

René Girard, scholar of religion and violence, dies at 91

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René Girard, a French scholar best known for his work on desire, violence, and religion, died November 4 at age 91.

Girard immigrated to the United States in 1950, teaching social science at several universities, including Duke and Stanford, from which he retired in 1995.

In [a 2001 Christian Century article](#) about Girard's work, Leo D. Lefebure, a Georgetown University theologian, wrote that Girard "developed a mimetic theory of the self which stresses the power of models in teaching us what to desire."

Following that theory, Girard sought to explain scapegoating in his 1972 book *Violence and the Sacred*.

"From the earliest times, Girard argued, religions have channeled violence onto sacrificial victims, human or animal, to prevent uncontrolled outbreaks of violence," Lefebure wrote.

In a 1998 interview for the *Century*, Lefebure asked Girard about his "interpretation of the passion and the crucifixion of Jesus as unmasking the powers of violence in our world."

Girard described himself in the interview as having converted to Christianity in 1959. "Jesus' death and resurrection put an end to the closed communities founded on scapegoating, compelling human beings to get along without arbitrary victims."

Robert Barron, an auxiliary bishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles and founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, called Girard "one of the most influential Catholic philosophers in the world."

"In the second half of the 20th century, academics tended to characterize Christianity—if they took it seriously at all—as one more iteration of the mythic story that can be found in practically every culture," Barron [wrote on the Word on Fire website](#). "What Girard saw was that this tired theorizing has it precisely wrong. In point of fact, Christianity is the revelation (the unveiling) of what the myths want to

veil; it is the deconstruction of the mono-myth, not a reiteration of it—which is exactly why so many within academe want to domesticate and de-fang it.”

James Bernard Murphy, professor of government at Dartmouth College and author of a book on Girard, noted [in a Religion News Service commentary](#) that Girard received a great deal of criticism from scholars in many of the fields he explored in his wide-ranging theory.

“Whatever the vagaries of his reputation among academics, Girard’s most lasting cultural legacy is to provide an intellectual basis for Christian pacifism,” he wrote. “Girard unfashionably denied that there is a significant moral difference between parties to violent conflict: both are caught up in a demonic logic that will end in mutual destruction.”

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