

Does religion give rise to violence, or the other way around?

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(RNS) It's often argued that religion gives rise to violence. But what if it were really the other way around? What if violence actually gave rise to religion?

So argued the French anthropologist and philosopher René Girard, who died Nov. 4. Described as the "Darwin of the human sciences," he was elected to the French Academy in 2005 for his seminal theories of sacred violence.

Mass killings by a group that calls itself the Islamic State have triggered a heated debate about Islam and violence.

Regardless of the dubiousness of the group's claim to leadership of the faith, Girard's theories deserve wider appreciation as we confront the threat from militant Islam and our sometimes panicked responses. Perhaps he can shed some light on why we find ourselves ineluctably drawn into a horrific cycle of revenge and reprisal.

Girard acknowledged that violence is at the heart of religious rituals and rhetoric; he was well aware that religious passions can lead to terrible persecutions. But Girard provocatively claimed that violence is even more primordial in human life than religion; it is violence, in fact, that leads to religion. He argued that religious practices function to sublimate, regulate and discharge human violence in controlled rituals.

Where does violence come from? According to Girard, violence stems from the nature of human desire itself. As a student of literature, Girard was fascinated by the French love triangle: A man desires a woman because he sees that she is loved by another man. Although we like to imagine that our desires stem from our own unique personalities, in reality, he claimed, we "catch" our desires from other people. Unfortunately, the social nature of desires means that all desire is rivalrous:

We cannot help but covet our neighbor's possessions. Soon we are in direct conflict over scarce resources, and the war of all against all has begun.

According to Girard's theory, our individual rivalries suddenly become focused on a single victim, and the war of all against all gives way to the war of all against one. A random scapegoat is selected on the basis of some social stigma and then killed. At once, a society riven by myriad conflicts comes together in harmony. All social order, claimed Girard, stems from the unity of a lynch mob.

To commemorate the social harmony created by the murder of the scapegoat, the original murder is symbolically re-enacted through the sacrificial killing of human and then later animal victims. In this way, the violent impulses that led to the scapegoat murder are sublimated and controlled by religious ritual, especially ritual sacrifice.

Girard's theory of sacred violence takes its most controversial turn when he claims that biblical religion, especially Christianity, is a radical attack on the whole logic of religious violence. After all, according to the Gospels, Jesus was killed by the Jewish high priests and by the Romans as a scapegoat and as a sacrificial victim. That God himself became the victim of both scapegoat murder and sacrificial killing demonstrates, says Girard, that the central message of the Gospels is to overturn once and for all the whole machinery of scapegoat murder and sacrificial violence.

Of course, Christians themselves have notoriously participated in scapegoat persecution of Jews and heretics, so Girard has conceded that many if not most actual Christians have failed to grasp what he takes to be the central teaching of Christianity. Despite this, many conservative Christians are attracted to Girard's theory of Christianity as the enemy of all ancient religions.

The imaginative power and explanatory range of Girard's theories are extraordinary. From the psychology of desire and the sociology of violence to the anthropology of religion and the interpretation of the Bible, his research led him to trespass onto many fields of knowledge. He spent most of his career teaching in America, where he enjoyed boundless intellectual freedom but also received scathing criticism from scholars across the disciplines. Whether such "grand theory" in the human and social sciences is still possible — given the highly specialized nature of today's academic research — remains an open question.

Whatever the vagaries of his reputation among academics, Girard's most lasting cultural legacy is to provide an intellectual basis for Christian pacifism. Before Girard, pacifists could rely on little more than the sayings of Jesus. Girard's theory of sacred violence provides a comprehensive psychology, anthropology, sociology and theology of peacemaking. If Darwin made atheism intellectually respectable, then Girard has done the same for pacifism.

What lessons can we draw from Girard that are germane to the latest outrage in Paris? Given that Girard believes our desires stem from social rivalry, his warning is: "Choose your enemies carefully because you will become like them." 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.

Near the end of his life, Girard worried about the deadly rivalry of nations armed with nuclear weapons. He came to the view, first articulated by Martin Luther King Jr., that our choice today is between nonviolence and nonexistence.