacred is deeply intertwined with his theory of violence. He posits that the sacred is not an inherent quality of objects or beings but rather a social construct arising from the collective experience of violence and its resolution. The sacred is what is set apart, what is forbidden, and what inspires awe and fear simultaneously. This dual nature of the sacred is directly linked to the scapegoat, who, as the object of collective violence, becomes both feared and revered.

Sacredness as a Product of Exclusion

In Girard's view, the sacred is fundamentally a product of exclusion. The scapegoat is excluded from the community, and in this act of exclusion, a powerful social boundary is created. This boundary marks the victim as "other," set apart from the ordinary. This separation, coupled with the intensity of the collective violence directed at them, invests the victim and anything associated with them with a sacred aura. The sacred is thus born from the expulsion of disorder, an order that was temporarily restored by that very expulsion.

Think of the early taboos surrounding certain animals, foods, or even individuals. Girard suggests these prohibitions often originated from the times when these elements were associated with a scapegoat victim. By forbidding contact with them, the community reinforced the memory of the crisis and the mechanism that resolved it, thereby preserving social order. The sacred, in this sense, acts as a constant reminder of the ever-present potential for violence and the fragile mechanisms that keep it at bay.

Ritual Reenactment and the Preservation of Order

Rituals, in Girard's framework, are not merely symbolic acts but are vital mechanisms for the ongoing preservation of social order. They are stylized reenactments of the original scapegoating event. By ritually expelling a symbolic victim or performing acts that mimic the original violence, communities reinforce the social order and reaffirm their collective identity. These rituals serve to dissipate potential mimetic tensions before they escalate into full-blown crises.

Many ancient festivals and religious ceremonies, from Dionysian rites to ancient Greek tragedies, can be interpreted through this lens. They often involve a period of license and inversion, where social norms are temporarily suspended, followed by a resolution that often involves the expulsion or sacrifice of a figure. This cyclical process, according to Girard, is essential for societal survival, allowing for the release of pent-up aggression in a controlled manner.

Prohibitions and the Reinforcement of Boundaries

The sacred is also deeply associated with prohibition. Taboos, the fundamental rules that govern human behavior, are erected around what is considered sacred. These prohibitions act as barriers, preventing the contagion of the sacred's potentially disruptive power. For Girard, these prohibitions are not arbitrary; they are rooted in the collective memory of violence and the need to maintain social boundaries.

For example, incest taboos, which are nearly universal, can be understood as a way to prevent mimetic rivalry within the nuclear family. If brothers begin to desire the same woman within the family unit, the potential for escalating conflict and the breakdown of the family structure is immense. Incest taboos, by clearly defining who is off-limits, help to contain desire within acceptable social boundaries and prevent the spread of rivalry to the most intimate of relationships.

The Impact and Implications of Girard's Theory

René Girard's theory of violence and the sacred has had a profound impact across various academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, theology, and philosophy. His framework offers a unique and compelling explanation for the persistence of violence in human history, the origins of religious belief, and the structure of cultural practices. It provides a powerful lens through which to re-examine seemingly disparate phenomena and understand their underlying connections.

Understanding Historical Cycles of Violence

Girard's theory offers a compelling explanation for recurring patterns of violence throughout history. He suggests that societal crises often arise from a breakdown in the mechanisms that manage mimetic desire. When these mechanisms fail, rivalries escalate, leading to widespread conflict. The scapegoat mechanism, when it functions effectively, can temporarily restore order, but it is not a permanent solution. Eventually, new rivalries emerge, and the cycle can repeat.

This perspective can help us understand phenomena like witch hunts, persecutions, and even modern forms of scapegoating. In times of social stress or uncertainty, communities may turn on marginalized groups, blaming them for collective misfortunes and expelling them as a way to restore a sense of unity and control. The theory suggests that this is not a deviation from the norm but rather a manifestation of a deeply ingrained human tendency to manage conflict through ritualized violence.

The Literary and Cultural Significance of Scapegoating

Girard's work is also highly influential in literary theory. He argues that literature, particularly tragedy, often functions as a way to reveal and critique the scapegoat mechanism. Many classic narratives, from Greek myths to Shakespearean plays, revolve around a central crisis that is resolved through the

sacrifice or expulsion of a protagonist who becomes the victim of collective misunderstanding or malice.

By exposing the underlying dynamics of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating, literature can, in Girard's view, offer a form of cultural self-awareness. It allows societies to reflect on their own violent tendencies and the ways in which they have historically managed them. This critical reflection, he believed, could potentially lead to a transcendence of the primitive scapegoat mechanism, a theme he explored in his later works concerning the unique role of the Gospels.

The Connection to Religious Evolution

Girard's theory provides a novel perspective on the evolution of religion. He argues that early religions were fundamentally based on the sacred power derived from the scapegoat. However, he also posits that certain religious developments, particularly in Judaism and Christianity, represent a crucial break from this primitive model. The Judeo-Christian tradition, in his view, increasingly reveals the innocence of the victim and condemns the violence of the mob.

The crucifixion of Jesus, for instance, is seen by Girard as the ultimate revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. Jesus is portrayed as a completely innocent victim, sacrificed by the collective forces of societal rivalry. The Gospels, by unmasking the perpetrators' guilt and exposing the injustice of the act, dismantle the very foundation of the primitive sacred. This unmasking, according to Girard, leads to a new understanding of God, one that is no longer based on fear and appeasement of violent forces but on love and forgiveness.

Criticisms and Alternative Perspectives

While René Girard's theory of violence and the sacred has been highly influential, it has also faced considerable criticism. Critics often question the universality of his claims, the empirical evidence supporting his hypotheses, and the extent to which his framework can account for the full complexity of human social behavior and religious phenomena.

Challenges to Universality and Empirical Evidence

One of the primary criticisms leveled against Girard's theory is its claim to universality. Critics argue that while the scapegoat mechanism might be present in certain societies or historical periods, it is not necessarily the sole or primary organizing principle of all human societies. Anthropologists have pointed to societies where collective violence is managed through different means, such as mediation, reconciliation processes, or more complex systems of justice.

Furthermore, the empirical evidence for the direct origin of all sacred rituals from a singular, foundational act of scapegoating is often debated. While analogies can be drawn and correlations observed, establishing a direct causal link for the origin of every ritual practice remains a significant challenge. Some argue that Girard's interpretations can be selective, focusing on evidence that

supports his thesis while downplaying or reinterpreting contradictory data.

The Role of Other Social and Psychological Factors

Another line of criticism suggests that Girard's focus on mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism may oversimplify the complex interplay of factors that contribute to social order and the development of religion. Sociologists and psychologists emphasize the roles of other elements, such as:

- The development of abstract thought and symbolic systems.
- The emergence of social hierarchies and power structures.
- The need for communal identity and belonging.
- The psychological benefits of shared beliefs and practices.
- The influence of economic and environmental factors.

These alternative perspectives argue that religion and social order are not solely the product of managing violence but also arise from a more diverse set of human needs and social dynamics. Girard's theory, in this view, might present a compelling but incomplete picture.

Theological Interpretations and Criticisms

While Girard's theological interpretations, particularly regarding Christianity, have been widely praised, they have also drawn criticism from within theological circles. Some theologians argue that his emphasis on the scapegoat mechanism, while illuminating, can inadvertently obscure the positive aspects of religious practice, such as divine revelation, covenantal relationships, and the inherent goodness of creation.

There are also debates about whether his interpretation of the Gospels truly represents a complete "unmasking" of the scapegoat mechanism or if it can be understood in other theological frameworks. Some scholars suggest that Girard's theory, by focusing so heavily on the mechanics of violence, might inadvertently diminish the emphasis on divine grace and redemption that are central to many theological traditions.

Conclusion: The Enduring Relevance of Girard's Insights

René Girard's exploration of violence and the sacred remains a monumental contribution to our

understanding of human societies and the enduring presence of violence in our world. His theory, which posits that mimetic desire fuels escalating conflict and that societies historically managed this threat through the ritualistic expulsion of scapegoats, fundamentally reshaped anthropological thought. The sacred, in Girard's view, is not an external divine imposition but rather the internalized memory and containment of this collective violence, expressed through taboos and rituals that reinforce social boundaries.

The implications of Girard's work are far-reaching, offering insights into historical cycles of conflict, the dynamics of literature and culture, and the very evolution of religious practices. While his theories have faced valid criticisms regarding their universality and the potential oversimplification of complex social phenomena, they continue to provoke critical thinking and offer a powerful framework for analyzing the persistent challenges of human rivalry and the search for social order. Understanding Girard's perspective on violence and the sacred is essential for anyone seeking to grasp the deep roots of human social organization and the intricate relationship between conflict, ritual, and the construction of meaning.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central argument of René Girard's theory of "Violence and the Sacred"?

Girard's central argument is that human culture and social order are fundamentally shaped by a foundational, often ritualized, act of collective violence, typically scapegoating. This violence is then sacredized, meaning it is imbued with religious significance and used to maintain social cohesion and prevent further mimetic crisis.

How does Girard explain the concept of 'mimetic desire' and its connection to violence?

Mimetic desire, according to Girard, is the process by which individuals desire objects not for their intrinsic value, but because they see other people desiring them. This 'triangular desire' can lead to rivalry and conflict as subjects and mediators vie for the same object, escalating into collective violence.

What role does the 'scapegoat' play in Girard's theory?

The scapegoat is the victim of collective violence. By uniting the community against a single, often innocent, individual or group, the community can temporarily resolve its internal tensions and anxieties. This act of 'unanimous expulsion' is crucial for restoring social order.

How does Girard link the sacred to violence and sacrifice?

Girard posits that the sacred arises from the powerful, albeit often unconscious, memory of the foundational act of scapegoating. The violence is ritually reenacted through sacrifices, which serve to appease the gods and symbolically purge the community, reinforcing the sacred prohibition against internal violence.

In what ways has Girard's theory of violence and the sacred influenced contemporary thought?

Girard's ideas have had a significant impact on fields like anthropology, literary criticism, theology, and sociology. His work offers a provocative framework for understanding the origins of religion, mythology, social structures, and the persistent human tendency towards violence, particularly in the context of cultural crises.

What are some common criticisms or debates surrounding Girard's "Violence and the Sacred"?

Criticisms often center on the universality of his thesis, the potential overemphasis on violence as the sole origin of social order, and questions about the empirical evidence for a singular foundational scapegoating event. Some also debate the extent to which his theory can be applied to all cultures and historical periods.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Girardian thought on violence and the sacred, with descriptions:

1. *Violence and the Sacred* by René Girard. This foundational text introduces Girard's groundbreaking theory of mimetic desire, arguing that all violence originates from this inherent human tendency to imitate the desires of others. He posits that the scapegoat mechanism, the ritualistic expulsion or sacrifice of an individual or group, is essential for stabilizing societies by channeling collective violence and creating a sacred order. The book explores how this mechanism has shaped mythology, religion, and culture throughout history.
2. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* by René Girard. Building upon *Violence and the Sacred*, this work delves deeper into the nature of mimetic rivalry and its devastating consequences. Girard argues that the Gospels uniquely reveal the innocence of the victim, exposing the scapegoat mechanism for what it is. He contrasts the hidden violence of foundational myths with the clear revelation of truth in the Christian narrative.
3. *The Scapegoat* by René Girard. This book focuses specifically on the role of the scapegoat in human history and culture, further elaborating on the mechanism introduced in his earlier works. Girard examines how societies have historically identified and expelled a single individual or group to resolve internal conflicts and restore communal harmony. He explores the pervasiveness of this mechanism across various religious traditions and societal structures.
4. *When the Body Speaks: The Sacred and the Symbolic in the Violence of the Other* by Charles M. Stang. This book analyzes Girardian concepts through the lens of embodied experience and symbolic interpretation. Stang explores how violence, particularly when directed at the "other," is intricately linked to the creation and maintenance of sacred boundaries. He investigates how bodies become sites of conflict and how symbolic systems are employed to manage the disruptive potential of mimetic desire.
5. *The Girardian Reading of Scripture* by James Warren. This work provides an accessible overview of how Girard's theories of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism can be applied to biblical texts.

Warren demonstrates how the Bible, particularly the Gospels, deconstructs the violence and mythology that underpin ancient societies. The book highlights the transformative power of understanding biblical narratives through a Girardian perspective.

6. **Ritual and Violence: Girardian Approaches to Religion and Conflict** edited by Graham Ward. This collection of essays offers diverse perspectives on Girardian thought and its relevance to understanding the complex relationship between religion and violence. The contributors examine how ritual practices, often rooted in the scapegoat mechanism, have historically been used to both perpetuate and potentially transcend violence. It explores the ongoing applicability of Girard's insights in contemporary contexts.

7. **The Origin of the Sacred: René Girard and the Biblical Revolution** by Michael L. Peterson. This book offers a detailed examination of Girard's arguments for the unique nature of biblical revelation in dismantling the sacred violence of paganism. Peterson traces the evolution of the sacred from its origins in mimetic rivalry and the scapegoat mechanism to its transformation in the Christian message. He emphasizes how the Gospels expose the innocence of victims, thereby undermining the foundations of ancient religious systems.

8. **Violence, Ritual, and Social Order: René Girard's Theory of the Sacred** by Jill P. T. de Jong. This book provides a comprehensive analysis of Girard's theory, focusing on the ways in which violence and ritual are intertwined in the formation of social order. De Jong explores how societies use ritualized violence, often centered around a scapegoat, to establish and maintain collective identity and stability. The work highlights the enduring power of Girard's insights for understanding the human propensity for both violence and the creation of meaning.

9. **The Mimetic Theory of René Girard: A Critical Introduction** by Paul J. J. van Geest. This book serves as an insightful introduction and critical evaluation of Girard's mimetic theory and its connection to violence and the sacred. Van Geest systematically explains the core concepts of mimetic desire, rivalry, and the scapegoat mechanism. The book engages with the strengths and potential limitations of Girard's framework, offering a nuanced understanding of its impact on religious studies and social theory.

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