

René Girard, James Williams, and the Genesis of Violence

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RENÉ GIRARD, SACRIFICE, AND SCRIPTURE

René Girard has developed a bold synthesis which relates sacrifice, the place of desire in human society, and the revelatory value of the Bible. His thesis has occasioned controversy on both sides of the Atlantic and may constitute the most comprehensive analysis of religion and culture since the work of Sigmund Freud.¹ Girard commences his analysis with a discussion of desire, which he understands to be flawed from the outset. The seed of destruction within desire is that it is "mimetic": one imitates a model whose passions can never be one's own, and therefore the model is at one and the same time a rival. Girard's first book was devoted to *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.² In it he sketched the "romantic lie" which leads to mimetic desire by reviewing the works of novelists such as Stendhal and Proust. Girard counterpoised the lie of romanticism with the "novelistic truth" which renounces mimetic desire and in so doing discovers a new possibility in relationship with others.

Girard's interest in the "double" who is both model and rival was further explored in a work on Dostoyevski.³ But his distinctive contribution to the study of religion came a decade later, in 1972, when he related his understanding of desire to the institution (or

1. For an appreciative review of his work, cf. James G. Williams, "The Innocent Victim: René Girard on Violence, Sacrifice, and the Sacred," *RelSRev* 14 (1988) 320-26.

2. The title of the French original is *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961); the English translation was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1965.

3. *Dostoïevski: du double à l'unité* (Paris: Plon, 1963).

rather, as we shall see, the fact) of sacrifice.⁴ In Girard's analysis, mimetic desire is a threat to the very existence of human society because its natural conclusion is the displacement (that is, the destruction) of the other who is both model and rival. The desire to have what the other has (even to the point of wishing to be what the other is), a basic, human passion, is the root of violence: it is both ineluctable and incompatible with the existence of human culture.

Sacrifice is the symptom of communal violence and—at the same time—the means by which society attempts to conceal and avert violence. The violence of society is imputed to a person or animal who is the sacrificial victim. The ritual act of killing that victim, which is then deified in view of the killing's apparently beneficial effect upon society, both restrains and assuages the communal violence which is at its root. The Bible, particularly the New Testament, is held to be especially revelatory both in laying bare the truth that sacrificial victims are innocent (from Abel to the servant of Isaiah 40-55, and on to Jesus) and in pointing forward to the liberation from violence (and therefore from sacrifice) which love makes possible.⁵

Especially in his treatment of a medieval text, "Le Jugement du Roy de Navarre" by Guillaume de Machaut, Girard explicates his vision of violence and sacrifice.⁶ Guillaume attributes to Jews (and their supporters) the coming of the Black Death, even to the point of accusing them of poisoning on a massive scale. The plague itself is an event so frightening Guillaume does not give it a single name; rather, he refers to it by means of a collection of fantastic and realistic images and their alleged causes. The jumble of cognition and causality in Guillaume's poem is taken by Girard to support his analysis, in that the desire to *blame* is discovered within the perception of the evil in itself. The primary manifestation of the dangers of the plague is social, in the breakdown of routine protocols of survival and life. When they are perceived to dissolve, the natural (if unreflective) reaction is to seek a social cause for the dangers (p. 11, cf. pp. 8-10). Girard sees the value of Guillaume's poem in its naïve or unconscious manifestation of the violence of persecution (pp. 16, 17; cf. p. 61), and he associates it with pogroms in France at the time

4. Cf. *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), translated as *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. P. Gregory; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

5. Cf. *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde: Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy LeFort* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), translated as *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* κερυμμένα ἀπὸ καταβολῆς (*Matthew 13,35*), (trans. S. Bann and M. Metteer; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

6. The discussion is conducted in what to my mind is Girard's most lucid and stimulating book to date (*Le bouc émissaire* [Paris: Grasset, 1982]).

of the Black Death. In this sense, it is a classic example of "textes de persecution" (p. 18). Persecutors regularly seek a social cause for the social chaos they perceive (p. 26), and they find it in those they accuse of political, social, and/or religious crimes (pp. 26, 27). The phenomenon, to Girard's mind, is transcultural. Although collective violence is best seen in the activities of mobs and their prejudices (pp. 28, 30-33), it is embodied in those myths which lie at the very foundation of cultures.

Girard characterizes his own scheme as universal. He believes there is a stereotypical pattern in which a crisis is perceived as an undifferentiated collection of social ills (although its cause may in fact be physical), some set of crimes is taken to be the cause of the crisis, and a marginal person or group becomes the culprit, the scapegoat against which social violence is released (p. 37). If the universality of violence is not evident, that is only because myths hide to the reality that they are rooted in the lynchings of the mobs which narrate them (p. 38). Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is read by Girard in a manner which illustrates his thesis: there is pestilence, crimes are attributed to Oedipus, he is marked as an outsider and an aristocrat, and—of course—he suffers (pp. 38, 39). Girard acknowledges that there is an element in myths that is absent from modern texts of persecution, which he refers to as "the sacred" (p. 58).

As he compares myths and texts of persecution, Girard comes to the conclusion that the former are distinctive in imputing the return to normality to the victims (p. 64). While texts of persecution represent the stunning confusion of social with natural ills, in finding social faults as causes of physical or other dangers, myths double the confusion by associating the mechanism of that false victimization with well-being. The innocent victim becomes a triumphant hero or a resuscitated god (p. 67). Girard sees vestiges of the supernatural in medieval texts of persecution, notably in the attribution to Jews of remarkable powers of healing and medicinal expertise (pp. 69-72), but on the whole he regards such elements as greatly diminished, when compared to myths. The differences are quantitatively so great as to make myths seem quite unlike texts of persecution (pp. 73, 74). In a telling particular, however, Girard believes that texts of persecution and myths are comparable: a real victim lies at the origins of both (p. 77). The concealment of violence makes ancient and modern culture contiguous (pp. 79, 80).

The mechanism which Girard has in mind is essentially simple: the power of his analysis consists in the range of its application, rather than in its complexity. The observation which lies at the center of his thought is that mobs attribute all manner of ills to social

causes, because it is first and last in social disruptions that dangers become apparent. The mob therefore finds a scapegoat⁷ and then credits the victim with supernatural power, in that its "intervention" (that is, its death by violence) restored the community to health. The reasoning is essentially magical, therefore, or mythological.⁸ Whatever the exact chronological sequence in the development of rites, Girard believes that the most brutal are nearest their violent origin (p. 82), and there is a persistent tendency in his work and his followers' to make human sacrifice the paradigm of all ritual. In such rituals, the faithful reenact the violence of their predecessors, while the words they use are epiphenomenal in relation to their imitation.⁹

Although the bulk of Girard's examples are taken from Greek mythology, he also exegetes Aztec¹⁰ and Scandinavian¹¹ myths in a like manner. In his work, he carefully distinguishes his approach from structuralism; he believes that the invocation of binary opposition as a principle of generation blinds the interpreter to the collective violence which is the substantial core of mythology (cf. pp. 106, 107). Indeed, it amounts to an ethical principle in Girard's analysis that interpretation should cease its complicity in the masking of collective violence; at just that point, actantial analysis obviously fails. The discipline of ethnology falls under the same accusation, and—in a particularly clever section—Girard compares Plato's censorship of mythic violence with the attempts of ethnologists to justify the violence of their subjects' rituals and myths (cf. pp. 111, 112, and the whole of chapter seven, "Les crimes des dieux," pp. 111-135).

In his treatment of the Gospels, Girard's analysis becomes openly ethical and programmatic (one might even say, evangelical) in its orientation. Human culture, in his almost Augustinian understanding, is devoted to the perpetual dissimulation of its actual origins in collective violence. But if that be so, he asks himself how we can become aware of our cultural mendacity: his conclusion is that there must be a force which counteracts the primordial mendacity of culture, one which lays bare the lie we perpetuate with the force of revelation (p. 147). That force, says Girard (with remarkably little

7. Curiously, Girard admits that "scapegoat" in his sense of the word does not relate directly to the rite described by that name in Leviticus (*Le bouc émissaire*, 61). But such rites would not be possible in his view unless they could avail themselves of people's susceptibility to the representation of primordial lynching.

8. "De tous ces Bœufs, d'ailleurs, nous disons à juste titre qu'ils raisonnent de façon magique. Nous disons aussi mythologique, je le rappelle" (*Le bouc émissaire*, 80).

9. *Le bouc émissaire*, 83. Girard's position in this regard may be viewed as the mirror's image of Lévi-Strauss's (cf. Luc de Heusch, *Sacrifice in Africa* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985] 1, 2).

10. Cf. chap. 5, "Teotihuacan," 85-96.

11. Cf. chap. 6, "Ases, Kourètes et Titans," 97-109.

argumentation), is the Bible.¹² The revelatory force of the Scriptures is to be found simply in their rejection of the stereotypes usually laid upon the victim, in the acknowledgment that Christ was persecuted for no good reason. He cites John 15:25 (in its reference to Ps 35:19; 69:5) and Luke 22:37 (in its reference to Isaiah 53). Unfortunately, he also cites Mark 15:28 as a parallel to Luke 22:37, but fails to mention that it is textually dubious. More seriously, he has John, rather than Matthew, introducing the scene with Pilate's wife (p. 155). Girard's thesis is sufficiently general to survive such mistakes, but they obviously do nothing to strengthen his case. His examples nonetheless help to explain how (and why) Girard sees the New Testament as bringing to term, to a decisive and definitive accomplishment, an initiative of revelation already under way in the "Old Testament" (p. 151).

What is posited here is a movement of liberation, founded upon the Bible, whose impact is to demystify human experience by releasing us from our various mythologies. In other words, Girard takes his interpretation to identify the sense in which, quite aside from the question of God, the Bible (particularly, the material he prefers in the Gospels) needs to be taken as revelatory. His reading of the Bible alone provides access to the innocent victim which lies at the heart of human culture, and—if we deny that reading—we condemn ourselves and our progeny to the mortal mimicry of violence. The seriousness of Girard's claim is reflected in his severe dismissal of other forms of an ideological reading of the Scriptures.¹³

JAMES WILLIAMS, GIRARD'S THEORY, AND THE BIBLE

In order to be credible as a reading of the Bible, Girard's program has required application to the biblical corpus by a scholar of the literature. Such an application is now offered by James G. Williams in

12. *Le bouc émissaire*, 148: "C'est la Bible telle que les chrétiens la définissent, c'est "union de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament qui constitue cette force de révélation."

13. Cf. p. 158: "Toutes les manoeuvres qui visent à démontrer l'antisémitisme, l'élitisme, l'anti-progressisme ou je ne sais quel autre crime dont les Evangiles seraient coupables face à l'innocente humanité, sa victime, ne sont intéressantes que par leur transparence symbolique. Les auteurs de ces manoeuvres ne voient pas qu'ils sont eux-mêmes interprétés par le texte auquel ils croient toujours régler son compte de façon définitive. Parmi les vaines entreprises des peuples, il n'en est pas de plus dérisoire." It might be mentioned that Girard is particularly ascerbic where it concerns fashionable attitudes amongst intellectuals, be they Christian or not; cf. p. 153: "Nous sommes classiques d'abord, romantiques ensuite, primitifs quand il le faut, modernistes avec fureur, néo-primitifs quand nous nous dégoûtons du modernisme, gnostiques toujours, bibliques jamais." Indeed, it may help to understand Girard that he writes from such a perspective.

The Bible, Violence & the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991). Expositions of the theory in respect of major portions of the New Testament have been offered recently by Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly.¹⁴ Williams's is the first attempt, however, comprehensively to develop a biblical theology on the basis of Girard's theory. Inevitably, there will be questions raised, both exegetical and theological, in a work whose range takes it from Genesis to the Gospels. For the present purpose, I wish to address only instances in which important aspects of Girard's theory may be questioned in exegetical terms. But I should say from the outset that there is scarcely an interpretation in Williams's book which will not arouse sustained interest.

His treatment of Moses might be taken as a case in point. Williams portrays Moses and the Israelites as victims in Egypt (pp. 73-88), and he provides a fascinating treatment of the conundrum involving Moses, Zipporah, and their son in Exod 4:24-26. As he reads the incident, divine violence, "that power of differentiation that is the sacred" (p. 76), mounts an "attack on Moses" which "is resolved by sacrifice in a twofold substitution: the life of the son for the life of Moses, and the foreskin for the life of the son" (p. 76). Of course, a classically Girardian interpretation would see such violence in entirely negative terms. Williams, however, effectively (if not always explicitly) tailors Girard's theory as he applies it. Specifically, he sees much earlier in canon than Girard does, and emphatically within the Hebrew Scriptures (not only the New Testament), "the divine reality that is just and compassionate, that intervenes on their [Israel's] behalf" (p. 78). Indeed, even God's violence is sanctioned by Williams, in that the "differentiation" which it conveys reveals "Israel, the innocent victim" as "the primary sign of this new order" (p. 81).

In a review of Williams's book, Hamerton-Kelly has observed that "The criterion of siding with the victims, by which Girard identifies revelation, is tricky because one can always use the status of victim to claim the moral high ground."¹⁵ He cautions that "Williams' repeated assertions that Israel's destiny is generated by faith and promise and not by the sacred are so strong that they risk giving the impression that Israel's exceptional status is ontological rather

14. Cf. "Sacred Violence and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3.13): The Death of Christ as a Sacrificial Travesty," *NTS* 36 (1990) 98-118; *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); and his edition of *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, Rene Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). He is currently preparing an analysis of Mark's Gospel from a Girardian perspective, *The Gospel and the Sacred: The Poetics of Violence in the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming).

15. Cf. *The Bulletin of the Colloquium on Violence & Religion* 2 (1992) 8-10, esp. p. 9.

than by grace" (p. 9).¹⁶ Hamerton-Kelly's unease derives to some extent from a signal departure Williams develops from Girard's theory. That departure is partly conscious and, it would seem, partly inadvertent.

The conscious aspect of the departure is Williams's programmatic insistence "that any language implying the inherent superiority of Christianity or the 'Christian' Gospels should be avoided" (p. 175). He may have overcompensated for the charge that Girard's theory is implicitly anti-Semitic, as when he sanguinely remarks that "the death of the firstborn of Egypt is not for the sake of Israel but for the sake of Egypt" (p. 120). But here we come to an interesting problem: the choice between a supersessionist argument or an exceptionalist argument in the evaluation of Israel. Because being a victim is by definition a relative condition, Israel may be portrayed as the oppressive husk or as the enduring remnant of what is valuable within the Hebrew Scriptures. Hamerton-Kelly (with Girard himself) inclines toward the former portrayal, Williams toward the latter. What occasions the dilemma, however, is the absolute privilege given the status of being a victim, whether as Israel or of Israel. Hamerton-Kelly's caution is therefore understandable, but Williams's correction of a possible reading of Girard's theory is also vital. Both of them neglect to consider that the concept of the victim itself might be too relative by definition to serve as the foundation of a systematic reading of the Bible.

The second, less than articulate, aspect of Williams's departure from Girard is the more fundamental. Hamerton-Kelly effectively points to it, but then so quickly invokes his own reading of Girard that Williams's position is obscured. Hamerton-Kelly correctly observes that Williams attributes "faith" to "Israel," which for Williams is the community which "in its own history, maintains the core identity of a marginal and expelled people whose God leads it into freedom and a new sense of identity" (p. 163). Within that definition of Israel, Williams's identification of the centrality of the covenant is lucid and convincing (p. 117):

The covenant is an event and a model of existence in which Israel's beginnings in God's act of deliverance is reaffirmed. Its enactment requires awareness of and preparation for the danger of the "other side"

16. Cf. also the more trenchant comment (also on p. 9): "Despite all the qualifications, all the acknowledgment of Israel's realistic sense of its own shortcomings, he treats the divine project as a social program for victims whose flag bearer is righteous Israel." Such criticism is perhaps inevitable, in that, in *Sacred Violence*, Hamerton-Kelly dismisses Paul's acceptance of the doctrine of Israel's election as symptomatic of an excess of nostalgia (pp. 138, 139).

of the differentiating line marked by mountain, altar, and prohibition. . . . The covenant is finally an alliance or binding of Israel to God "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

Just here, Williams offers—without saying so—a major revision of Girard's theory, in that the sacred is no longer merely projected violence: the differentiating power of the covenant, including its sacrificial instruments, is for Williams salvific. Girard himself laconically remarks in his "Foreword" to Williams's book that his own "general outlook is perhaps a little less optimistic" (p. x). But the theoretical difference between the two is more substantial than reference to a degree or two of optimism would indicate.

The covenant for Williams becomes a positive force within the Hebrew Scriptures, a force which he believes develops in an anticul-tic direction as a result of the Prophets (pp. 117-162). It is, of course, unexceptionable for an evaluation of the sacred covenant to form the basis of a theological reading of the Bible (although one might wish for a sustained treatment of the reading which sees the Prophets as condemning cultic abuses, rather than the cult in se). But what is straightforward for the Scriptures is a problem for Girard, for whom the sacred is by definition a destructive force, communal violence in a projected form. Hamerton-Kelly objects to the shape Williams's more positive evaluation takes, but he is engaged in a cognate revision of Girard, an appeal to grace (which is Pauline in provenience, if postmodern in expression). Exegetically, of course, both revisions (and many more) might be justified, but if the sacred is to become a positive category, it is obvious that the theoretical basis of Girard's position must be altered.

Nowhere is the theoretical difference between Williams and Girard clearer than in their treatments of sacrifice, particularly (as we might expect) when the former treats of Exod 24:1-11, where sacrifice seals the covenant. At that point, Williams says the negative things about sacrifice and violence which one expects of a Girardian, but he also accepts that the blood tossed on the altar and the people "is a symbol of the life they share together and with their God" (p. 114). Toward the end of the period during which he was writing his book, he read the manuscript of my own, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program Within a Cultural History of Sacrifice*.¹⁷ I there argue that the offering of which Exodus 24 is an example, the *zēbah šē-lāmîm*, should be understood as a "sacrifice of sharings" (pp. 57-58). Communal consumption, in turn, strikes me as the best means of understanding sacrifice, on the assumption that it must be grasped

17. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.

as an activity which gives rise to culture, rather than dismissed as an artifact of mythology.

Sacrifice has been "explained" as a variety of schemes of meaning projected into practice. The history of discussion has seen a host of theories come and go: sacrifices have been characterized as methods to release and share the power resident in a sacrificial offering, feasts celebrated in the presence of the gods, gifts to the gods, occasions of divination, apotropaic offerings, symbols of violence, reenactments of divine deaths and rebirths, amongst other rationalizations. In particular cases, there is much to be said for the invocation of such meanings; indeed, they are—from time to time—the historical and/or ethnographic meanings attached to identifiable sacrifices by those who participate in them. But when one meaning, or set of meanings, derived from a single sacrificial system, or a group of such systems, is used to generate an alleged explanation for the entire phenomenon of sacrifice, skepticism is in order.

Rationalizations of sacrifice need to be described and analyzed in connection with the sacrificial systems which actually produced them: that is a necessary aspect of the task of understanding. But whether it be derived from ancient texts, a psychoanalytic "reading" of violence, or from ethnography, to give a single rationalization preeminence as the source of sacrifice globally might be seen as an ideological species of myth-making. Reasons for a given sacrificial activity are being found, not in the activity itself, but in a story about another, allegedly similar activity, and the point of the exercise seems to be to convert sacrifice into symbol. Ideology is made to do what myth once accomplished.

Now that vigorous efforts have been made for better than a century to "explain" sacrifice in that manner, that is, by locating a primal or original explanation, and now that no such effort has won general support, there is some practical warrant to consider the possibility that no such explanation exists. In other words, the suspicion that current theories are providing us with new myths of sacrifice, rather than with the explanations they purport to provide, is reinforced by the inability of one scheme to falsify the others. One scheme can always cite a different sort of evidence from another and so be shown to be superior by a supporter, but no reason is given for which the new run of evidence should be privileged.

The nature of sacrificial activity, to be sure, is distinctive, which is what makes description challenging. But, once what is to be described is understood as an activity, progress is possible. We are not seeking to explain a thought, but to characterize an activity among one group of people which can be easily seen to be analogous to the activity of another group. A typology may therefore be used, as a

criterion of such comparison. Sacrifice occurs with definite *pragmata*, objects and gestures specified for the purpose (and often out of the ordinary), and there is a social affect associated with the pragmatic action. Finally, peoples who sacrifice generally believe that they and/or their gods are different after the sacrifice from what they were beforehand. To describe that difference, in all the particularities of a given culture, is not an explanation of sacrifice among the people concerned, but it belongs to the typology which must be appreciated if their sacrificial activity is to be understood.

To the overwhelming majority of modern interpreters who have considered the issue of sacrifice, the most striking part of the activity is the death or destruction of a victim. For that reason, some variant of a motif of death and rebirth is perennially attractive: it "explains" the killing and accords it as much romantic reason as is possible. "Primitive" peoples are vindicated for celebrating a desirable impossibility. But in sacrifice, consumption is probably a better metaphor to describe what is happening than death; the passing of the victim rarely arouses interest, while its preparation and disposal, to the advantage of people or the gods, is specified. What happens most nearly approximates a meal, and sacrificial practice—in the type and preparation of food and its consumers—is often associated with culinary practice. Meals, as well as sacrifices, are pragmatic and affective and may occasion ideological transactions, although the gods are not normally involved. If we wished generally to characterize the typology of sacrifice we have been discussing, then, I would say that sacrifice is a feast with the gods, in which life as it should be—chosen and prepared correctly—is taken in order to produce life as it ought to be.¹⁸ Sacrifice may be said to mark the dichotomy between—on one side—"antiquity" (in historical terms) or "primitivity" (in cultural terms) and—on the other side—"modernity." A societal activity involving *pragmata* defined as valuable, palpable affects and ideological meaning appears to ancient or primitive societies as obviously necessary, and to modern societies as violent relics which require rationalization, if they are to bear any meaning at all.

18. Cf. *The Temple of Jesus*, chap. 3, "Toward a Typology of Sacrifice," and the preliminary discussion in the earlier chapters, "The Challenge of Understanding Sacrifice from an Anthropological Perspective," and "An Analysis of Sacrifice: The Systematic Approach of René Girard." The influence of William Robertson Smith is there acknowledged; cf. his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (Burnett Lectures; London: Black, 1901; first edition, 1889). Where he attempted a genetic explanation, however, I argue that sacrifice is an irreducible, social activity. Where for him sacrifice is a totemic meal, for me it is typologically closest to communal eating. I part company with him, and my predecessors generally, in my observation that sacrifice—precisely because it constitutes culture—cannot be explained on the basis of other products of culture. The attempt to do so produces a myth.

The particular case of the Hebrew Scriptures provides rich material for the description of sacrifice and its meaning in covenantal terms.¹⁹ I pointed out the importance of Exodus 24 for the ideological dimension of sacrifice in that "Israel" of which the texts speak and I emphasized that the sanction of violence is directed against whatever stands in the way of the sacrificial goal, such that "the violent affect implicit in each typology instanced is related, finally, to the particular ideology of the covenant that sacrifice is held to articulate" (p. 67). When, therefore, Williams acknowledges the positive value of cultic sacrifice for the conception of the covenant (pp. 114, 115, 117), I can only welcome that departure from Girard's unrelenting ascription of all manner of violence (ancient and modern) to sacrifice. But because the departure is not fully integrated within his own perspective, Williams also (and consistently) invokes a classically Girardian analysis (cf. pp. 124, 125, 130, 139).

The theoretical inconsistency is cognate with an exegetical problem: Williams from time to time simply misses key transitions which are signaled by the issue of sacrifice. For example, his analysis of sacrifice as an issue at the time of the Exodus (pp. 82-84) makes no mention of Exod 3:18 and 5:1-3, where it is plain that appropriate sacrifice is a paradigmatic concern of the narrative. Williams asserts, consciously keeping the incident concerning Amalek in 1 Samuel 15 in mind, that "the present form of the text does not indicate that Saul, knowingly or not, was a great offender against the sacred social order." In view of 1 Sam 13:7b-15a, that is a manifestly odd claim. Apparently, an as yet unresolved ambivalence toward sacrifice has resulted in a selective treatment of the texts.

Ambivalence is also the order of the day in regard to the issue of *mimesis*. In that such imitation is, by practical definition, covetous rivalry, any form of learned, constructive social behavior must—following Girard, and by way of distinction—be called "the good mimesis" (cf. pp. 85, 86, 239, 247, 257); the focus of Williams's concern is on what he might have called covenantal *mimesis*, "the powerful generative vision from which the Bible as a whole stems" (pp. 85, 86, cf. pp. 151, 166). Here again, I can only welcome the adaptation of Girard's theory which asserts that mimesis is "in and of itself . . . a neutral capability of the brain and of every aspect of systems that can be considered 'human'" (p. 239). That correction is part of the critique of Girardian mimesis which I developed in a debate at Stanford in 1989:

Imitation unites people and animals, and even certain plants. Indeed, many so-called lower forms of life are better mimics of certain phenomena than people are. They can change color, make the noises of

19. Cf. chap. 4, "Sacrifice in 'Classic' Israel," 45-67.

other species, alter their physical appearances, and so forth. But people can imitate, know they imitate, remember and reproduce the imitation at a later stage, initiate several models at once (in multi-polar mimesis), stereotype an imitation in language, move smoothly from imitative performance to imitative performance, and develop individual and social protocols of that movement. The common translation of Aristotle [sc. which calls individual "man" the "imitative animal"] is technically in error and misleading.²⁰ man is not the imitative animal. Only the plural of the species can be human, because a person in isolation is not a person, and even the collective construction of "man" misses the point that people are not distinctive in imitation, but in mimesis, that is in their multi-polar, self-conscious variant of imitation.²¹

If that is in fact the perspective which Williams now accepts, it is not evident why he should say that "the demise of sacrificial religion could be a good thing if it were replaced with the good mimesis of the God of victims" (p. 247). Such claims are the ghosts of an unqualifiedly Girardian perspective, with its attribution of violence to sacrifice and its dualistic assertion of a mimesis of the critic which is unlike all the wicked mimeses of this world. If sacrifice is not demonic, and if mimesis is not inherently destructive, the Girardian analysis of ritual is bankrupt.

What remains of Girard's contribution is nonetheless of potential usefulness. His focus upon mimetic rivalry is interesting and may be productive in particular exegeses. One may be reminded of Jonathan Swift's insight in his poem, *The Death of Dean Swift*:

To all my foes, Dear Fortune, send
 Thy gifts; but never to my friend;
 I tamely can endure the first:
 But this with envy makes me burn.

Part of Swift's insight, however, is that the rivalry he identifies in mimetic terms is only one aspect of human behavior, and should be overcome routinely. Nonetheless, rivalry is not merely Swiftian: it might be as harmless as the byplay common at academic conferences

20. The Greek text reads τό τε γὰρ μιμεῖσθαι σύμφυτον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐκ παιδῶν ἔστι καὶ τούτω διαφέρουσι τῶν ἄλλων ζώων ὅτι μιμητικώτατόν ἐστι καὶ τὰς μαθήσεις ποιεῖται διὰ μιμήσεως τὰς πρώτας, καὶ τὸ χαίρειν τοῖς μιμήμασι πάντας (cf. D. W. Lukas, *Aristotle: Poetics. Introduction, Commentary and Appendixes* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1986]). A sounder rendering in English might be, "For to imitate is inherent in people from childhood, and in this they differ from other living things, because they are the most imitative, and learn their first lessons through imitation, and everyone enjoys imitations." (The singular construction from the words μιμητικώτατόν ἐστι onward is presumably in agreement with τὸ μιμεῖσθαι, and not a true collective.)

21. *The Temple of Jesus*, Appendix 1: "A Response to *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*: In the Beginning was the Meal," 163-72.

or as lethal as the battle for Sarajevo. What is it about human mimesis which devolves persistently into violence? That is the framing question of Girard's project, and its crucial importance is evident. What is not evident to me is that sacrifice, an ancient institution, should be made the scapegoat of the genocidal outbreaks of violence which have become routine since the Enlightenment.

Both Girard and Williams have better success in developing the Girardian program when they address themselves to the issue of myth. Time and again, they show how myth in the ancient period (and often, ideology in our own) is used to rationalize and justify and mandate violence on a systematic scale. Williams is particularly skillful at identifying the rhetoric of rivalry and violence in the Scriptures (p. 83) and in the modern interactions of "the myth of history and social harmony, the myth of the chosen people destined to rule the world, and the myth of the great man" (p. 98). He is at his best when he argues that "The history of Israel is a history of revelation, of disclosure of the God whose intention is to strip off mythic camouflage" (p. 186). That is far more convincing than his repetition of attacks on sacrifice which his own analysis transcends.

In order for myths of violence, ancient and modern, to be adequately treated, a systemic shift in the Girardian program is necessary. Sacrifice can no longer serve as a scapegoat. That only diverts our attention from the issue of what social groups say about outsiders, and how the boundaries between outsiders and insiders are drawn. Likewise, a Manichaean assumption that all mimesis is violent until it is revealed as "good mimesis" will only blunt the tools of analysis, by obscuring those fateful, often unobserved moments, when a mimetic gesture, in its interplay with others, turns into an act of violence against another mimetic actor who is now no longer an agent of mimesis, but a thing to be destroyed. Our grisly fate as human beings will only be transcended when we cease assigning blame for that fault to ancient antecedents and accept the challenge of tracing its operation within our own mimetic behaviors.