Girard against Fragmentation

Andrew Lascaris OP

Theology's role in modern society is slight, to say the least. People are not waiting with baited breath for new ideas from theologians—unless, of course, they are theologians themselves. Scientists and, for that matter, scholars in general, cannot easily be persuaded to read a theological essay. And surely it is also the case that, while theologians themselves may be rather more ready to read in the literature of the human and even the natural sciences, they will often find it hard to relate what they read to theology. It is little comfort to them to be told that other academics too know astonishingly little about what is happening outside their own field.

The specialisation that goes with expertise partly explains this state of affairs, but this fragmentation of knowledge is also a reflection of the fragmentation of human society. We are all supposed to be autonomous adult beings obliged to live together, in the same time and space. We behave like cars passing one another on the same motorway (and hopefully in the same direction), without much communication that reveals who we are, what we desire, hope for, love. When we enter the motorway we have to fight for our place. It is not self-evident that we have one. Society is not any more a warm blanket woven from many threads, where every thread the weaver may add has already its place before it is woven in. We are free. In principle we may choose our place, competing with those who happen to covet the same place as we do. In this society the rational state of mind is the one most suited for life, so rational knowledge is one of its gods, but the more society gets fragmented—the more the old blanket is torn into separate threads—the more lonely we feel.

Possibly to our surprise, growing criticism of the fragmentation of our society can be heard from the gods of our time themselves: from the natural sciences. Nobel prize-winner I. Prigogine published in 1979 a book, *La nouvelle alliance,* translated into English as *Order out of Chaos.* In it he gives his view on the new physics and at the same time pleads for a new relationship with the social sciences. Natural and social processes turn out to be much more alike than we thought until very recently. In both order is born out of chaos, with no possibility of predicting where and when a process to order will begin. It is impossible to predict which molecule will start boiling first when I heat some water to make tea. It is mere chance. And the choice of the exact place where a white ant hill will appear cannot be predicted either. When the ants walk disorderly around, carrying things, secreting a little, slightly more rubble will pile up in one place rather than in others. This is sufficient to make the white ants build their hill on that very place.

Prigogine is only one example of somebody trying to build a bridge between his own science and other sciences or other fields of human experience. Another is Gregory Bateson, who was a cultural anthropologist, worked as a biologist with dolphins, and developed a theory about schizophrenia. C. Lévy-Strauss is a cultural anthropologist who uses linguistics to create a language for his particular science. All these attempts are very hopeful. In helping to overcome the fragmentation of human knowledge, they may help to overcome the fragmentation of modern society without a return to romantic ideas of the past. They may also help to set theology and faith free from the place in the corner to which modern society has driven them.

One of the scholars who is making a contribution to the linking up of several fields of human knowledge is René Girard. I have already published two articles on his hypothesis in *New Blackfriars*. In the first article, 'The Likely Price of Peace' (December 1985, pp. 517—524), I expounded his theory. Implicitly I showed that Girard is able to connect literature, cultural and philosophic anthropology, and theology. In my second article, 'Economics and Human Desire' (March 1987, pp. 115—124), I argued that Girard's hypothesis supplied us with a new insight into economics and enabled us to link economics once again with ethics and theology. In this article I would like to show that still some further connections can be made: that his hypothesis is fruitful for psychology, conflict studies and aesthetics.

Girard's hypothesis in fact implies a firm criticism of the fragmentation of our society. His theory is founded on the phenomenon of *mimèsis*, 'imitation'. Human beings imitate one another and cannot stop doing so. Without imitation it is impossible to live as a human being. We have known for a long time that language is based on imitation, and that language is not, as it were, an instrument outside ourselves, but forms a part of ourselves. We cannot think or even feel without language. We create language and are created by it. Girard adds to this that we also imitate one another in our desires. In our society we want to see ourselves as unique and original beings. Girard does not do away with creativity and originality altogether, but he shows us our limitations. We desire by identifying with another person's desires. He or she is our model, and we find it extremely difficult to resist imitating our models in their wants, behaviour, use of language. We do not desire spontaneously: we copy one another's desires. It is odd to realize that at a time when so many parents are trying to make their children grow up to be free and autonomous adults, 'play-backing' pop stars is so popular among them. We are not, after all, lonely cars passing one another on a motorway. Neither though, are we threads in a blanket, with our particular place determined a long time ago. The old culture in which that was the case will not easily come back.

A second aspect of Girard's hypothesis is that our model can become our obstacle when we desire something unique or exclusive. At the very moment when we start desiring what our model desires or already possesses, our model and we become rivals, fighting to get the same thing, the same woman, man, position; fascinated by each other; building up our forces all the time. This kind of conflict is itself 'mimetic'. It is contagious, so others will join our struggle. Chaos will emerge and order will be lost. How do we bring order out of chaos? According to Girard, by pointing at someone as the cause of all our troubles—it is mere chance who is singled out and who will point his finger. In other words, by scapegoating. Through the violence of scapegoating we drive out our violence and we find peace. Religion is celebrating and ritualizing this peace. Scapegoating is at present a well-known and recognized activity (the word 'scapegoat' appears almost every day somewhere in our papers) but we should thank the gospel for the discovery of this awesome mechanism. In the passion story Jesus is clearly being scapegoated but at the same time it is clear that in this case the scapegoat is completely innocent and the crowd guilty. Yet Jesus does not retaliate; he forgives. Christian worship is celebrating a very different peace from the 'religious peace'.

Girard and Freud

How, though, can this rather simple hypothesis give us insight into the field of psychology? In his books and articles Girard is often in discussion with Freud. The 'Oedipus complex' is perhaps the best-known concept in psychoanalysis. (In this context Girard remarks how it is strange that Freud's theory, with its numerous references to Greek mythical figures, is supposed to be 'rational', while the gospel is considered to be 'irrational'.) According to Freud, every small boy unconsciously wants to get rid of his father in order to claim the love, including the sexual love, of his mother. Freud developed this theory to explain the well-known triangle of woman, husband and lover. This triangle is supposed to be a repetition of the 'Oedipus complex': the woman replaces the mother, the husband the father, the lover is the boy. The need to repeat this relationship in our lives is ascribed by Freud to the 'death instinct'.

Girard, however, does not need to refer back to some unconscious event in infancy in order to explain such triangles. The fact that the woman is desired by her husband may be enough to make her desirable to another person (often one of the husband's friends). According to Freud's theory the desire of the boy would be something original, independent of other desires. For Freud, the father is a model, but not a model of desire.

Desiring the mother happens independently of the boy's identification with his father. His father is first of all a rival to the boy who forbids the boy to desire his mother and thus becomes the incarnate law.

For Girard, the father is a teacher of the child. He is one of the models, and makes the child desire the things he desires, but at the same time he tries to protect the boy against rivalling desires. Normally the distance between father and child is too great to make it possible for the boy to desire the mother in the same way as she is desired by his father. Through the woman that the father desires the father points the boy to other women to be desired by him. Girard thus has a much more positive evaluation of the family than is customary in popular psychology. In our fragmented society, the father is often seen as oppressing the child, who should be free to develop himself. A very way-out view-point, now rather dated, is that the family should be abolished altogether, so that the child can become an autonomous being without all the commandments and prohibitions of his parents burdening him. Girard does not go to the other extreme of making the family the corner stone of society, but the family is for him the place where a child can learn to cope with his desires in a relatively secure, peaceful situation. The family is a learning situation, not a fighting one.

The family can, of course, be sick, and, even if not, difficulties will always abound. The 'teaching family', represented mainly by father and mother, may feel threatened by the child that excels his teachers. His parents may try to discourage the child. On the one hand the child is invited to imitate his parents, on the other he is told not to imitate them. Such situations are defined by Gregory Bateson as 'double bind'. An example of a 'double bind' is the commandment: 'Be spontaneous.' A commandment is being given not to act on the basis of a commandment. Parents may suggest through their words that they are easy to approach, but reject their children when they try to touch them. In a 'double bind' it is unclear what has to be imitated and what not; the result is psychological chaos.

According to Freud, human desire has two poles, independent of each other: the mother and one self. Desiring myself is called 'narcissism' by Freud. However, Girard shows convincingly, on the basis of an analysis by the novelist Marcel Proust, that the so-called 'narcissism' is a strategem. Its aim is to evoke the desire for oneself in another person. By 'narcissistic' behaviour one gives the impression that one is self-sufficient. The other person feels excluded, his desire heightens, he torments himself and pines away. He becomes the victim of his own desire and attributes to the person whose attention (and body) he desires a special charism, Freud's 'narcissism'. Psychology can do without an 'Oedipus complex', an 'Electra complex' (for girls) and without 'narcissism'. Both boys and girls learn from their parents what to desire. They do not have desires independent of those of their parents and of other people who may play a role in their lives.

Sexual desire, says Girard, does not differ fundamentally from other desires. The difference is only that the object of desire can be identical with the model of desire. One desires what another person desires or possesses. The object of sexual desire is the body of the model. When the loved one is reserved, desire increases. Suppose a boy falls in love with his friend's girlfriend, but he holds back because of the friendship. Because of his aloofness the girl's own desire is evoked (remember what Girard has to say about 'narcissism'). This again increases the boy's desire for the girl, and so on. He can now become his friend's rival, or he can try to become closer to his friend in order to be closer to the girl. Such situations are depicted by Shakespeare and Dostoievsky. We do not need the 'Oedipus complex', 'narcissism' or 'a latent homosexuality' to understand what is happening here. The imitation of desire suffices.

In an extreme situation I can become so fascinated by my model (who at the same time is my obstacle, perhaps my rival) that I lose sight of the object of the rivalry. I may lose every sense of distance between my model and myself, and try to become like my model. Think of all the people who have come to believe that they were Napoleon. The gospel story of the healing of the man possessed by demons in the region of Gerasa suggests (says Girard) that he was possessed by the inhabitants of the city of Gerasa: they were his models, whom he tried to imitate, losing every sense of distance, becoming possessed by his models. The name of the demon who possessed him was rightly 'legion' (Mark 5, 9). The strange behaviour of fans when their star appears on the stage does not differ fundamentally from this. They desire to be as close as possible to their idol, they become 'crazy', for they are getting totally out of proportion the distance between themselves and their idol, although fortunately only for a brief period.

Girard is convinced that the gospel understands the mechanism of desire more profoundly than Freud. He pleads for an 'interdividual psychology' instead of the 'individual' psychologies such as psychoanalysis. The autonomous human being, contained in himself, does not exist. Even when we ascribe particular qualities to a person, we are often saying first of all something about that person's relationships with other people. Arguably Girard purifies psychology Freudian 'mythology' and creates a new space where psychology and theology can meet again. J.M. Oughourlian, the French psychologist, is trying to develop Girard's ideas further. In his book *Un mime nommé désir* (Paris, 1982) he brings clinical psychology together with anthropology, sociology, history and theology. However, though people have been working quite successfully with Girard's theory in the field of psychology, we have still to wait for the development of a clinical practice based on this theory.

Girard and violence

Girard's true interest has always been how people relate to one another. He is a literary critic, but he reads novels and plays because they show more clearly than do philosophical ideas how people live and fight with one another. People engaged in the promotion on non-violence have become interested in Girard's hypothesis because they see it as a way of giving a scientific basis to their practice. In this dialogue between Girard and representatives of non-violent movements Girard's strength and weakness are revealed.

His weakness—and he admits it frankly—is precisely that he is a literary critic and does not have any experience in non-violent action. He is not even a 'political animal'. He admits that other people have much more knowledge of how to use his hypothesis than he himself. His concern is to show the actual meaning of the text of the gospel. He points out that now even totalitarian governments feel forced to defend their use of violence, while in the past such a justification would have been superfluous. The rules of the gospel concerning non-violence have perhaps as their first result the dwindling of the protection provided by so-called legal violence. Our society becomes perhaps more open to violence rather than less. The kingdom of God is pictured as a society robbed of the means of defending itself from violence because it cannot use violence itself. Non-violence is for Girard the refusal of every form of violence, it is the impossibility of violence. The gospel, in his view, is not a moral system, or at least it is not only that; it is concerned with all the aspects of human reality and so is much more profound than a moral system.

He admits that he does not have a definition of the concept of violence. Only since the 17th century have people used in their thinking the concept 'violence', and up to now they have failed to come up with a satisfactory definition of it. Because we do not have such a definition, it is not easy either to define what non-violence is or what it implies. Girard is convinced that it is important to be creative in the field of non-violence, but he does not feel capable of offering much advice in concrete situations. He does not have an answer to questions such as: Who decides that this or that action is violence? Can violence always be avoided? Would it have been possible to use non-violent techniques against Hitler instead of violence? Is non-violence sometimes a refusal to see the dramatic aspects of a situation? Can it be a bourgeois attempt to avoid a real confrontation? At a certain moment a decision has to be taken, and at any moment every person finds himself at a place in the spiral of violence.

However, Girard's hypothesis makes us more sensitive to the presence of violence in our society, and helps us to analyse more clearly the political and social situation. For example, is the emphasis that many people—politicians and non-politicians—in at least some Western countries place on petty crime such as shop-lifting and house robberies an example of scapegoating? The courts can hardly deal with serious crime. In fact, people who really make money out of crime are seldom caught. Petty crime is much less dangerous to society, but it is concrete, perceptible. The stories about it have a mythological quality. Campaigning against it hides from us the truth that out society is sick.

What Girard's hypothesis is never going to do is set us free from responsibility for thinking about our actions, and it does not lead to the general conclusion that violence can never be used. It teaches us a lot about the mechanism of violence. Saying that one is committed to non-violence is not enough; this may well veil a violence deep down. Generally, violence will always breed a new violence; it is always reciprocal. The Sermon on the Mount is, in Girard's view, a plea not to retaliate and to do the unexpected and use paradoxes in order to overcome violent and unjust situations. The Girard hypothesis also opens our eyes to the myths people use to rationalise the use of violence. Mother Ireland. The American Dream. The Islamic Republic. The World Revolution. The national security.

Girard and the arts

Violence is an often-occurring theme in the arts. Girard can make us look at the arts with new eyes and offers us a possibility of again connecting aesthetics and gospel. Imitation is a basic rule—some would say *the* basic rule—in art, or at least in some of the arts. Art has its origin in religion, and only fairly recently did aesthetics and Christian tradition more or less part.

Here there is only room to mention a couple of examples of the application of the Girard hypothesis in aesthetics. First of all, in a study of the work of a great film director. In 1980 P.N. Livingstone published in Baltimore *The Snakeskin: Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art,* a book on Bergman films in which the author makes frequent use of Girard's hypothesis. Bergman has a gloomy view of our violent society: it is for him a snake that is already dead, but whose skin is still moving because of the vermin eating its flesh. The artist is depicted by Bergman in his films as a scapegoat, often praised but more often humiliated. Art, especially music, is, he is convinced, today deteriorating because religion is going down—not that he believes in a return to religious rituals, which by way of violence (sacrifice) he sees as expelling violence. In his films Bergman shows again and again the reciprocity of violence; it can never, he believes, be justified. In the midst of the crisis of our culture, art and society, he is searching for a way out in ethics, in humility, in genuine sympathy, in love. (Unlike Girard, he sees the Christian gospel within the perspective of ethics.) In each of his films a brief moment of true communication is to be found, always the most important moment in the film. Film-making is for Bergman a way of trying to create communication.

Surprisingly, Girard's hypothesis also sheds light upon the abstract paintings of Piet Mondriaan (1872—1944). Mondriaan himself explained his paintings in his book *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art* (New York, 1945). He wanted his paintings to express the end of history and art. He was looking for a harmonious equilibrium between opposites, a dynamic balance between contrary elements. This harmony, he said, only emerges after the abolition of every special shape and form. Every detail, natural form or symbolic content disappeared from his latest paintings. The world was systematically removed from the painting. According to Mondriaan, we create in such a way an imitation of true reality: the harmony between opposites. We are oppressed by our desire to imitate, which reveals itself most clearly in figurative art. This, in Mondriaan's view, gives great value to human desire, is superficial, and promotes conflict and illusion. He was convinced that modern man is a prisoner of violence. We imitate one another's violence all around the world. He believed that man can only become a whole being by driving out all the imitative forms.

Indeed, Mondriaan shows us the folly of imitation on the level of art. However, the more he resisted imitation, knowing that this dominates the world, the more repetitive and imitative his own work became. He wanted to drive out violence, but, like so many before him, he thought that the only way to drive out violence was by using violence. When we look at Mondriaan's paintings through Girard's eyes we see that Mondriaan was scapegoating art and society itself. By expelling violence through violence he continued the use of violence.

Girard provides us with some useful tools for analysing the crisis in art and society, and for avoiding repeating the mistakes we want to avoid. Much more work could be done. To the fields considered in this article others could easily be added, such as education and the media.

On the one hand, it is only too easy to get a little suspicious: can it be true that one relatively simple hypothesis gives us new insights into so many fields of human knowledge? On the other hand, Girard's hypothesis does give us a means of helping to overcome the fragmentation in our society. Girard and Prigogine know each other; Prigogine himself suggested that Girard's thesis should be brought into play in the developing dialogue between the natural and the social sciences. Girard has friends among the members of the so-called Palo Alto school of psychology, founded by Gregory Bateson. He is in a lively debate with Lévy-Strauss, whom he criticizes because of his static view on human society.

We are instancing exchanges taking place on the academic level. It is worthwhile extending the discussion beyond the frontiers of academic life. The future may be very different from our present projections in our fragmented society.