

## **Cain and Abel - Where is the End of Violence?**

### **Looking at the Cycle of Violence from the Perspective of René Girard**

**Gabriele Hoerschelmann\***

It is hardly news that the world is a violent place, not only since the often mentioned 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. The world is a violent place. This is true whether we look at the world or at the home of families, whether we look at our country or our city, whether we look into history or the present situation.

Violence has been part of the life of human beings since the beginning of the world. The relations not only with our enemies, but with our neighbors, family and friends also suffer from this phenomenon. The World Council of Churches even has launched a campaign with the title “The Decade to Overcome Violence”. What a big undertaking! But it shows much more. The churches see violence as a burning issue needing the active action of the churches now.

Sometimes one tends to think our times are more violent than any other times before, but this is probably not true. We only have different tools in our hands. The weapons in many of our countries can destroy the earth and all its inhabitants multiple times.

Violence was always there. And as far back as we have records, we know that violence and religion have gone hand in hand.<sup>1</sup> Even when you look at the Bible, it is a book full of stories dealing with this problem.

René Girard,<sup>2</sup> originally a scholar of Literature, has done important research on the

---

\* Gabriele Hoerschelmann is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Practical Theology of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong.

1 In all cultures worldwide we find myths and stories which put violence in a religious context. See: Mircea Eliade, *Geschichte der religiösen Ideen I* (Freiburg i.Br., 1978), p.76.

2 René Girard, born 1923 in Avignon (France), taught Literature at the Stanford University (California).

structure of violence. Comparing the texts of the Bible with texts from myths and other literary sources from a similar context, he discovered that violence often follows a certain pattern. It is not only the result of our aggressive instinct. Violence is never a coincidence, but more often it has a very predictable structure. The Bible shows this structure and pattern. Many of the Bible stories describe and unmask the structure of violence.

René Girard's approach is not to reflect on the philosophical question about the origins of the evil, the violence or the suffering. He is more interested in its presence and its effects. In this context the question "how is violence developing from almost inconspicuous beginnings" is particularly important.

## **The Structure of Violence: The Mimetic Circle**

### **1. The Desire**

Whenever one watches two children sitting together and playing, one child usually picks up a toy. The other child watches and - wants immediately the same and exactly this toy. But maybe there is only this single one. Immediately they start to fight about this toy.

But this is not only typical childlike behavior, it happens also to adults. Just the "toys" are different. Whatever somebody else owns, it is always much more attractive than what we have. It can be the car of the neighbor, the dress of the best friend, the house of the brother. We can demonstrate it on every level up to political controversies about land. How long has the fight between Japan and Korea about a little rocky and uninhabited island been

---

His books *Violence and the Sacred* (Paris, 1972) (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987); *Job the Victim of his People* (Stanford University Press, 1987); *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 2001); *Violence and Mimesis* (Blackwell Publishers, 2004); *Oedipus Unbound, Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire* (Stanford University Press, 2004), developed a remarkable Cultural Anthropology that aroused a considerable attention throughout the world. His theories have been taken up by numerous scholars like Raymund Schwager, *Must there be scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Biblical Scriptures* (Gracewing, 2000); Raymud Schwager, *Banished from Eden. Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation* (Gracewing, 2006); Swartley Williard, *René Girard, Biblical Studies and Peacemaking* (Pandora Press, 2000); Paul Dumouchel, *Die Hölle der Dinge: René Girard und die Logik der Ökonomie*; Michael Jakob, *Aussichten des Denkens* (Paul Fink Verlag München, 1994). Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girards mimetische Theorie im Kontext kulturtheoretischer und gesellschaftspolitischer Fragen*, LIT (Verlag, 2004); Peter Walter, *Das Gewaltpotential des Monotheismus und der Dreieine Gott* (Freiburg Herder, 2005); Chris Fleming, *Violence and Mimesis* (Polity Press, 2004); Gilberto daSilva, *Am Anfang war das Opfer*, LIT (Verlag, 2002); Joachim Negel, *Ambivalentes Opfer* (Schoeningh, 2005); Thomas Konrad, *Rivalität, Sozialwissenschaftliche Varianten zu einem alten Thema* (New York: Paris, 1990) and many more.

going on?

Already the Bible tells us this kind of stories. It even states: “Already when the world began” it was like that. There were two brothers, one was a farmer, the other one was a shepherd, both were giving sacrifices to God. But God only accepts the Sacrifice of the shepherd. Both are rivals for Gods acknowledgment and love. God warns Cain of the rivalry. But he does not listen and murders his brother.<sup>3</sup>

Look at the Ten Commandments, we see a collection of laws which try to control violence related to its grade. It starts with the worst form of violence:

- *Do not commit murder.*
- *Do not commit adultery.*
- *Do not steal.*
- *Do not accuse anyone falsely.*

The tenth and last commandment doesn't focus on an act, but more on the desire:

- *Do not desire another man's house: Do not desire his wife, his slaves, his cattle, his donkeys or anything else that your neighbor owns.*

Here we are at the root of all violence, making clear all human beings are under one big sin: The desire of wanting what the neighbor has. But if this is the tendency in people's nature, to desire what the other owns, there is a strong tendency in all societies to rivalry and conflicts. If there is no law that controls and forbids this, the survival of all human communities would be deeply threatened.<sup>4</sup>

Rivalrous desire is dangerous because it has the tendency to reinforce itself again and again. It is like a rolling snowball. This type of conflict is directed by the principle of escalation and a continuing outbidding. The lawgiver does therefore everything to control the “problem number one” of every human community: The violence.<sup>5</sup>

By reading this tenth commandment one has the feeling of taking part in the development of this law. In order to avoid violence among the people, the lawgiver intends

---

3 See Genesis 4:1-10.

4 See Girard, *I See Satan...*, p.23.

5 Thomas Konrad proved Girard's theory on the basis of social psychological reflections. He stated that social norms and laws gain their sense by either promotion or avoidance of rivalry. See: Thomas Konrad, *Rivalität, sozialwissenschaftliche Varianten zu einem alten Thema* (New York: Paris, 1990).

to forbid everything what people usually desire. But it is impossible to enumerate all these objects they are all the time fighting for! He realizes that there are too many. So he suddenly interrupts and doesn't focus on the objects anymore, but more on the person who is always involved: The neighbor, the other, the person, who is the owner of all these objects.

Since the neighbor owns all the things we desire, it must be the neighbor who makes them so desirable for us. The neighbor is the model of all our desire. And this is what Girard calls the *mimetic desire*.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. The Mimesis**

Whenever two people see something, they both want it. This is the moment when competition and rivalry occurs and it can - as the example of Cain and Abel shows - lead to violence and even murder.

The interesting part about the mimetic desire is that because of this upwelling rivalry, the desire increases and will be even more goaded. If nobody else shows interest in whatever we like to have we might lose interest ourselves. But as soon as somebody else looks at it, our own desire stays or even grows.<sup>7</sup>

The relation of Cain and Abel was also shaped by rivalry.<sup>8</sup> Both desired that God would accept their sacrifice. They were competing with each other for God's acknowledgment: "*I want what you have.*" This mimetic rivalry<sup>9</sup> is the main source of all violence among human beings.<sup>10</sup> It is not an instinct of aggression. Mimetic rivalry can become so intense that the rivals discredit each other, steal objects from each other, take their wives or husbands and even don't recoil from killing each other - just to mention again the four main violent deeds that were named in the Ten Commandments.

---

6 See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.63.

7 See Girard, *I See Satan...*, p.25.

8 See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.61.

9 See *ibid.*, p.155.

10 Girard's thesis that this kind of rivalry mimetic destroys human relations has been taken up by the French human scientist François Lagard in François Lagard, *René Girard ou la Christianisation de sciences humaines* (New York: Bern, 1994).

René Girard calls this moment the “*mimetic crisis*”.<sup>11</sup> The tension is so high that it literally seeks to burst into a violent act. Moreover it comes to an additional characteristic: It is contagious. It infects others and even more people become involved.<sup>12</sup>

The story of the passion<sup>13</sup> of Jesus is a typical example of this infecting and increasing mimetic violence: The people, who were still hailing Jesus, turn against him. The animosity is so contagious that it infects more and even different people. Peter is the most spectacular example of this mimetic contagion: His affection for Jesus was absolutely honest. Nevertheless, as soon as the apostle was in this hostile environment after Jesus death, he couldn't avoid imitating the animosity. Even the first of all apostles, the rock of the future church, could not resist this collective pressure. Amazingly, even the two who were crucified together with Jesus at his left and right hand were not excluded from this mimesis. They too, were imitating the crowd. Like them they were blaspheming Jesus. They ran with the pack.

From an anthropological perspective the cross is the moment when the crisis is at its peak and everybody made a stand against Jesus. René Girard uses here the term the “*mimetic furor*”.<sup>14</sup> It is remarkable that from now on, the most controversial people are all one. In the furor against a single victim the crowd is united.<sup>15</sup> It has unified all those who were before struggling with each other. This is the so called *scapegoat-effect*.<sup>16</sup> Whenever a group has identified one person as a scapegoat the rest of the group will be very united.<sup>17</sup>

When the crisis reaches its peak, it bursts into violence and often enough it leads to murder.

Usually after this outbreak of violence there will be a lessening of tension,<sup>18</sup> similar to the people after World War II saying “No war again!”. A similar situation faced the

---

11 See Girard, *I See Satan...*, p.24.

12 Concerning the dynamics of the mimetic furor in antique mythology, see: Richard J. Golsan, *René Girard and Myth. An Introduction* (New York: London, 1993).

13 See Girard, *I See Satan...*, p.35ff.

14 See *ibid.*, p.78.

15 See *ibid.*, p.38.

16 See Girard, *The Scapegoat*, p.12ff.

17 The discussion about the religious and social function of a scapegoat in societies was taken up by Raymund Schwager in Raymund Schwager, *Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock?* (München: 1978) and Jean- Michel Oughourlian, *Un mime nommé désir* (Paris, 1982), pp.38-44.

18 See Girard, *I See Satan...*, p.88.

prophet Jonah. When he was thrown into the sea and sacrificed in this way, literally the storm calmed down.<sup>19</sup>

The same happened after Jesus' death: The crowd dispersed quietly. The city of Jerusalem was calm. Surely the disciples themselves were frightened but the tension of the crowd was solved, like the calm after the storm.

This leads us to another important anthropological insight: The religious use and meaning of rituals of sacrifice.

### **3. The Ritual of Sacrifice**<sup>20</sup>

This awareness of the structure of violence within our History of Religion and within other myths of humankind helps us to understand many traditional laws and sacrificial rituals<sup>21</sup> that are related to this phenomenon of mimetic crisis and violence. Both the law and the sacrifice serve the control of violence. For the law it is obvious. But for the sacrifice it is more subtle. Therefore it is interesting to focus on the function of the victim in rituals of sacrifices:

In crisis situations, like epidemics, war, floods, etc. usually an animal<sup>22</sup> or a human being,<sup>23</sup> draws all the accumulated aggressions and fears on itself. The typical victims are people with abnormal characteristics, disabled and sick people or beggars, but also particularly gifted people.<sup>24</sup> Remarkably all societies in the world tend to reject people that do not meet their idea of being normal. These people will be declared guilty and in the worst case murdered.<sup>25</sup> So it happened to thousands of women in the late Middle Ages in Europe who were accused as so-called witches and were made responsible for the Black Death and other sicknesses, to the Jews multiple times in the history for similar reasons, or to the gypsies or whoever was declared to be the scapegoat of a particular country or society.

---

19 See Jonah 1:15.

20 See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.1ff.

21 See also Arnold van Gennep, *Übergangsriten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1986); Victor Turner, *Das Ritual: Struktur und Anti-Struktur* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989).

22 See Leviticus 4:1- 5:26.

23 See Jonah 1:5-16.

24 See Girard, *The Scapegoat*, pp.18, 31.

25 See also Wolfgang Sofsky, *Traktat über die Gewalt* (Fischer: Frankfurt am Main, 1997), p.157.

In all these murders we discover a cyclical process of chaos and restoration of order.<sup>26</sup> In the mechanism of the people's unity against the victim, the crisis finds its climax and its fulfilling. The Gospels as well as the Old Testaments describe this cyclical process of chaos and restoration of order again and again in great detail. We can find this pattern in the death of Old Testament prophets,<sup>27</sup> but also in the death of John the Baptist and last but not least in Jesus' passion. All of them are following the same pattern. All were caused by a collective will, like the guests at Herod's birthday banquet or the crowd in Jerusalem. In both cases the politically responsible person did not want the death of the demanded person, but at the same time did not dare to resist the mob and gave in to their will. On an anthropological level the result in both cases was the sacrifice calming down the community and bringing a kind of tranquility. People were shocked, maybe frightened but satisfied.<sup>28</sup> At least for the time being until the effect of the sacrifice lessens and the crowd demands a new sacrifice.

This is the pattern of many cycles of violence throughout the world. And it is also the nature of most of the rituals of sacrifices that we can find in religions. Most religions know rituals of sacrifice, where the priest is repeating and remembering the sacrifice that once was given in order to remind the people. The effect is the same as the original sacrifice: To calm the people and to minimize the danger of violence. It is used as an antidote against the poison of violence and murder.

#### **4. The Significance of Christ's Sacrifice**

But now we are coming to the significant difference between Christ's sacrifice and any other in the world. There is one thing that makes Jesus sacrifice so fundamentally different than any other sacrifice in the entire history of the humankind: It is **not** repeatable! It was once given for always and ever, as it is said in Hebrews 10:10, "*Because Jesus Christ did what God wanted him to do, we are all purified from sin by the offering that he made of his*

---

26 See Girard, *I See Satan...*, pp.45, 103.

27 See Isaiah, 53:7-9.

28 Also Friedrich Nietzsche described the same reaction in: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Werke bd. 2, K. Schlechta ed. (München: 1988), p.808. See also Sofsky who refers to Girard in Sofsky, *Traktat über die Gewalt*, p.109.

*own body once and for all.”*

This fact breaks the vicious circle of this continuously repeating violence. We no longer need any rituals where we give sacrifices to soothe an angry God. In the resurrection of Jesus it becomes clear that there is another way of overcoming and controlling violence than by sacrificing. The resurrection is more than a miracle, more than going beyond the bounds of the laws of nature. Here God overcame all violence and its mimetic cycles. We have instead a God who no longer needs any sacrifices but who broke this circle of violence and sacrifice once and forever.<sup>29</sup>

### **5. “Overcoming Violence” - But How?**

Has Girard any answer for us?<sup>30</sup> He taught us violence is in its roots caused by the mimetic desire. There is a model, in biblical terms, “the neighbor” (Exodus 20), or the brother (Cain and Abel) who has something or wants something which we want, too.

Another person often motivates the action of other people. This mimesis is not only responsible for our bad actions, but also for the good ones. The Bible gives us once more a good example of a mimetic model that helps us to understand how to break the cycle of violence.

The story of the Woman caught in adultery in the gospel of John, chapter 8 shows us the way. The crowd was gathered around her and was already about to throw stones at her. They only needed a word from Jesus (to allow them?) and they would have started to throw their stones. But what is he doing? Is he ready to give them the model to start the violent act?

“But he bent over and wrote on the ground with his finger. As they stood there asking him questions, he straightened himself up and said to them, ‘whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone on her.’ Then he bent over again and wrote on the ground. When they heard this, they all left, one by one, the older first.” (John 8:8-9)

---

29 The theology of the cross demythologises all cycles of violence. Gil Bailie explains this in Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* (New York: 1995).

30 See Girard, *I See Satan...*, p.202ff.

This is a good lesson of a mimetic model. The first stone is the decisive one. It is the most difficult one to throw. Why? Because it has no model.<sup>31</sup> As soon as the first person has thrown the first stone, it is much easier for the next to follow and then the third and so on. In this moment when Jesus says his words, the first stone is the last and only obstacle to start the stoning.<sup>32</sup>

In order to save the woman from being stoned to death by the crowd, Jesus names this first stone: “*whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone*” He draws the whole attention on this first stone by naming it. He does what he can to make this obstacle even bigger. It is like an echo at the end. The more those who want to throw stones are conscious of their responsibility, the bigger is the chance that the stones fall out of their hands. The mimetic dynamic follows here in the opposite direction. Jesus uses this effect. As soon as the first person abstains from stoning the woman, the second would follow. Finally “*they all left, one by one, the older first.*”

This story teaches us once more the dynamic of crowds, but much more than that it can teach us how the mimesis can be used in the other, peaceful direction.

Maybe this is even the most effective way of avoiding or stopping violence. It is not to forbid certain objects or the desire to possess them, as the Tenth Commandment does. The best method is to give the people a model for imitation. A model which prevents mimetic rivalries and that gives an example which leads in the opposite, peaceful direction.<sup>33</sup>

---

31 See *ibid.*, p.78.

32 The First Stone generated to a symbol which describes all antique and modern mass phenomena. See: René Girard, *Dialog mit Michel Treguer*, Thaur, Wien (München: 1997), pp.170-176. See also René Girard, *La vittima e la folla* (Treviso, 1998).

33 In the discussion about the role of Religions in promoting violence, Peter Walter shows according to Girard's ideas that the biblical image of God aims more at the overcoming of violence rather than its generation, see: Peter Walter, *Das Gewaltpotential des Monotheismus und der Dreieine Gott* (Freiburg Herder, 2005).