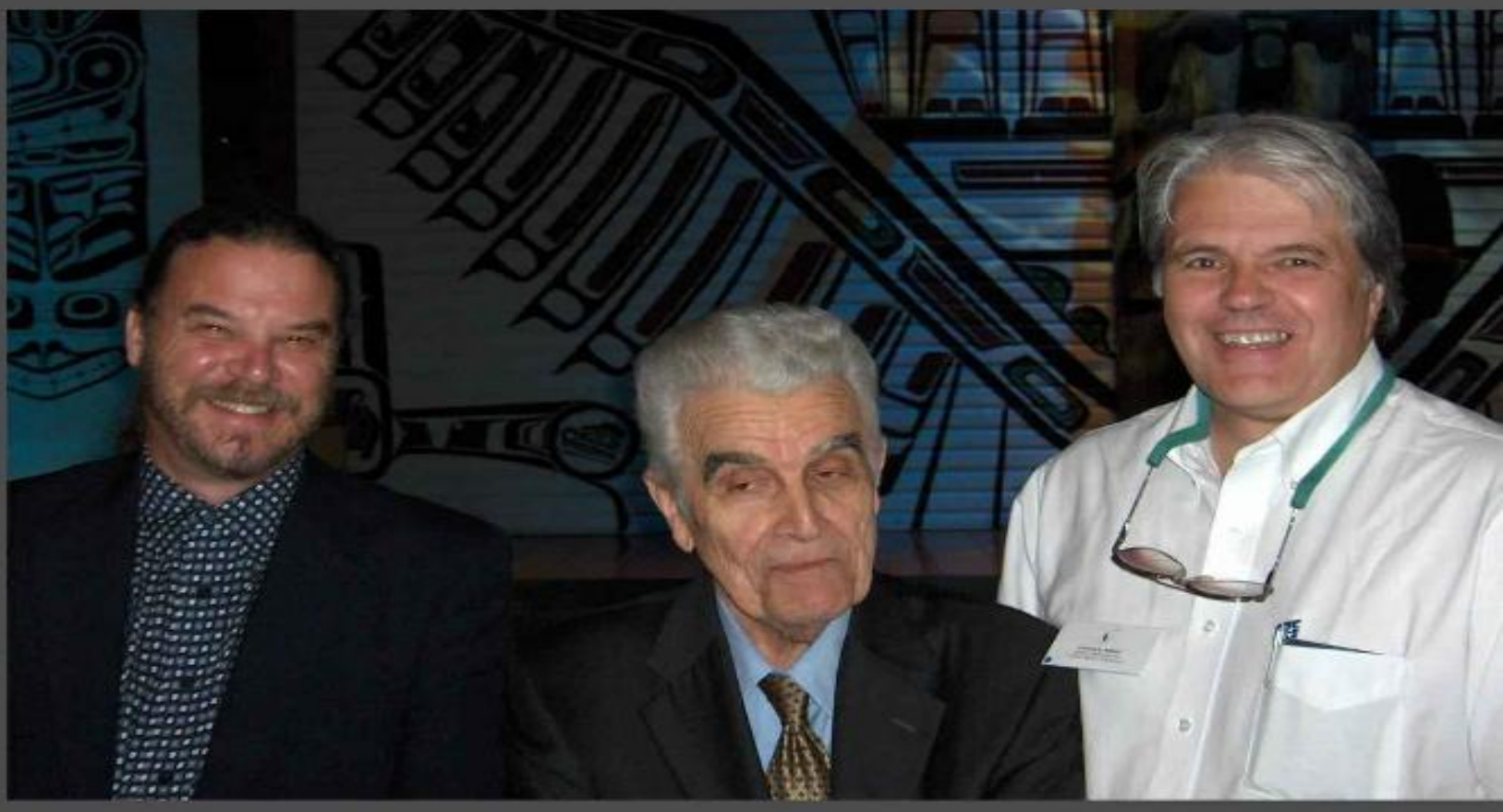
Reading the Bible with René Girard

Conversations with Steven E. Berry



Edited by

MICHAEL HARDIN

Foreword by SCOTT COWDELL

Praise for *Reading the Bible with René Girard*

"One of the many gifts of René Girard is his ability to unfold his theory in interviews. Some of his best writings belong to this genre. Depending on the partners who engage with him many of these dialogues open new perspectives on mimetic theory. *Reading the Bible with Rene Girard* is a wonderful example of this. I especially liked all the biographical comments; many of them were new to me."

~ Wolfgang Palaver, Professor of Catholic Social Thought and Dean of the School of Catholic Theology at the Universität Innsbruck, Austria, Past COV&R President

"Reading the Bible with René Girard is an important contribution both to understanding the Bible as a "work in progress" that continues into our own lives and to introducing the ground-breaking insights of René Girard on the human condition and the love of God that breaks through to us in the historical process. Girard's basic themes of imitative desire, the violence that is both expressed and contained in scapegoating and sacrifice, and the decisive revelation of our different ways of sanctioning violence and the divine response to this violence in the

crucifixion and resurrection of Christ all have their foundation in the Bible itself as an ongoing interpretive process. Steven Berry does an excellent job of eliciting the range of Girard's thought and his appreciation of the Bible and Michael Hardin has polished the text of these interviews into an extremely readable final form."

~ James G. Williams, Syracuse University, Past COV&R President

"Very often René Girard is at his best when he talks freely in a relaxed interview style. *Reading the Bible With Rene Girard* provides the master of mimetic theory with one more chance to show this strength. It is indeed hearing the master's voice."

~ Niki Wandinger, Professor at the University of Innsbruck, COV&R Bulletin Editor

"Over the past several decades, the famed literary critic and social theorist René Girard has applied his theory of mimetic rivalry and generative scapegoating to the Western literary canon in a series of brilliant and highly illuminating commentaries on such great writers as Shakespeare, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, and the Greek tragedians. Now, in *Reading the Bible with René Girard: Conversations with Stephen E. Berry*, he turns his attention to a text of unparalleled importance in shaping

both the civilization of the West and, more and more each day, our emerging international community—the Bible. Girard brings the insights of mimetic theory to both the Old and New Testaments, offering fresh new interpretations of Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, Joseph and his brothers, Abraham and Isaac, the Psalms, the Song of the Suffering Servant, Job, the Gerasene demoniac, the Parable of the Vineyard, Peter's denial, and of course the Passion of Christ. Dismissing fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible that treat every word as equally authoritative, Girard hears multiple voices speaking from its pages, with relics of the archaic religion born of scapegoating preserved alongside powerful critiques of sacred violence that reveal the innocence of the victim. As a work of Christian apologetics, *Reading the Bible with René Girard* is unique in that it offers an entirely new way of understanding the Bible as revelatory.

However, *Reading the Bible with René Girard* contains more than just biblical exegesis. In the course of a discussion of Girard's life and intellectual development—from his school years in occupied France to his long career teaching at various American universities and his recent

induction into the *Académie Française*—it offers a succinct and accessible digest of the genesis of his mimetic theory and its central insights. But, even more, *Reading the Bible with René Girard* expands into a bold account of the trajectory of human history, in which the biblical text is said to hold the key to understanding not only our violent past but also our uncertain future. One might disagree with some of his specific arguments and claims—his uncharitable readings of Plato and Nietzsche, for instance—but Girard remains at all times a brilliant and provocative thinker who constantly challenges us to look beyond the bewitching surface of our world and recognize the profound mimetic forces at work within it. One comes away from *Reading the Bible with René Girard* unable to view the Bible—or the modern world that has been so decisively shaped by it—in quite the same way ever again."

~ George A. Dunn, Department of Philosophy and Religion, University of Indianapolis

"Clear, conversational, and as always brilliantly insightful. There are few more exciting conversation partners for the beauty of orthodoxy than Girardian anthropology. And there are few more accessible introductions as this little gem."

~ Jarrod McKenna Australian peace award-winning pastor, activist and cofounder of First Home Project.

“Whether your faith is in God or science, this conversation with Girard will nudge you with the patience of a good friend into a deeper understanding of yourself and the world in which we live. I encourage you to join Girard as he retells the story of his great discovery of the truth about God, humanity and violence lurking in the Bible.”

~ Suzanne Ross, co-founder of The Raven Foundation, author of The Wicked Truth.

“This is a wonderful introduction to René Girard's work. Through it one can follow the unfolding of his theory in the context of his life. The text retains its flavor as conversation and so makes "listening in" even easier. We are lucky to have this!”

~ Jeremiah Alberg, Professor of Philosophy and Religion, International Christian University, Tokyo Japan , COV&R President

“Since the 1970s, René Girard has had much to say on the Judeo-Christian texts, offering us a startlingly profound

series of reflections on the Old and New Testaments, reflections that should be of interest not merely to "believers," but anyone interested in exploring some of the deepest sources of western cultural understanding and critique. Here, finally, we have in one volume a dialogue dedicated exclusively to this dimension of Girard's work. In this excellent book, you are invited to sit in on a series of conversations with one of the leading thinkers of our time, concerning matters of the utmost philosophical, theological, and practical significance. This is a very important volume indeed."

~ Dr. Chris Fleming, Senior Lecturer, School of Humanities and Communication Arts, University of Western Sydney

"An invaluable addition to René Girard primary sources, piquing fresh questions and perspectives on his game-changing thought of original violence. The relaxed wide-ranging comments lead directly to the heart of the Girardian paradox. On the one hand his reading of the Bible cries out for a radically new iteration of Christian faith and practice. On the other he appears deeply to favor a gradualist and conservative approach. He places "the religion of love" above "violent religions" but he sees a reflection of the divine even in the latter. And while Catholicism has a wisdom that does not "hurry up" the apocalypse, Protestantism "is driven for the good, but this

drive can become excessive." A must-have for all those tracing out the signs of our times, seeking to reimagine Christian theology and meaning in a post-Girardian universe."

~Anthony Bartlett, author of *Virtually Christian* and co-founder of Theology and Peace

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Dedicated to

Martha Girard

Beloved spouse, loyal companion and faithful friend
of the genius who made this all possible

And to

The visionaries of Imitatio

Peter Thiel
Robert Hamerton-Kelly†
Lindy Fishburne
Jimmy Kaltreider

“Change we must, to live again.”
– Jon Anderson

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Foreword by Scott Cowdell

The veteran Girardian thinker, writer, and peace activist Michael Hardin has done us a great service as editor in bringing this fascinating, wide-ranging conversation between Steven Berry and René Girard into the light of day. Its publication represents nothing less than a significant milestone in Girardian studies worldwide.

Since *Achever Clausewitz* (*Battling to the End*) and the long-awaited appearance in English of two earlier French books – *Quand ces choses commenceront* (*When These Things Begin*) and *Celui par qui le scandale arrive* (*The One by Whom Scandal Comes*) – one might have thought that Girard's oeuvre was complete. Each of these works brought breakthroughs and new layers of understanding to the Girardian enterprise; not least in fleshing out Girard's own Christian perspective on what it is that he is doing. But now we have a further major contribution.

Girard's Christian readers will be pleased to see the doctrinal, spiritual, and prophetic concomitants of the mimetic theory set out in more detail than we have seen hitherto. Here the indivisible spiritual reality of Judaeo-Christianity is commended non-triumphalistically and non-exclusively on the basis of unique insights that have been its blessing (and curse) to convey.

The charm of Girard's own "Catholic humanism," resting on a scriptural-prophetic base that should satisfy any serious Protestant, is evident in this volume. The story of his early life is also told here in unprecedented detail, helping to complete the picture we have of a teacher who has been a worthwhile mimetic model for so many.

While this book is not just about questions of scriptural interpretation, nevertheless these are its *raison d'être***.** Girard has been criticized by the guild of Biblical scholars for his controversial conclusions. Where is the evidence of sufficient immersion in the craft of academic, "scientific" engagement with the texts? Yet the rise in recent years of a vigorous

"theological interpretation" movement in Biblical studies, looking to theologians, spiritual writers, and ministry practitioners instead of academic specialists, points to the rediscovery of a more ancient way of reading the Bible. One might approach Girard on the Bible in this vein. As for specialist biblical scholarship that continues to draw on anthropology, sociology, literary studies, and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, Girard's half-century of creative work in all these areas can surely be viewed more positively, as both a resource and a stimulus. I hope that this volume helps to spark a new appreciation of Girard and his hermeneutical strategy.

René Girard is now approaching the end of a long and fruitful life. It is very likely that this most recent publication will be the last. As such its importance cannot be overstated. To Michael Hardin, Steven Berry, and the Girards go our thanks for this surprising and unexpected gift.

Scott Cowdell
Charles Sturt University,
Canberra, Australia
Feast of St Ignatius Loyola, 31 July 2015

Preface

In the mid-1980s I was invited to join a group of clergy to engage in a series of dialogue sessions focused on an exploration of the future of the church. Our discussions were held at Auburn Theological Seminary bordering the famed Riverside Church in New York City. The group consisted of seasoned veterans of the cross including the then pastor of Riverside, the Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin. I was the youngster of the group of ten by approximately 15 years. I listened intently as the pastors told stories of joining the voters' rights march from Selma to Montgomery, or of being arrested for protesting the war in Viet Nam, or of the time when they were swept up in the student rebellion at Columbia (which was only blocks away from where we were seated). Each of them spoke of his own experience of the exhaustion of working in the institutional church.

Every week for some months I came to the seminar and listened to unique and fascinating stories that are now part of the collective memory of our country's fabled cultural journey, entwined with much religious ambiguity, intrigue and hostility. Why did the church seem to be faltering? Why were church leaders running out of spiritual capital and succumbing to fatigue and spiritual ennui? These are questions that I pondered as we gathered to explore what might happen next. What stands out most poignantly about that experience is the day when Professor René Girard, the Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language, Literature, and Civilization at Stanford University, visited and shared with us a theory that he had developed. For years, Dr. Girard had taken up the question of the violent roots of culture embedded in desire and revealed through literature, psychology, anthropology and most recently, biblical analysis. Having already authored *Deceit, Desire and The Novel* (Eng. Trans.1965), *Violence and the Sacred* (Eng. Trans. 1977), and *To Double Business Bound* (published in English in 1978), he was

now appearing before us to discuss his most recent work, *The Scapegoat* (1982).

I found what he had to say profound. He explained that human beings are fundamentally imitative creatures. We copy one another's desires and therefore are in perpetual conflict with one another over the objects of our desire; his *idée fixe* is that the permanent threat of violence could end only if the violence was directed against a single victim – a practice which he discovered founds, preserves and unifies culture. Religion, for him, was a safety valve against all-out violence and war. Religion, working within culture, had as its ultimate purpose the organizing of retributive violence into a united front against an enemy common to all rivals. Religion acted as a form of safety valve that let off steam and thus transformed violent behavior into a socially constructive force with all differing antagonisms now converging on an isolated and unique figure, the surrogate victim, the "scapegoat," thus preserving the culture from all-out war. I listened intently as he explained for us what I (and others with me) call the Caiaphas solution: "It is more expedient that one man should die, rather than the whole nation should suffer." (John 11:49-53) He explained that the prophetic religion of the Hebrew people and the religion of Jesus at heart were an attempt to overcome violence by exposing the truth of institutionally sanctioned violence and Jesus' ultimate goal of transforming society into a new order. The Biblical message, Girard explained, is ultimately that "God identifies with victims and exposes the surrogate victim mechanism as a fraud, a deception and a lie. This is the essence of biblical revelation."

Girard's words stayed with me throughout the years. Still, it was not until I became deeply embroiled in my own personal crisis of institutional violence that I pursued an even deeper, more in-depth level of the work of Girard who, for me, offered the missing link in the movement from competition and rivalry to compassion and solidarity.

I am indebted to Michael Hardin's groundbreaking work in Preaching Peace. On a certain level his Biblical studies prompted me to take a film crew to Stanford, California, where I conducted three days of interviews with René Girard and produced what is now the most extensive video archive of René Girard on scripture, which contains the bulk of the content

of this book. I am indebted to my friend – author, editor, and Girardian scholar Michael Hardin – for helping me get these important insights of René Girard into the public domain where he can be accessed in a new way that may help us through the maze of meaning contained in what remains of the Jesus revolution, which is, as Bonhoeffer insightfully and presciently offered, to create a "religionless Christianity."

Steven E. Berry
Manchester, Vermont 2015

Editor's Introduction

There is a sea change occurring in the interpretation of the Bible. One does not have to be a rocket scientist to see that Christianity is undergoing a powerful transformation both internally as it reconsiders the nature of the church and the Gospel and externally in relation to the world and science. A powerful impetus behind this reinterpretation is the work of Professor René Girard.

Up to now, if a person wanted to engage Girard's thesis on mimetic theory and scapegoating as it pertained to the Bible, they would have to turn to the sophisticated analyses found in Girard's own writings or to more technical discussions located in books and articles on his theory. While these resources are of great benefit to professional theologians and biblical scholars, Girard has, for the most part, remained inaccessible to the average person. Yet, interest in Girard's work continues to grow unabated among an intelligent lay public. I am constantly asked where someone who has no acquaintance with Girard should begin. Until now I have recommended his book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*.

Happily you have in your hands the first accessible discussion by Girard on the mimetic theory and its usefulness in interpreting the Bible. In these interviews of Girard by the Rev. Dr. Steven E. Berry (now a State Representative in Vermont), scores of biblical passages are illuminated in an easy-to-understand format. Dr. Berry interweaves Girard's autobiography with major aspects of the mimetic theory and interpretation of biblical passages, thus painting a big picture of both the man and his work. In these pages, the reader encounters not so much the sophisticated professor but rather the humble ruminator who, after four score years, looks back on the development of his life's work and its impact on the interpretation of scripture. Once you see this way of reading the Bible, you can never go back. If I may reference the movie *The Matrix*, it is akin to swallowing the red pill.

Although these interviews were conducted before Girard's last major book *Battling to the End,* one can hear Girard's concern for the effects of 9/11 on contemporary society. It seems that the mimetic theory speaks even more clearly to the post-9/11 world than it did to the time before.

I discovered Girard in 1987 in my final year of seminary. Over the past quarter century, I have found nothing to dissuade me from Girard's understanding of the message of the Bible. Working together with Jewish and Christian thinkers in the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, I am more persuaded than ever that the rendering of the biblical text in the light of Girard's theory is the most constructive way to read the Bible in the twenty-first century. There is no other method that comes close or so clearly opens up the Bible as Girard's reading is able to do.

Girard aficionados will discover within these pages nuggets and gems on topics not previously published by Girard. After reading these interviews, the lay person will have a solid grasp of how the mimetic theory works, how it relates to the Bible, how it vindicates the biblical revelation and how much sense it makes of the modern world. May its light illumine our darkness and make for peace.

I thank Dr. Berry for the invitation to turn the transcripts of these interviews into readable prose. It is not an easy task to accomplish, as others who have done this can attest; nevertheless, it has been rewarding and enjoyable. Thanks to Rob Grayson, Peter and Barbara Bell for copy-editing the manuscript and to Nikolaus Wandinger and George Dunn for their eagle eyes and corrections. Thanks to Chris Fleming for his nudges. Mistakes of course belong to me, so I offer my *mea culpa* ahead of time. I am honored to have my *Doktorvater*, Scott Cowdell, write the Foreword. Thank you Scott.

Thanks to Lorri for a beautiful cover and her work on the interior design; hers has been a labor of love. I love you, my pet.

To Terry at Alice's Diner, thanks for letting me turn the back booth into my office. Great service from a great staff!

Taking a transcript, correcting it and editing it into written text is a tricky thing to do. I have sought, as much as possible to retain the dialogic character of the interview. I spoke with René and Martha about this, and I believe that the *ipsissima vox* is true to René. Those who prefer *ipsissima verba* can watch the archived videos. René is now past the time when he reviews manuscripts. He is a venerable 91 years old and still smiling all the time, according to Martha.

While I have always prized Girard's books, I have valued even more our many face-to-face conversations. Too many significant thinkers can be difficult to engage socially. Such is not the case with René, whose amiable gentleness belies his extraordinary erudition. He is as comfortable visiting in his backyard patio as he is addressing some of the world's most significant intellectual bodies. Those who have enjoyed the privilege of meeting with René and Martha in their home in Stanford, CA, can attest to the warmth of their hospitality and the freedom they give to questers.

Martha Girard has stood with me all the way through this project, offering ideas and suggestions, always seeking to make sure René's message was truthfully expressed. With deep appreciation, Lorri and I offer our gratitude to Martha Girard who, over these many years, has been a model for how to understand René's work and how to live a life of good mimesis. This book is dedicated to her and to the visionaries of Imitatio who continue to make sure that René's voice is heard the world over.

As we are preparing this book for publication the news has come that René has died, November 4, 2015. He will be missed by family and friends but his legacy will endure and continue to change the way we think about violence, the sacred and God.

Michael Hardin
Lancaster, PA
November 15, 2015

CHAPTER 1
Biography and Mimetic Theory

Steven Berry: Thank you, René and Martha, for your generous hospitality. I'd like to begin at the beginning, back in France where you were raised. Can you tell us about your childhood and what it was like for you in your early years?

René Girard: I was born in Avignon, in southern France, on Christmas Day, 1923. My father was curator of the municipal library of the museum; later, he was also curator of the Pope's Castle, the most famous monument in Avignon, which is almost as big as half of the town. I had a very happy childhood. I had a brother and two sisters. My one brother, who is older than me, is still there in Avignon, where he was a medical doctor all his life. One of my two sisters lives in Paris now, and the other one in Marseille, on the Mediterranean coast. My childhood was quite happy; we had a big garden, a house in the suburbs, not too much money. My father had no car, whereas many of my school friends did, so our life was modest but comfortable. I can say that I was a happy child.

I remember many details of my early education. I taught myself to read, and I still have the book with me, a children's version of the medieval novel about Reinhart the Fox. I was an avid reader from very early in my life. Later on, I went to the *lycée*, the school that is like the gymnasium in Germany, or high school if you want, but more classical than American high schools, with Latin and Greek. Later, my father put me in a special little school held by an older lady in her home. She had around three students. A few years later I went back to the *lycée*.

In France, you finish high school with two examinations that are competitive national examinations in the last two years. The first year I was still in that school I didn't do so well: I passed, but without special honors or anything. At the beginning of the last year, I was actually expelled from school, so I prepared for the second examination at home. But I did much better the second time on my own than I had the first time at school. I had

high honors, so after that my father more or less trusted me. This was during the beginning of the Second World War: the French defeat in 1940 followed by the occupation of France. Avignon was in the so-called unoccupied zone. In spite of that, there were quite a few Germans in town; it was a period of great upset, of course. Our life was not immediately upset by the situation, though. So after that second exam I decided to prepare for a school in Paris that is very famous for intellectuals and the humanities. In order to do that, I went to another town where my older brother was already a medical student. I didn't like it at all, so I went back home to Avignon. There I studied medieval history. It was the type of work similar to what my father was doing in medieval art. It was linked to the type of work he was doing in the museum that was mostly about local stuff.

I passed the entrance exam and I suddenly found myself in Paris, which was separated from Avignon at the time by the occupation line, the dividing line in France between the occupied zone, where Paris was located, and the so-called unoccupied zone where my home town was, which experienced some occupation by the Germans. So as soon as I found myself in Paris, where it was very difficult to find food, I became aware of how bad the situation was. I was on my own, going to student restaurants in Paris; I found it just abominable. It was the worst year of my life, and I wanted to get back to Avignon in a hurry. In France, all students tend to go to Paris, so there were many students from the south. There was an arrangement with the German occupying authorities where students could go back and forth from home to Paris and back, but only at certain times of the year. I couldn't go back home this time. The first time I had left home, I had gone back home very quickly because I felt uncomfortable while in Paris. This time, I felt even worse, but because of the occupation I couldn't go back. So I say mockingly in a way that it's thanks to the Germans that I finished school in Paris because I couldn't go back home, which I would have done if it had been immediately possible. Those years in Paris, which were also the difficult years of the war, were not very pleasant, but they taught me a great deal about life. It was a very special period, even though the Nazis occupied Paris. Then at the end of the year, at the end of that period, 1943 to 1944, there were bombings, which were not very scary really, but I finished the educational requirements. I didn't want to become an archivist. I had a

chance to go to the United States as an assistant in French. I was finally offered a job at Indiana University in Bloomington.

SB: What was the year?

RG: 1947. In the autumn of ’47, three years after the war, I became an instructor in French at Indiana University. What should I say about that period? I didn't know how to teach, I didn't even know the rules of French grammar. I had to teach American students, so I learned the rules there. I read even more than I had in France in the previous years, including my childhood years. There was a huge library at Indiana University with open stacks. I started to read very broadly in many fields that were not directly related to my work. I didn't even have the visa that I should have had to teach the number of hours that I was teaching: I think I was teaching 15 hours a week, which is really quite a load in a university. When the immigration officials came to check on me, they saw I worked 15 hours and said that must be part-time, so that was okay. I had a student visa and was a student working on a PhD in modern history. I wrote a thesis on American opinion of France from 1940 to 1943, during the war – in other words a contemporary thesis, not like the medieval thesis I had done in France, at the School of Medieval Studies in Paris. This was contemporary history, which I more or less enjoyed because it was American opinion of France, so it was primarily about reading the newspapers of the time.

Soon after that I got married, to one of my early students, Martha. At the time, I was not interested in research of any kind at all; I was primarily interested in buying a car and traveling in the United States that first summer with two other men, one French and the other American. We actually took a trip to San Francisco, Los Angeles, and then back on the famous Route 66, which I enjoyed very much. But I had a 1942 car with a very bad radiator which was leaking. Since the car was mine, I was worried about it during the entire trip, so I don’t recall seeing anything I remember on Route 66. There was what is known as the Painted Desert: all these places where there is a lot of red stuff. The radiator was leaking and steaming so much that when I finally got back to Bloomington, Indiana, the car’s engine, which by then was hardly running, was crimson, an incredible color. So the guy in the garage asked me, “Why did you paint this?” I said,

“I didn't paint it – that’s the way it happened on the road,” and he wouldn't believe me. He said, “Oh, you must have painted this. I mean, no car would ever turn that color.” I said, “Well, not all of America is like Indiana – it's very red in some places.”

After a few years of teaching, I was let go from Indiana University because I was not publishing. Another Frenchman replaced me, but I had been warned about that just before I started to write articles. So basically I'm a product of the “publish or perish” policy of American universities. I started to write articles about literary criticism because I had decided to stay in America, where I felt the salary was higher than what I could get in France at the time, not long after the war.

SB: What was happening in your relationship with Martha at that time, as you’d begun writing?

RG: We married in June 1951. We had this small apartment in Bloomington, Indiana. I had just started to write articles: I began to work very hard and write all the time. So in the end, the chairman at Bloomington, whom I knew, was very sorry he had fired me. I met him later at professional meetings. He said, “My tough luck that I fired you and now you're publishing so much. You would have done so well at Bloomington.” The next job I got after that was at Duke University, but I only spent one year there. In the French field in universities in those days, there was a Frenchman, Henri Peyre, who was very important; he was an important professor at Yale and served as chairman of the department for a long time. He was sort of “The Boss” of the whole French field in American universities. He was a liaison between the French university system and American universities. Later, when I first met him – which was in my hometown, because his family was from Avignon, believe it or not – he said, “How could you have escaped my attention? You’ve been teaching at an American university for five, six years and I don't know about you. I know about everybody in the field.” It was Peyre who found me a job at Bryn Mawr College that was much better than either Indiana or Duke. So Martha and I moved to Bryn Mawr College, and this was my first interesting teaching job. Bryn Mawr College is one of these eastern colleges for women, and they had a very good French department at the time: they

used only French books. Teaching became quite interesting to me. I was teaching the novel, among other things, although I had no training in literary criticism; so I kept asking myself, "What should I teach these kids?"

Nevertheless, there was a certain *ennui* about teaching these novels. I thought the students must feel bored as well. What could I do for them to make them less bored, or even interested? Given my own mentality, I guess, or my own inclination, my tendency was to look for what was the same in all these novels, what made them similar. Literary criticism, both then and now, is really more interested in looking for singularities: things have to be different from each other, to be like lonely mountains, separated by wide valleys with no communication between the two. My own trend was very different. I was reading nineteenth-century French novels, finding great similarities. These writers were obviously looking at the same social world, criticizing the same things and, in particular, talking about love affairs. Thus it was my effort to find something to say about these novels that led me ultimately to the idea of mimetic desire, the basic idea that has never left me.

SB: So it was during your time teaching at Bryn Mawr College, when you began to really delve into French literature, that you discovered mimetic theory.

RG: Yes, it was in part my teaching and in part my own recollections of reading a book from my childhood. I've never left the books of my childhood, because my childhood is very precious to me. I kept re-reading the books of my childhood all the time. I was very lucky that one of them was another novel, not a French one the time: *Don Quixote*, written by Cervantes. I felt there were similarities between the novels of the nineteenth century and *Don Quixote*, even though *Don Quixote* is a much older book, written at the beginning of the seventeenth century. When Shakespeare was writing in England, Cervantes was writing in Spain.

I decided that all these books were really primarily about the desire of the characters, their plans in life, what they wanted to do, the girls or women they were in love with … and I could see that their desires were not independent, rooted in themselves, as they claimed, as we all claim. Rather,

they were dependent on someone else. For a long time I wondered about the role of the book in *Don Quixote*. Don Quixote is a reader of novels; he reads the novels of chivalry. The novels of chivalry are medieval novels, which had really started in France, but spread to all of Western Europe including Spain. Now Don Quixote is a country gentleman, what they call in Spanish *Hidalgo*, which means "son of someone." It means you are of noble blood. He's only a small nobleman and doesn't have much money, but he reads these novels of chivalry and his head becomes so full of them that he wants to become a knight-errant. Today, of course, we don't see much difference between knight errantry in the thirteenth century and life in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, but in fact there is an enormous difference. The seventeenth century is already the modern world, where there were no knights-errant. So Don Quixote is crazy when he wants to become a knight-errant; he's following a model that has no meaning in modern life. As a matter of fact, he's following a model that has never existed.

So what Cervantes wanted to show us is a character who is carried away by his dream, but his dream is not really his own: his dream is about the books he's read. To quote the song from *Man of La Mancha*, Don Quixote has an "impossible dream." Now, if you look at many characters in the nineteenth century, they have real models, live models: they see a gentleman who has more money or prestige, who is a little bit older than them, and they imitate him. They are going to fall in love with the same girl. So the relationship between *Don Quixote* and all the other novels is that desire is not independent, not rooted in the self, or in the object. There is not a straight line between the desiring subject and the desired object; rather, there is a triangle with a model directing the desire of the hero towards an object which, if he had been all by himself, he would not have desired. The idea of what I call "triangular desire" was born there in the novel. I sensed that the really great novels were the ones that were aware of that lack of independence, of the young man who thinks he is in charge. He thinks he is pursuing his own dream, whereas in fact he's pursuing a dream that is already around, a dream with a past, a dream with a social existence, or a dream that is shared by someone who is going to be a model of desire. When he is imitated, he will turn into a rival, because the two characters

will be in love with the same object, and therefore will become rivals for that object.

Popular views have taught us that our desires should be independent from other people, should be rooted in ourselves, but even that idea is not really ours; it's the idea of the whole of society. It is still repeated *ad nauseam* in the world today and believed by most people. But a great novelist will show you that it's not true, that there is either a book behind the desire or a live individual, which can amount to pretty much the same thing. There is either a model who is already literary, who has a bookish existence, who maybe never had a real existence, like the knights of *Don Quixote*, or there is a model with a real existence. But in a way what Don Quixote is doing is less, even though he is crazier than most people, with armor going back several centuries, which is a completely crazy enterprise. Don Quixote is a happy man because he has no rival, because the knights-errant he imitates he's never going to encounter in the field pursuing the same goal he's pursuing himself.

This is very interesting, because Cervantes is a great master of mimetic desire. He shows you that there is a young man who's gone to university and who feels he's quite learned, yet who is scandalized by the dream of Don Quixote, by the fact that Don Quixote wastes his existence doing this nonsense since he is not a young man – he's in his fifties. This man is trying to correct the mistake to teach a lesson to Don Quixote, so what does he do? He imitates Don Quixote, he gets armor of his own, a horse of his own and a squire of his own, and he goes into the field to have an encounter with Don Quixote. Lo and behold, it's the only battle Don Quixote ever wins: he defeats this man, who after that becomes torn apart by jealousy and envy of Don Quixote, and has no peace until he finally defeats Don Quixote at the end. But he has an unhappy life, because his mimetic desire is of the second type. Since Don Quixote himself is his model, he has a real model that has defeated him. Therefore he's full of envy and jealousy, which is the vice that goes with mimetic desire. This is not the case with Don Quixote himself, since his idea is unreal, entirely bookish, almost like a religious ideal.

Don Quixote is beaten black and blue by all the people he encounters during his trips because he acts like a fool; he tries to save ladies whom he

finds on the road who are not deprived of their freedom. He does all sorts of mad things, but he's never really unhappy, because when he's defeated he feels the next battle will be better; his dignity and his prestige in his own eyes is never destroyed.

I started at Bryn Mawr to talk not only about mimetic desire, but about the fact that there are different types of mimetic desire. If your model does not exist or is far enough from you that you will never rival him, he will never become a real rival, and you preserve a certain independence; you may not be like a medieval monk but you're the next best thing to it. Conversely, if your model is your school friend, your neighbor – the more democratic the world becomes, the more our models live in the same world we do – you get into a world of dreadful competition, rivalry, envy, jealousy and so forth. You can see these bad sentiments that are ultimately the same on both sides, because as the model is imitated, he starts imitating his own imitator. Therefore you have a vicious circle of imitation that gets worse and worse between model and rival, which is typical of the world of politics, and even the world of scholarship. Scholars can be rivals of each other. Competition is the essence of our world; competition is essentially mimetic. So in a way the story of mimetic desire is a historical one: it's the story of the evolution of desire in the Western world.

This historical aspect is one of the main points of my first book, which in English is called *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. In French it has a title that is very different but subtler: it translates as *Romantic Lie and Novelistic Truth*, but the word for *romantic* and the word for *novel* in French sound almost the same. It's a very different book from normal literary criticism, because what is hinted at is a history of the Western world consisting of rivalrous relationships. We see less and less distance between models and their imitators, and this is the fundamental fact of our civilization. We feel we're constantly moving toward more happiness as we become more equal, but in fact we're always moving towards more rivalry. And this is true not only within the democratic world, but one might say throughout the world, because national competition is not very different from what we are talking about. This is the way my first book was interpreted by the best interpreters. There is some kind of social theory behind it which is also a historical theory, not a history of a necessarily different regime, but a history of

human relations becoming more and more entangled in each other, more and more rivalrous throughout the course of time.

SB: What other books did you read at that time?

RG: The oldest book there is *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. The second book was Stendhal's *Red and Black*, a novel about an ambitious young man in the nineteenth century who is an imitator of Napoleon but becomes the employee of a very rich politician. It's a novel about ambition. Then after that I read *Madame Bovary* by the French writer Flaubert. She's a provincial woman who feels terribly unhappy because she doesn't live in Paris, and she reads cheap novels. She's in some kind of convent during her childhood, during her school years, but nevertheless it has a corrupting influence on her because she reads trashy novels that are brought into that school by one of the women there. As a result, she's full of romantic dreams. She marries a country doctor who is a very nice guy but who is not very smart; then she starts having lovers, who are more glamorous. *Madame Bovary* is really the first great novel to realize that much of our mentality is based on what in English is called glamour. Flaubert is probably the greatest writer in this vein, because he created Madame Bovary, who has become a legendary character like Don Quixote. She's the archetypal woman who is the victim; you feel she's already the victim of advertisement, of things like that. As a matter of fact, there is a man who brings a lot of stuff to her and she tries to dress in a very chic way. She has a lover who is above her station in life. She copies the aristocrats in Paris; she's invited one time to a wealthy country house in the Normandy province where she lives, and there she has a little taste of Paris. It moves her to commit suicide, because she has two lovers, she feels disgraced, she has debts and she doesn't realize that her husband is so nice that he would have forgiven her. So she commits suicide ultimately for no reason, except perhaps out of a romantic dream, like Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. It's a very profound novel, but you can see Madame Bovary as a kind of female Don Quixote.

SB: Except she's unhappy.

RG: Except that she's unhappy. The more mimetic desire one has, the more it gets into real life and the more it destroys that life, the unhappier the

characters become.

The next novel I read after that was another French one, by Proust, but I also brought in Dostoyevsky. I put him last even though chronologically he came before Proust, because I feel that the evolution of mimetic desire in Dostoyevsky really goes beyond what we have in the French novel. It's really the Russian Revolution that is key. Take *The Possessed*, a book where you have this terrorist. Both Dostoyevsky and the terrorist are just romantic madmen who have a glamorous idea of life that they will never realize, since they want to kill the Czar. You can see how the whole thing can be a history of the private, the individual person's consciousness throughout Western history that moves towards the type of world we live in today.

Dostoyevsky is the one novelist I studied that is the closest to the type of world we live in. I still feel that way now that terrorism is an even bigger presence in our world than it was at the time I wrote *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Much of my theory of human relations is already there in my first book. At the same time this history is the history of what happens to the Christian world, which becomes less and less Christian over time, which is a history of modern individualism, which in turn is a rebellion against religion.
SB: How so?

RG: In the sense of the project of the self, even in the case of Don Quixote. Don Quixote's models are knights. At one point his squire Sancho asks him, "Wouldn't it be better to become monks, than try to be saints: maybe we would not get so many blows on our backs if we did that." So Don Quixote explains that his own call is not a religious one, but is to be a knight, to save the community. So his choice is already against religion. This is a very significant passage where one could say that all these books are prophetic of one another; they are stages in a gradual descent, though I wouldn't call it a descent into hell. In a sense, Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a descent into hell could be regarded as a model for it, because when I wrote *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, it was interpreted as a theory of the novel, since it only talks about novels. However, take Dante and the story of Paolo and Francesca, who become lovers because they read the novel together, and they kiss each other: they are in love. Paolo is the brother of Francesca's husband, and

they are not thinking about anything evil, they have no thought of deception or romantic love before they read the book, and they only kiss each other at the moment they read about the queen kissing her lover Lancelot for the first time.

Dante, in a way, is the arch-writer of mimetic desire in that country. It's a very brief text, but a very beautiful one which, if I had known about it at the time, would have been the first covered in my book, even before Cervantes, because it comes two or three centuries before. Cervantes, Stendhal, Proust, Dostoevsky and Dante all write great literature. I would say this of Shakespeare ultimately. I also finally wrote a book on Shakespeare.[1]

Shakespeare is the arch-master of mimetic desire. All his early comedies are about two boys. For example, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* two friends try to get each other to fall in love with the same girl because they are such good friends that if one of them falls in love with a girl, he feels totally unsafe about his choice unless his friend shares the same choice. So he tries to get his friend to fall in love with the same girl, and when he succeeds of course all hell breaks loose and they become rivals. That, in a nutshell, is *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the same thing but with two couples instead of one, so the story is much more complex. It's also much cleverer, written by a writer with more experience. It's the story of two boys falling in love with the same girl, two girls falling in love with the same boy and the crisscrossing of all this in a play of mimetic desire. Shakespeare uses expressions that are just so fantastically revealing. For instance, there is a line in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that goes, "Oh hell, to choose love by another's eye." To choose love through the eye of your friend is hell; that is literally true. This is the real story of the play; while it might seem to be merely playful, just fun, in reality it is not about the fairies, as it appears to be. The 'magic' in the play is really the mimetic desire that makes the two boys switch lovers, according to the doings of their mimetic complexities. Shakespeare is the complete master, but all great literature is about the evil of influence. Influence at the time was not cinematic, as it is today, but literary. Great literature is about the danger of great literature.

SB: This was slowly unfolded for you then.

RG: Slowly, yes, because I didn't know Shakespeare at the beginning. That occurred when I went to Buffalo years later and engaged the English department who were Shakespeareans. That's when I incorporated Shakespeare. Shakespeare is so rich from the point of view that interests me, and so full of definitions. Only Shakespeare can sound playful when he is extremely serious about what he's saying about human relations. In the meantime, however, long before I wrote my book on Shakespeare, I had become interested in not only mimetic desire but also religion.
SB: Tell us about that transition.

RG: That transition is a pretty complex one, because now, what I said about mimetic desire is not a literary truth only. It is about human beings. Now, animals have appetites; they don't have any desires as we do, as we would like to think sometimes, but they do have appetites. These appetites lead to certain types of rivalries. We know, for instance, that deer and many other animals compete with each other; the males compete for a female and therefore they desire the same object. But they don't kill each other. When they fight, one of the two animals, as a rule, surrenders to the other one. This is very important today in studies of animal behavior, because it creates a permanent relationship between what is called the dominant animal and the dominated animal; what we call animal society is simply made up of pairs or groups of dominant and dominated animals. It always happens in the field this way: there is no social system that is independent like the one we have as humans. So we talk about animal societies because the relationships are uneven or differentiated. They have dominant animals that choose everything they want: food, females, and so on. The dominated animals have to be satisfied with what is left over.
Human beings obviously have the same type of struggle in their rivalries, but it doesn't end with a dominant-dominated pattern, because we are more violent. Why are we more violent? We have a greater mimetic impulse, and that mimetic impulse that turns us into rivals; our imitation is more intense than the animal imitation. This is probably, in my view, decisive in the definition of humanity, because this greater power of imitation is both the driver of our intelligence, our ability to learn from others, and also accounts for our violence, our rivalries, and the fact that we kill one another.

Rivalries in human beings don't end with a dominant-dominated pattern; rather, they end with vengeance.

What is vengeance? I kill you, but after I've killed you, your brother may decide to kill me; after your brother kills me my brother will decide to kill my killer, and so it goes on endlessly. Vengeance is mimetic violence in its purest expression; it is pure mimesis, pure violence. Imitation becomes so intensely widespread that it transcends time and place, and can become a way of life. Societies cannot sustain that because if everything becomes vengeance, everybody dies. At the same time, however, vengeance – in our case *social retribution* – is the greatest duty, and calls forth the greatest prohibition. Human societies are contradictory: they must prohibit vengeance, because it would destroy them, but vengeance is so bad that if you commit it the victim will have to avenge it. Here we see the contradiction of human society; vengeance is both the greatest duty and the greatest prohibition of human societies. Many societies struggle with this; archaic societies struggled with it a great deal. But you can see that there is an imbalance in humans; we are too intelligent for our own good. I think that certainly what we call "original sin" has something to do with this.

Original sin is an inferiority of man compared with innocent creatures like animals, but it also undoubtedly has something to do with the superiority of man. It's the same thing; it's the power of imitation, which is so great that it becomes a source of endless conflict. Now let's talk about the problem with imitation in the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. They saw that imitation is absolutely essential to human life; this is true in eastern societies too. Christianity recognizes this as well, since it enjoins us to imitate God. However, these ancient philosophers failed to see that imitation and violence are conjoined. Aristotle gives a definition of imitation which literally more or less excludes violence, turns imitation into some kind of truth less affair of people imitating each other's faces or imitating one's teacher at school or such, but he does not see that rivalry and competition are forms of imitation. This lack of connection is very important. You can see this with Plato who comes before Aristotle; he has an ambivalent view of imitation. It's very important to him – it's all of reality in a way – but at the same time he's scared of it and we don't know why. I think in Plato there is a kind of anticipation; Plato is still linked

closely enough to the archaic religious world to acknowledge imitation, which is that ambivalence I'm talking about. He's afraid of imitation, yet at the same time he recognizes that imitation plays an enormous role in the creation of culture. In a way, for Plato all reality is ultimately imitation; the idea, the form of everything is imitation. This he turns into a metaphysical principle.

So, my purpose is to correct this mistake of the philosophers by saying that imitation is the best aspect of humanity but also the worst, because it is that endless conflict that makes human society in a way impossible: there is no community without tension, without conflict, there is no mankind without violence and murder. Ultimately, because it all ends in murder. One must see the dilemma in order to realize that human beings cannot have the same type of societies as animals: they need laws; they need rules outside themselves which force a certain type of behavior upon them – which say, for instance, murder will be punished by murder, but not by individuals. So there is endless vengeance, but by a separate power, which we call the state or the judicial system, against which, if things work properly, you cannot avenge yourself. The state or the judicial system is beyond vengeance, above vengeance, like transcendence itself, like God. So in other words, in human societies, it's really the problem of violence that explains why human beings just cannot form societies the way Rousseau says, where they get together and have a social contract. The idea of social contract is an absurdity: it means that humans are rational enough to have an agreement that they will all subsequently respect. This is not true.

SB: René, you just mentioned Rousseau and the social contract, which you said is an absurdity. Could you comment on that?[2]

RG: Well, the need for the social contract is inevitably associated with conflict, with the inability of people to get along together. If conflict occurs, when people are fighting together, this is the moment when it is most impossible to sit together at a table and discuss a social contract. I think that human society is inevitably linked to violence: the creation of a society is the resolution of a violent conflict. However, this resolution cannot be a purely conceptual one; there has to be something to stop the violence. So the question is what is that something, and in order to say something about

that we have to try to consult the data we have. What could this data be? To make a long story short, I would say this data is primarily what the anthropologists' call foundational myths. Foundational myths are myths that recount the foundation of a community. Do they have something to say to us that is valuable? I think so, but many people do not agree. Many of these myths – I wouldn't say all, because they can be tampered with in innumerable ways – are structured in the same fashion, where there is a big crisis in the community. For instance, at the beginning of the *Oedipus* myth, we know there is a plague that is destroying the community. Another myth will have drought or a flood; it may even be social disruption or a monster that demands too many sacrificial victims, or two mountains clashing together. Either way, it all sounds violent. Then, after this crisis, there always comes a collective form of violence against a single individual, or something similar. In many myths all over the world the violence is collective. When the victim is killed, it is discovered that the victim is a god, peace comes back, order is restored, and *voilà:* society is founded. So how can we interpret these things?

In my view the crisis is real. The crisis is a crisis of mimetic violence. What can cure a crisis of mimetic violence? It has to be something that belongs to the mimetic process itself, because we don't have any human idea or anything that would be beyond the animal at that stage. We are thinking of this crisis occurring for the "first time," or for that matter, many "first times," when animals are evolving into men, becoming humanized. We can assume that as the mimetic fighting increases, it involves the entire community. What does that mean? It means that if you have two people imitating each other, fighting for the same object, the attractiveness of that object for the third individual is greater. When you have three people it becomes even greater, then you have four, then five, and pretty soon you have the entire community fighting for the same object. But when the whole community is fighting for the same object; that object is going to be torn apart or destroyed, so what will happen next? There is a tendency for people not to stop fighting each other even when the object has dropped out of the picture, because that's what they're doing anyway. If you're fighting for the same object you can never be reconciled with your opponent. But if you're fighting the same enemies, if many people are fighting each other, it's very easy to share the same enemy with someone else, so the mimetic influx

tends to shift from objects to the antagonists themselves. When this happens, we need to describe the process carefully and in detail, but I'm not sure I can.

Roughly speaking, this is what happens when the conflict shifts from an object of imitated desire to the antagonists themselves. You have more and more antagonists choosing the same antagonist, no longer being contaminated in terms of the desiring object but in terms of their choice of antagonists. Then, when this happens, there comes a moment when everybody is against the same antagonist, a single antagonist. So when a single antagonist has everybody against him, he's going to die, to be killed. Then, at least for a brief moment, no one in the group will have an antagonist. The death of the last antagonist will automatically reconcile the group, because it will be the antagonist of everybody; therefore, peace will suddenly return because of this victim. In the eyes of the group, this victim seems to be responsible for the whole trouble; but he is also responsible, through his death, for the reconciliation. Therefore this victim seems all-powerful, for good and evil; that victim is at first seen as 'God.' The victim seems to be the master of the crisis; she resolves it through her death. Just as this victim was deemed responsible for violence, so also the victim is responsible for the return of peace when everybody joins together against her. So we have a situation that is suddenly one of peace, and the community rejoices. The community is freed from the crisis, but this freedom is not going to last. Very quickly, mimetic rivalry will come back over other objects. Then the people will remember that a victim saved them, and they'll try to do the same thing again. They will deliberately choose other victims and kill them collectively in the hope that this will reconcile them again. It does, mimetically; this is the invention of ritual sacrifice.

Sacrifice is repeating the event that has saved the community from its own violence, which is killing a victim. Sacrifice changes its *modus operandi* very quickly; there are very few contemporary examples of sacrifice that are truly collective, though some have been observed in Africa. Usually one encounters a single priest. Sacrifice can be modified in countless ways. But the principle of sacrifice is that it belongs to the entire community, which kills a victim in order to reconcile the community with itself. All over the world in every culture, the sacrificers will tell you what they imitate and

that some god provided the model. We should take that very seriously, because it's a reference to the initial mimetic process that resolved the crisis, which was real. So sacrifice works, and since people want to continue it, people pay a great deal of attention to it. Cultures are very careful to imitate the original phenomenon very faithfully, with deliberately selected victims who replace the original victim, who replace the god; in other words, the animal or human being sacrificed is a substitute for the god.

SB: That's where you make the link between the novel and religion.

RG: Yes, that's right, though of course we are talking about a process of the genesis of religion from the animal, so of course we are going back in time. We don't know if it is tens of thousands of years, or hundreds of thousands of years. We simply don't know how far back religion goes. We know that in the Cro-Magnon period, they had religion and they most likely had sacrifice. I think religion starts with sacrifice; sacrifice is the main thing about religion, because sacrifice saves the community from its own violence. So it's very easy to see how many other institutions can be derived from sacrifice. Sacrifice is the reason human beings have a culture. A culture first has to perform the ritual sacrifice together; even when you appoint a priest to do the killing of the victim, the priest will kill the victim in the name of the whole community. He represents the whole community, thus sacrifice is a social event. Only the Indians have managed to turn it into a princely affair. It's an evolution that is not important from the point of view of the origin of sacrifice. Sacrifice, in my view, is the center of human culture; the original center, of course, is the death of the victim that reconciles the community. This is why human societies have a religious center; human societies are all built around religion. There is no natural human society in the same way that there is a natural animal society; but in a way there is a similarity between the fights and rivalries of animals. However, in the case of humans, the rivalry resolves itself only when a scapegoat is selected.

CHAPTER 2
Sacrifice, Myth and Gospel

Steven Berry: You have by now begun the transition in your theory from mimetic desire as a literary phenomenon to the logic of sacrifice and ritual. So how and when did you discover this bridge?

René Girard: I discovered it when I wrote my second book, *Violence and the Sacred*. My first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, was published in 1961; *Violence and the Sacred* was published 11 years later in 1972. For a while after my book on the novel I hesitated. I had become interested in the *Oedipus* myth and the study of Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*, which is the best version of the myth. I became interested in *The Bacchae* as well. *The Bacchae* is the most famous play by Euripides, another of the three great Greek tragic poets. In *The Bacchae*, the center is the killing of Dionysus by all the Bacchae, all the women of the city. I think the fact that it is only women may well be mythical in a vulgar sense: that is, men must have been involved. But the thing that is noticeable about *The Bacchae* is that it's a collective murder, a lynching. I was also reading Sigmund Freud at the time. Freud had turned to anthropology from psychoanalysis. He said there must be a collective murder at the beginning of culture, which probably influenced me too in favor of that thesis. One might say it was the confluence of The *Bacchae*, Freud, and, of course, the idea of everybody joining together mimetically, which is what lynching is about.

So if the crisis – the mimetic crisis – is as intense and total as I was led to think, it has to be solved by that single murder which provides the god, the center, the idea of a center, the idea of a society really. At the same time I must mention ritual, the killing of the victim again and again; these are the main ingredients of an archaic society, around which everything is understood. When you start to have periodic rituals, you have a kind of religious order, you have ceremonies, and you have a community. So the human community is fundamentally different from the animal society because it needs ritual in order to vanquish mimetic disorder. Now ritual will not last forever. Why does ritual law work? Why would the collective

murder stop the fighting? The Greeks call it *catharsis*, which means purification, but purification of what? The violence, the emotion, the commotion of the unanimous murder is such that it stops people dead in their tracks; they are so moved, so improved. Ultimately, then, the collective emotion is fundamental. Aristotle uses the word *catharsis* in the Poetics, but why? He says that at the end of tragedy there is catharsis. Of course it's the same catharsis.

What is tragedy? Tragedy is acting out a myth without the conclusion, since it is only a story. In other words tragedy tells the story, it reenacts the crisis, but it does away with the actual violent ending. The genius of great culture is all there. Greek culture is inventing tragedy, in other words, using the violence of the community that founded the community in order to represent the whole thing without doing it. The one thing banned in tragedy is real violence: you must not even see it, you have to have someone who comes and tells the story. The genius of culture is that it is able to turn violence into the peace of culture. The question is, is this peace permanent? No, not even ritual can do this, because the emotion created by ritual will not go on forever; sacrifice as we know it becomes routine. The more you repeat it, the less it impresses you, so sacrifice tends to lose its cathartic power; that is why when we see it, when anthropologists observe it, they cannot believe it's really significant.

But when sacrifice loses its power, what does this mean? It means that mimetic rivalry is going to surge again, and therefore create another spontaneous scapegoating that will re-establish a modified form of sacrifice that will be effective. This new form will in turn lose its power after a while; thus sacrifice becomes frustratingly cyclical. I think archaic people thought in terms of cyclical time; time was like a wheel, something that goes round and round; it was constantly reborn. Time was not seen as a straight line, as it was by the Jews and Christians. The reason for that is that all sacrificial worlds are really cyclical, because sacrifice has a life, a lifespan, and then it becomes old and worn and dies. As it dies more disorder occurs, and sacrifice is reborn because there'll be another spontaneous scapegoating. If you look at the Indian Vedic scriptures you have descriptions of precisely that.[3] The decadence of culture occurs when all classifications become mixed, when people make no distinctions

between anything, when everyone is alike. There are striking descriptions of this in the Vedic scriptures thousands of years ago. If you look at the tragic crisis as described by Euripides, you see the same thing: men become women, women become men. It's a description that's mind-boggling. Violence, of course, is born out of it, but violence will produce the scapegoat that will recreate differences and order as well. So culture, like its founding mechanism of sacrifice, is cyclical. The Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus will say, for instance, "Violence is the father and king of everything." Or there is another philosopher who says, "From the place where things are born they will finally return, fighting each other according to the order of time," which I think is another description of the whole thing. Things go back to the place where they are born, which means chaos; they go back because of reciprocal violence, people fighting each other.

SB: So what you're saying is that violence and murder are found in all mythic stories, all stories of origin. Is that correct?

RG: Yes, all stories of origin. In other words, I take stories of origin seriously. I say if they show you a crisis resolved by collective violence, as so many of them do, it must be true. With the idea of mimesis, you can make sense out of it. Society, one might say, is the lifespan of a god and the sacrificial system that goes with it.

SB: So the same is true for Africans, for Asians, for Europeans?

RG: In an extremely diverse variety of ways, but yes, to a certain extent there are great cultures that tell you that more or less. Take India for example. I gave some lectures at the French National Library on India. I don't know anything about ancient Sanskrit, which is the language of the Vedas, the ancient Indian scriptures, but there is a lot there. There are books, huge books, called the Brahmanas, which are mostly about sacrifice. They are not taken seriously because sacrifice in the Indian scripture is always born out of the symmetrical fight of the gods and the demons. Why do they fight? Because they always desire the same thing. As soon as one of the two groups desires an object, the other group desires it too, and they start fighting until the conflict is resolved by sacrifice. The gods and the

demons start sacrificing at the same time; the gods always win and become more godlike, the demons always lose and become more demon-like. But it's a birth of culture: it's more than myth; it's kind of a constant repetition of the same incidents with different objects. The objects they fight about change: sometimes they fight about the earth, or the moon, sometimes about cattle; but it always ends with sacrifice settling the case. Since the gods sacrifice better than the demons, they win. These are not really myths in the sense that they are a kind of scholarly rendering, highly civilized in some ways, but they are adaptations of myth, with the Brahmanic interpretation of them. They are always a history of what sacrifice is about, which is settling violence between the princes in that caste and these Brahmans throughout the court of the princes sacrificing for them. It's an archaic story in a much more elaborate cultural context.

SB: This story of the mimetic theory was unfolding for you while you were in the midst of going from place to place teaching, is that correct?

RG: Yes. But it was not necessarily unfolding in the right order. In *Violence and the Sacred*, I wanted to write a book about both archaic religion, which I did, and Christianity. But on Christianity I just gave up, I just couldn't do it. I felt there was some basic difference between Christianity and archaic religion but I couldn't define it, so I wrote a book exclusively about archaic religion. It's a book that is very dark, about the archaic type of religion, which is about sacrifice, and nothing else. However, some people interpreted it in a Christian light. I didn't know how they did that really. I knew the guy who was going to write the review for the main afternoon paper in France, *Le Monde*, and I told him to say that it was the first really atheistic theory of religion that worked because it identified a real mechanism; he did, and has been quoted ever since! I knew that the relationship between Christianity and archaic religion was a very close one in some ways, but with a great difference at the same time, but one that I couldn't define. I think I defined it, but not as well as I would have liked, in my third major book in 1978, which is *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.[4]

SB: Let’s talk about that book. It has been hailed as your masterpiece.

RG: Yes, by that time I had moved. I was teaching at Johns Hopkins University, where I even became chairman of the department for three years. Johns Hopkins was very interesting to me because it was the first time I had graduate students who got interested in my system. In theory I was teaching French, but I was really teaching about archaic religion; I was teaching *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. There were students like Eric Gans, who is now emeritus at UCLA, but who has a modified version of the mimetic theory, and Andrew McKenna, who teaches at Loyola University in Chicago. Teaching became very interesting to me because I had responsive students who knew what I was talking about, though sometimes they protested, "It cannot be that way," but that certainly was a lot of fun. However, it was kind of weird that in theory I was giving seminars on French literature, when in fact we were building a theory of culture, of religious culture.

SB: How could you make that leap?

RG: There is a spiritual aspect, no doubt, but there is also a scholarly aspect in the sense that the consequences of mimetic desire would be solved by what I started there to call the Scapegoat Phenomenon, which means everybody standing arbitrarily against the same victim for mimetic reasons. Many aspects of culture will respond to that sacrifice when you realize that sacrifice is closely tied to all cultural institutions. For instance, if you look at funerals in an archaic society, you realize that the guy who dies is treated like a sacrificial victim. One group in Australia for a long time had a very strange ceremony that they performed when someone was close to death: they all jumped on him – there was a kind of mock lynching of the person who was about to die. I think it's both a funeral thing and an effort to revive the person, because the collective death is also the collective birth of the culture, so why not the individual? I'm not sure I can really interpret it fully, but I know that this collective jumping on the guy who is dying is a redoing of the Scapegoat Phenomenon.

SB: Regarding the phenomenon of the scapegoat, you were working on this for years before you wrote the book.

RG: Yes, and I was reading in anthropology too. In my opinion, the great period of modern anthropology is a failure. Modern anthropology began in

the late 1800s with English scholars like Tyler, and Frazer, who wrote *The Golden Bough*, and Robertson Smith, who wrote *The Religion of the Semites*. These people were trying to interpret sacrifice, but they could never do it because they were really Enlightenment thinkers; they couldn't acknowledge the key role that violence played in sacrifice. They tried to interpret sacrifice through everything except the obvious thing, which is violence. Sacrifice is violence and it's obviously an effort to prevent violence in the community by finding the right escape hatch through some kind of innocuous violence. This they didn't see. They couldn't see it because, influenced by Enlightenment presuppositions, they believed in the innocence of humanity, the basic goodness of man. Why should humanity need that violence? The only possible answer is that humanity needed that violence to avoid another kind of violence: people's own violence against one another.

Sacrifice is the lightning rod for the community's violence, because it mobilizes the whole community against a fake enemy, who is not a member of the community, thus preventing people in the community from killing each other. It is a ceremony of unity, with all that violent symbolism, against a victim who is and is not part of the community. If you look at the way sacrificial victims are chosen, they must look somehow like the members of the community, which is why they are very often appropriated into the community. Sacrificial animals are nursed very often by human women in order be turned into quasi-humans; they must resemble the people they replace in order to be effective cathartic lightning rods. If you start looking at the detail, I think there is no doubt. However, the old anthropology thought it was sacrilegious to think that humans could be bad enough that some fake violence would be needed to prevent violence. They feared that sacrifice did not explain anything, and they regarded it as an institution without a purpose, which is ridiculous; it's the institution with the greatest purpose. It makes a society possible and it makes people peaceful enough that they can have a society.

So, for instance, what is education and what are rites of passage? These are really excellent examples of where sacrifice begins. In sacrifice, there is the killing of the victim at the end, but how does it begin? It begins with a fake crisis, fake disorder. Why? Because the community feels they must relive

the real crisis from which the sacrifice originated in order to make the sacrifice – the new killing – effective. This is why so many sacrifices are sometimes called sacrifices of rebellion. They begin with a crisis; the community goes on an artificial rampage, which will be concluded by the killing of the victim. If you look at this artificial rampage it becomes the ordeal of the people who will be initiated; in a way, the people who will be initiated are regarded as going through some kind of sacrifice in which they might be the victims. But as they go through a crisis, very often they are expelled from the community for a while. Initiation rites are primarily an ordeal that comes from the sacrificial crisis, which is a real experience and turns into a means of education.

SB: Would that be true of the story of Oedipus?

RG: Yes, and also the story of the king in general. What is a king? You have a crisis and out of the crisis comes the single victim who, in theory, is sacrificed by everybody. But if you delay the sacrifice of this victim a little bit, if you choose this victim but don't kill him immediately, then this victim gains a kind of sacred aura in anticipation of what's going to happen. An archaic king is really a victim whose sacrifice is further and further delayed, who if he's smart becomes the greatest power in the community. That's why the first kings are called sacred kings; at the end of their tenure as king, they are sacrificed. In Africa the sacrifice really happened, but there is reason to believe that in Egypt this was the same thing: the Pharaoh was a sacred king.

SB: Also the Aztecs?

RG: Also the Aztecs, of course. You don't even know if they are high priest, if they are king; it doesn't matter what you call them, they are just future victims, and therefore sacred by anticipation. They have great power over everybody else before they die, because the power always comes from the sacred death. Yes, you're right, the Aztecs are extremely relevant, and one shouldn't be too awed by the title or office: calling someone a priest, calling someone a god, calling someone a king or ultimately a god could be regarded as the same thing as a king. The real power is death, and as long as you're not dead you can use that power to great effect. Most likely real

kingship occurred by delaying the sacrificial death further and further, and this was followed by kings getting someone to replace them as victims. Frazer saw these things very clearly in *The Golden Bough*.

SB: He couldn't bring himself to go the next step, though.

RG: No. He shows that there are certain institutions to which you can give different names: you can call it priesthood or you can call it kingship. To say that a society is a theocracy, or is a sacred monarchy, the difference is not necessarily very great. You have in-betweens. If you become too platonic and believe in words too much, you'll miss the facts.

SB: That's been a problem of religion, though, as well.

RG: Of religion too, especially in our day and age, because people believe only that language dissolves reality. I prefer to dissolve language and believe in reality. If you have the sacrificial matrix you could call it the sacrificial genesis. You can see that kingship, religion, priesthood, all that comes from it is "culture"; therefore culture comes from that collective killing that re-establishes the peace; that's the main thing. If you hold to that, you can see that while different terminology might be used, it's always the same thing: you always have some kind of ceremony in which you sacrifice some kind of victim that symbolizes the whole community.

SB: The story that gets us into the archaic really well is the story of the Oedipus myth.

RG: Yes, or *The Bacchae*.

SB: You mentioned *The Bacchae*, you also mentioned the storyteller, the person who presents this theory; because it is done on stage there is no actual violence.

RG: Yes. In other words, the tragedy is another modification of sacrifice: you tell the story, but you don't kill the victim anymore. That's the genius of great culture. It works, but not for very long, perhaps 50 years.

SB: So in this story of Oedipus we have the storyteller telling the story. What's the significance of that story for you, or when you discovered that, was it something that clicked with you?

RG: I started to study the tragedy and saw for instance that Oedipus and Tiresias are like twins; they are doubles, mimetic rivals for power. If you look at the tragedy it's a genesis of tragedy itself, in the sense that Oedipus and Tiresias both accuse each other of disrupting the community, of being literally 'sons of bitches.' They therefore invent rumors of patricide and incest as they fight each other. But one of the two wins the battle, and his opponent really becomes the patricidal incestuous son whose story is told in the myth, which is the story of the victory of one group over another, it doesn't matter which. But you could see that Oedipus really cast that story in his own tragedy, understanding much of its real content of violence.

SB: You would say, however, that he becomes the scapegoat.

RG: Obviously it's Oedipus. Oedipus loses the battle, Tiresias leaves, and everybody believes that the patricidal son is Oedipus. In fact, if you look at Tiresias, his story is just as fishy as that of Oedipus, but we prefer not to notice that. In other words, culture always undoes the symmetry that is mimetic rivalry in order to favor one side over the other. There you have an imbalance, a difference, which prevents mimetic rivalry from being reborn. You have a social system with some on top, some at the bottom, instead of having that tragic evenness, which is mimetic rivalry.

SB: You were teaching this at Johns Hopkins, this is all part of *Violence and the Sacred*?

RG: Yes, *Violence and the Sacred* was being born in these classes and the students really helped me there. But it was also the beginning of *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*, because my thinking on Christianity and the difference between Christianity and archaic religion was developing too. I really wanted to write *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, to have one book on archaic thought and another on Christian thought. But I wanted to publish a book, and *Violence and the Sacred* is a pretty thick book anyway, and I just was not ready, I didn't have

the right formulations for the Christian part of it. So *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden* were split into two projects. One can say that my first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, is the story of mimetic desire, while *Violence the Sacred* is a story of what I sometimes call the Scapegoat Mechanism, the mimetic unity against a random victim. When one victim becomes mimetically more attractive because several people are focused against him, suddenly everybody will go the same way for a purely mimetic reason, just like in the stock market. But it will not appear that way to the people involved: they will contend that the victim is guilty of patricide and incest; they will believe in their own myth.

SB: Where *Violence and the Sacred* had seemed to reveal you as a theorist who was inherently hostile to religion, *Things Hidden* significantly complicated this picture.

RG: The relationship of archaic religion to Christianity is difficult to understand anyway because it's too simple. If archaic religion is a scapegoat phenomenon that works, it means that everybody believes that the victim is guilty, that Oedipus really has committed patricide and incest. We still believe it today since Freud made it fashionable again. But of course Oedipus has not committed patricide and incest; the two together make absolutely no sense. So what modern anthropology has understood is that the Gospels have the same structure as a myth. You have a crisis, which is a crisis of the Jewish state, which is being slowly strangled to death by the Romans; this crisis is a real historical crisis, and we have all kinds of documentation about it. Then what do you have? The scapegoat phenomenon; Jesus is not killed by the Romans alone, or by the Jewish priests alone, or by the crowd alone, but by everybody. It's a collective murder if ever there was one. Jesus is obviously a scapegoat. Therefore the anthropologists were perfectly right to say myth and the Gospels are the same story, the same business, and to conclude it's the same thing; how could you see any difference?

Not only do you have no difference, but the Gospels are full of statements that turn Jesus explicitly into a scapegoat, such as “It is better that one man die than the all people perish.”[5] Or things like Jesus himself quoting the psalm that says, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the

cornerstone."[6] In that sentence you have everything we've been talking about: the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone of the community, the foundation and perhaps the top as well, the keystone of the community. So where is the difference? Well, it's obvious; it's so obvious that no one sees it. Archaic religion believes in the scapegoat business, and when you believe in the scapegoat business you don't talk about it in terms of scapegoating. Only the Gospels can do that: because they don't believe in it, they tell you that Jesus is a scapegoat. When you say that someone is a scapegoat, he is not your scapegoat. To have a scapegoat is to be unaware that you have a scapegoat, to think he really is guilty. It's so simple that people don't understand it. Scapegoating is effective only if it is nonconscious. Then you do not call it scapegoating; you call it justice. That's what the Oedipus myth tells you, that the people of Thebes are right to get rid of Oedipus because he's responsible for the plague. What a joke: no one is responsible single-handedly for a plague. In the Gospels you don't have that type of nonsense, you have the opposite. You have a scapegoat, all right – it is the mob that turns Jesus into a scapegoat. We can use the word "scapegoat" or the phrase "lamb of God." The phrase "lamb of God" means nothing but scapegoat in a nicer way. But the lamb of God is innocent, and that makes all the difference.

SB: The Greek tragedies and the myths of Greece indicate that people like Oedipus are guilty.

RG: Yes and no. Simone Weil, the French mystic, was right to say that Greek literature is full of pre-Christian insights. There are some sentences in the Oedipus tragedy that show that Sophocles, who was a pretty clever character, had great doubts about the real guilt of Oedipus. Oedipus himself says, "When I came here they told me that Laius had been killed by many men," so he sees the collective as a way the one could replace the many.[7] But this sentence is very ambiguous: how could the one replace so many? The answer is that the scapegoat can replace the many. So while Sophocles obviously understands this, he tells you about his understanding in a very ambiguous way. Why? Because he's in front of the people, and the Greeks didn't want to see the great legend of the community changed. The great tragic poets were too intelligent for their own good, and were highly suspect in the eyes of the people. If you read all the stories about them, they were

not regarded as reliable characters. But still, as you say, they give you the straight scapegoat story: the scapegoat is guilty.

SB: The Gospels say the exact opposite.

RG: The Gospel says the exact opposite. The Gospel is unique. You have only one scapegoat story among others that tells you the truth of the scapegoating. In other words, with regard to myth and its deceit, it's a lie; the Gospel undermines the whole edifice. But the Gospels can be read in a sacrificial way, if you don't want to understand them, which is what some people still do. If heard correctly, they can undermine the whole structure of our mythmaking; there are still archaic aspects in our thinking, especially regarding scapegoats. But if we read the Gospels, they are always there to teach us about the dismantling, the deconstruction of our scapegoating.

SB: When you came up with this idea, were people generally accepting of it?

RG: Very, very few people understand. More people now do understand, but not too many. However, it must be said that there are better ways to formulate it than the way I have done so far; it could still be done better. I mean more clearly, more explicitly, more forcefully, more dramatically while at the same time showing that once the scapegoat, the lie of scapegoating, this unconsciousness of scapegoating (to have a scapegoat is not to be aware that one has a scapegoat), therefore means that a text that openly mentions scapegoating cannot be a scapegoat text. I have confidence that this will be done and is already being done by interpreters of the Bible who use mimetic theory.

CHAPTER 3
The Scapegoat and Christianity

Steven Berry: Let's go back a bit and talk about your personal life.

René Girard: Martha and I married in 1951; in 1955 we had our first child, our son Martin. Three years later we had Daniel. They were both born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania when I was teaching at Bryn Mawr College, which was a wonderful time. But just after the birth of Daniel, we moved to Johns Hopkins, it was at Johns Hopkins I became of professor of French and for the first time had graduate students. That's where, as I said before, my teaching became more important to me. That's when I started to do contraband teaching in a way by not teaching French literature but my mimetic theory work in progress.

SB: Did they know in the department that you were doing that?

RG: Yes, sure. Let me say a few good words about institutions like Johns Hopkins. Johns Hopkins was created as a gratis first American university and graduate school at the end of the nineteenth century. Fortunately it was great during the whole first half of the twentieth century, but being primarily a graduate school, it didn't have rich alumni. It always had and still has financial struggles. The only part of the university that really does well is the medical school, which in the last few years has been a leader in the United States. So they get a lot of money, of course, because medicine does. The president of Johns Hopkins, in the days I was there, was Milton Eisenhower, a professional university president and the brother of the U.S. President. So he would go to the medical school and tell them, "Give us a little money for the arts and sciences," which are not evenly balanced; the medical school is in a very bad part of Baltimore. The humanities and sciences are in a part that's better but no longer really as good as it used to be. The medical schools grumbled a little bit, but the president told them, "You don't want to be just a medical school in Baltimore with no university around you. So you have to give some money to these poor people in the arts and sciences." Then they finally started to do so. So there's a small arts

and sciences program there. Mostly graduate. But the undergraduate school has been growing. It's not the equal of the great eastern universities, The graduate school was a great place for teaching. At the seminars you knew everybody. It was really what a university should be.

We had a great department there; we were something. We were pretty much at the top of the university. So we were treated well by the administration. In 1966 we held a symposium. We were the first to bring the deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida and others to the United States. Many of my colleagues were hostile to that. They felt it was very bad. Two years later they were all converted to deconstruction. That left me somewhat disconcerted, and I left for Buffalo.

SB: Why did that bother you?

RG: Well it bothered me because deconstruction is against reality. They say everything is language. I think, as I said before when talking about my study of ritual, the way I read a theorist like Frazer is that you can choose either to say everything is language or everything is a fluid reality of violence that takes various shapes and can be named in different ways. That's my way. Out of the sight of reality but not against language. I say it can be named different ways, but behind the solid stuff are human relations and the violence that creates a false peace. What they say is that everything is about language; everything is play, futility. There is no reality. You don't have to worry about anything. Ultimately it becomes dull and stupefying, this doing away with reality. I think that day is finished.

Ultimately I say religion is real. Anthropology is real. Behind them are real human relations and they can kill you or they can make you live. Deconstructionists see the opposite. They say everything is language. I think that some of them, in particular Derrida, were extremely powerful readers of certain texts. There are underground connections between the mimetic theory and Derrida that I'm not sure I can define. I know they are there but I cannot define them.[8] We are interested in the same texts. I always like to read Derrida, but I'm not sure I can talk about it competently.

SB: What about postmodernism?

RG: It's a question of what you mean by postmodernism. If we are in the postmodern era that doesn't mean the same thing as postmodernism, which turns all of culture into some kind of word game. Right now, it's extremely powerful in universities all over the Western world. But I think it has been weakened by the events of the last five years, and especially the events of September 11, 2001.

SB: Can you comment on that?

RG: I mean that people are aware that maybe deconstruction looks like a game, but then suddenly there are realties that interfere with that game. Violence in particular is real. Deconstructionists tended to make fun of my concern with violence and with history. I think it would be a joke to put our lives and the lives of our children on the line with what's going on now. So, I'm very opposed to that kind of thinking. But it's very difficult for me to go any further. The issues of culture today are life and death issues.

SB: Wouldn't you even go so far as to say that "frivolity" is another term for triviality, which is a vector of evil?
RG: A vector of evil. No doubt. I agree. On a personal level I have very good relations with these deconstructionists because we are in the same business. We understand the same thing. I had an encounter with a German TV personality at a radio station in Paris. It was a very nice conversation. He said, "You have a special ear for religion. You play religion like a violin." But these things always turn culture into something that has nothing to do with reality. I just don't buy it.

SB: I'd like to come back to your life story. So now you've decided to move on from Johns Hopkins to Buffalo.

RG: Yes. They made me a very nice offer at Buffalo, and at the time I'd never lived in any really cold and snowy area. So I was tempted by a change of climate. These were the days when Governor Rockefeller wanted to accomplish in the state of New York the equivalent of the state university system in California. He did it in part. But the taxpayers in the state of New York found that it was a little too expensive to have another California

system in New York and quickly rejected his idea. So they expanded the system but only in a limited way. The first two years in Buffalo, it really was the good life. I had a job where I recall that my obligation was to teach only two hours a week, which is exceptional, and I could draw on any department that accepted me. Buffalo was an old private university where they were upset to be invaded by a huge new state university. The campus multiplied by fourfold or something like that.

They didn't much care for me in the French department, so I went to the English department, which was a lot of fun. That's one of the reasons I became interested in Shakespeare, because there were some very good Shakespeare scholars there. So Buffalo, in a way, was the beginning of my book on Shakespeare. I could teach absolutely what I wanted and I was teaching the mimetic theory there too. I had some students who were doing theses on Shakespeare, and although I was teaching, I was also a student with them. They were a little too deconstructive for my tastes, of course. It was a nice affair except for the weather, which really ceased to be attractive after two or three winters. So we were only in Buffalo from 1968 to 1974, but in between I spent a year here at Stanford, just for a change. I got a job offer. I was supposed to teach the great books course that is the only undergraduate requirement for the whole freshman class. They gave me an offer to become the permanent head of that course. I rejected that offer. At that time, the students were revolting over this course. But then one of my colleagues here, an Italian, got me another offer in French in comparative literature, which I hastened to accept because I felt the area was so much nicer than even Baltimore. Baltimore and Buffalo. Hard. Almost like each other. They were opposites of each other but equally dreadful for people who like good weather. So we came here in 1980. We've been here ever since then. It's been very, very nice. I have had many good students here, good PhDs, especially in the first years I was teaching. I was absolutely free to teach whatever I wanted. So I was teaching my stuff from the Johns Hopkins time. I really taught absolutely what I wanted.

SB: Your children by that time were out of the home? You had another one in the meantime didn't you?

RG: We had a third child, Mary. She was born in France in 1960. It was the time when they were all starting to leave, being either in the final years of law school or some kind of school or the first year of taking a job or that sort of thing.

SB: 1960. Did your family mind moving around from place to place?

RG: Well, they were spending the summers in France. My idea would have been to spend my sabbatical years in different European countries so I could speak decent Italian and German. But we were systematically going to France so that the children would speak French. It's a serious undertaking to get children who live in this country to speak a foreign language like that, and if only the father's involved, it doesn't work. Martha, although she is from Indiana, spoke French to them for years. When they are young they learn extremely fast. In six months with other children they speak another language completely fluently. But they will forget it in six months too. Then, the older they get, the more durable is the learning. But they have a period when they are really hostile to the idea of doing things that their friends in school do not do, like speaking French. Then suddenly, at the age of 13 or 14, they realize it's an asset. They had something that the other ones didn't have. So, there you're saved. But it took 14 years, so it's a long time.

SB: In 1980 when you came to this beautiful sunny clime, did you find that the professors accepted you and your theories?

RG: Stanford University never "accepted" my theories. But it doesn't mean they were mean to me. They were just indifferent. I would like some day to write a mimetic analysis of the academic world, when you're in a place and no one is interested in what you're doing. You're always an outsider. It's systematic, among your colleagues I mean. Students are another thing. But among your colleagues you're all alone. You occupy the ground no one wants to occupy because that's the way it works. It's not the same in the sciences because in particle physics, for example, you have 25 people working on the same project. But not in the humanities, which can be much more "individualistic," much more mimetic.

SB: I met you for the first time in 1985 in New York City at Auburn Theological Seminary. You were asked to do a special presentation on the scapegoat. Your book *The Scapegoat* had not yet been published. I remember how profound that was.

RG: Generally, it took more time for theologians to catch on. There was some curiosity but very little. Very few people were willing to entertain the hypothesis seriously. Religious people have theology; they have acts of God and so forth. But they talk about religion in terms of theology. Anthropology is essentially comparative. It's regarded with great distrust. It reaches the point where it says that the common features of archaic religions in the Bible and Christianity are so great that have to be the same thing. In a way the theologians believed that if you were to accept these findings, they would have to admit that there was no singularity to Christianity. They don't see the scapegoat, i.e. the true or false question of the scapegoat.

So they're afraid. Maybe because they feel that the purpose of the anthropologist is really to undermine Christianity. Therefore, they don't like the anthropologist because they don't want to think like the anthropologist, and so they reject anthropology. Or, if they accept it, they tell you Christianity is not unique, which they do now. On the other hand, I say you can show anthropologically that Judaism and Christianity are unique. Take the great stories of Bible. They're the same thing as one find in mythology. Take the Joseph story. Joseph is extremely close to the story of Oedipus. He's accused of the same thing. He's accused of committing a kind of incest with Lady Potiphar. He's accused of crimes of an Oedipal type. The *Oedipus* myth tells you he did it, Oedipus was guilty. But the Joseph story tells you he didn't do it. That's extremely important.

Take the Job story. People don't see that the Job story is the story of a local ruler, tyrant, king, whatever you may call it, who has been the favorite of his people and he tells them so. "You loved me. You treated me like an idol." Suddenly they turn against him, and his three so-called friends are the beginning of a lynch mob that is going to execute him. But unlike Oedipus, Job says, "I'm not guilty." He defends himself. He shouts all over the place. Or if you take the Psalms, you have all these passages where the victim is

about to be lynched by a mob and complains and asks God to destroy them. It's always these types of stories that reverse or contradict myths. Of course, the Gospel is just the arch-story of this type. So I feel that the book of Job, in particular, is totally misread by people who talk of it only in terms of the introduction, the ulcers, Satan and so forth. It's obviously something that has been superimposed on all the dialogues, which are the great part of the book of Job. The dialogue with Job's friends is the key to the book, and the friends tell Job he is guilty. "Acknowledge it. Maybe you'll save your skin if you say you're guilty." Job refuses.

It's a little bit like the Moscow trial or a "kangaroo court." All these great stories of the Bible are reversals of scapegoats. All the prophets have the crowd for them at first. Then the crowd turns against them. Jeremiah is a good example of this. It's the same story with Jesus. Jesus says, "I will die like all the prophets." No one is a prophet in his own country because the crowd turns against him or her. So it's a constant revelation of mythology, of scapegoating.

Now why don't theologians see this? They don't want to because they are basically Enlightenment people too, and they think that humanity is good. They don't want to believe in original sin. That's why I'm kind of against progressive clerics because they are trying to tell us that which is not true. They are the last converts of the Enlightenment. They don't see that it's too late for them. They are always essentially behind.

SB: What is your opinion of the Jesus Seminar?

RG: Some of my good friends here, Bob Hamerton-Kelly† and Jim Williams, attended this group. I attended the Jesus Seminar and I went in total ignorance. They asked me to do something, so I did my thing. Therefore, it was a strongly Christian thing ultimately. They didn't like it at all. They are going in the direction of myth, back to the archaic. What they call modern is a reversion to the archaic, the worst form of archaic religion. Of course the media always take people who debunk Christianity seriously. They will never take seriously any thesis that does the opposite, one that debunks modernity. They should. But they won't.

Religion is going backwards because it loses this essential demystification that you find both in the Jewish Bible and in the Gospels. The Bible shows that scapegoaters who slander the victim and wrongly accuse the victim have no basis on which to do so. The prophetic and Christian texts destroy that slander by demonstrating the innocence of the victim. So deep down, when we read a myth right, we slip the Passion underneath, the death of the innocent victim. A French scholar recently told me that in the Middle Ages in the Byzantine Empire they still read great tragedy, which was about the only Christian place where they read it. They read it as the passion of Oedipus. In other words, while they would not have formulated conceptually what I say, their heart was in the right place, and they could see that Oedipus was innocent. That was wonderfully illuminating. Indeed the Middle Ages tend to see things more clearly than they are given credit for. I don't have any other example to quote, but it's wonderful. It was really a real understanding of tragedy, in my view, a Christian understanding.

SB: What about the Christians right now who look to Jesus as a wrathful avenger?

RG: Well, they are no better than the people who look to Jesus and say he is a rock-and-roll star. Although I think we may be due for a change in mood, a great one if things get worse than they are now. We've been totally unfaithful to our real inheritance. We don't want to understand it. We misconstrue it in one way or another. We turn it either into some kind of pop story or into a vengeance story like the other side. But we don't want to see the greatness of it, the real greatness of it.

We have to say something about the apocalyptic texts of the Gospels that announce the last day, the end of culture, and so forth. What do they mean? In my view, far from being some kind of mad or wild imaginary dream of violence, they show awareness of a world that discredits mythology. They discredit archaic religion. This makes sacrifice impossible. Therefore, they end or dissolve the elements of our culture that are archaic, which conservative Christians very often would like to retain. In other words, they create a new crisis. They create a crisis that cannot be resolved by scapegoating, since we know too much about it. Even if we have countless little scapegoatings here and there, we are not going to create a new scapegoat god in the sense of Greek religion or so forth. That is impossible;

we are too Christian for that. We may not be atheist, but we do not believe in Zeus or in Jupiter or that sort of thing. Therefore, we are not going to have efficient sacrificial systems. We are deprived of all medicine against our own violence. I think that's what's happening today. What is visible in our future is the incredible variance of war because of technology. In addition to this, all the problems of our environment are inseparable from the Christian faith. This doesn't mean that Christianity is bad, but it does mean that we are totally incapable of using Christianity the right way, to save ourselves. Therefore, we are moving towards destruction.

The fact is that these apocalyptic texts are there in the Gospels, and they tell you what it will be like in the days of happy people who are living as though life will continue on forever uninterrupted. They don't tell you it's necessarily going to be all science fiction. This does not mean that these kinds of texts are mad or illusionary. They see very clearly the destruction of sacrifice that is necessarily associated with the spread of Christianity. Everywhere Christianity appears and seriously implants itself, blood sacrifices disappear. Where blood sacrifices disappear, you have no more real cultural protection against your own violence. Therefore it's very good for the development of science and technology, but it's not very good for the future of our civilization. Therefore, either our civilization will go back to the real significance of Christianity, or it's going to become worse and worse. It will be threatened by violence that it will no longer be able to evacuate through sacrificial means. So it's very important, in my view, that the mimetic theory can account for the apocalyptic dimension which is not confined to the Revelation of John, but plays a major role in the synoptic Gospels, especially Matthew 24, Mark 13, and here and there in Luke.

SB: Is there anything else that you would like to say about your life and times through the Stanford years and what you did there?

RG: Nothing special. It was a continuation pretty much of the life I had at Johns Hopkins. It was graduate and some undergraduate teaching. Usually quite rewarding, but always centered on mimetic theory. I did a few literary courses when I published my Shakespeare book, since there was still a Shakespeare requirement in the English department. They invited me to teach a quarter of that course, which I enjoyed very much. There were more

than 200 students. But I taught straight mimetic theory. There was a little opposition, of course, but not much. It was a lot of fun to read Shakespeare that way because I had never really taught Shakespeare to English majors before. This was a course for majors and the English department was nice enough to invite me. They even wanted me to do another one, but I found it a little too strenuous.

I remember once I did a class in the Classics Department. I think it was about Oedipus and one or two of the tragedies on which I had worked. They were absolutely terrified and scandalized by the way I was talking about these texts, which is nothing like what they usually hear. On the whole it was accepted passively but there was a lot of "It is just his thing" and that sort of stuff.

SB: Then around that time, scholars began looking at your work and discussing it, and then the Colloquium on Violence and Religion formed.

RG: The Colloquium on Violence and Religion was created close to 15 years ago I think.[9] It has been meeting every year ever since, usually alternate years in Europe and in the US, although in 2012 they will meet in Japan. They discuss matters pertaining to the mimetic theory and writers connected with it. All phenomena that relate to the mimetic theory are welcome.

SB: What has Colloquium on Violence and Religion meant to you?

RG: I don't have anything to do with its organization or have any influence in it. It has a number of officers, as associations of that type do. Now the danger is that it may inevitability turn a little bit into another scholarly university group, publishing papers and being useful for people who want tenure in their departments. But we are very lucky because we have some nonacademic people. I think we must encourage that quietly. We don't want to be buried in an academic venture.

SB: You, however, have just received the highest award as an academic in the entire world. Can you tell me about that?

RG: Oh well, it's not an award. I'm now a member of the *Académie Française*, the French Academy. The French Academy is one of the few institutions in France that survived the French revolution. It was destroyed by the revolution but re-created by Napoleon. It was really born in 1635, created by a bunch of intellectuals who would worry about the welfare of the French language. It's struggling right now, I can tell you. Even so, I was elected. But in order to be elected, I had to be a candidate. It's a real institution. The institution is still more powerful than the individual because in the last two generations there have been quite a few writers and philosophers who didn't want to apply because they felt superior to it. You see what I mean? Typical of our individualism that flattens everything. But I agreed to be a candidate. I was elected.

SB: How did that make you feel?

RG: I felt good, though ultimately it really means nothing but obligations. You have to write a speech, do this and that. There's a ceremony that will take the place on December 15, 2005. The one good thing is that they give you a long vacation to start with. There are 40 members. That's very important to know because President Mitterrand, the president before Chirac, wanted to triple the number of members, which would have been a way of killing the Academy. So they all refused indignantly, and he didn't insist any further.

SB: So, this is a high honor and you have a speech that you have to write on your theory? Will that be…?

RG: No. I have to write a speech that is primarily concerned with my predecessor in the chair. The chairs are numbered. So you run for the chair, which happens to be vacant because the guy who occupies it has just died. So mine is the thirty-seventh chair. The election is by secret ballot and involves only the 39 principal members. But there were only 38 to elect me; there was another seat vacant at that time – very old members tend to die like flies. I think they are divided into four quarters about even in numbers. There are people in their 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s. So the people in their 90s very often don't show up. They have more important things to do that are more decisive for their total destiny.

SB: The person that you're going to be speaking about, that's a priest.

RG: He's a priest.[10] The Academy is not a secular institution like so many French institutions. In principle there are people from all walks of life, though there is a preponderance of writers.

SB: Who were some of the famous French writers elected to the Academy?

RG: Victor Hugo was there, for instance. You were talking about him. You know the second holder of the thirty-seventh chair, which I occupy or soon will, was Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet[11], who was the greatest French church orator, the churchman of Louis XIV. All the great seventeenth century writers, or most of them, were members of the Academy. So when you go there you see their portraits, because it used to be the custom that each person elected would have their portrait painted. Now it's only a photograph. But usually they are the same portraits that you see in textbooks of literature. Of course, it's in a beautiful location, you know? It's just across from the Louvre, in Paris.

CHAPTER 4
Genesis

Steven Berry: René, you've stated that, in the Bible, there is an original conception of desire and its conflicts. What import does that statement have? Why is this story important in the context of other originary myths?

René Girard: I wouldn't call the Bible a myth because I use the word myth for texts which are like the ones we talked about before, which are not aware of what they are doing. They are not aware of the fact that they are resting on the false accusation of the victim. So I don't know what term I would use for the Bible, but I tend to reserve the word "myth" for those texts that begin with a crisis then have a collective murder where the victim of that collective murder is regarded as guilty. Which is not, let's state, the fundamental principle for the Bible. It's not the case in the Bible, or at least, in the greatest texts of the Bible.

On the other hand, we shouldn't consider that the Bible is divinely inspired: it is also a human text. It is a text in which occurs the change from mythology to the biblical view, which is really the change from the guilt of the victim to the innocence of the victim. It's not something which is a given once and for all. It's something that creates itself as it goes. We don't know which books, which parts of the Bible are the oldest, but we know that the Bible cannot be consulted as a kind of recipe for correcting mythology. It starts from mythology. It is a human thing. The Bible deconstructs mythology. It undoes the mythology gradually. I think there are mythical elements in texts like the story of Adam and Eve. At the same time, this text is not mythical because it tends to move away from myth. It's not a myth at all in the sense that it's not about the creation of the god who reveals himself through victimage, like a myth does. So it's something else. It's a text about the creation of humanity, about the way human beings first disobey God. That's the main thing, you know? That's the main meaning of these texts. So this is what we are going to talk about, the fall of humanity. This is the Christian version, of course. When we discuss the story of Adam

and Eve, we use the expression “original sin,” which the Jews do not use, but nevertheless, our interpretation fundamentally is the same or should be the same. What I mean is that the different versions of Christianity and Judaism shouldn't make any difference. We should look at the texts.

SB: However, some interpreters still refer to this text as mythological.

RG: They use the word myth generally as something that is not really true but may contain some symbolic truth or that sort of thing. I use the word myth, as I did yesterday, for these texts in which a god is generated as the victim is turned into a god. There have been quite a few mimetic readings of Adam and Eve.[12] The first thing to note is that the desire never comes from the one who feels that desire. Eve is not spontaneously attracted to the apple. Eve is advised by the serpent, is counseled by the serpent, and is under the influence of the serpent. The same thing is true of Adam. He's not directly under the influence of the serpent but indirectly, through the mediation of Eve. The first person contaminated with mimetic desire is Eve. In other words, neither Eve nor Adam desires spontaneously. They both desire through the serpent but, in the case of Adam, he's the second one – he desires through Eve. So the Middle Ages were wrong to consider that Eve was worse than Adam. She's exactly the same. She doesn't own her own desire; it's not hers. It comes from the serpent, but it comes more directly than in the case of Adam.

SB: What about the serpent? Who is the serpent?

RG: The serpent is mimetic or mediated desire. In a way, mimetic desire is infinite; it's in circles, you know? The serpent is the *ouroboros*, the embodiment of the circle of mimetic desire, from a literary point of view. The serpent is always already mimetic desire turning upon itself and influencing itself. You don't have to give the serpent a religious meaning directly if you adopt a reading in terms of mimetic desire. So quite a few readers have discovered that, and I don't know why I never did it myself as I sat there reading.

The couple disobeys God. They disobey God through mimetic desire when they shift to another god. They shift to another god that is mimetic desire,

which is the serpent, which is this mutual influencing. Disobedience is this desire – or so it's clearly expressed in the Bible – for total independence from God. Disobedience then is the desire to be creatures that owe nothing to anyone except themselves, which cannot be the case since humans have to have a model.

I say exactly what the text says, that desire cannot appear spontaneously. When we think about our desires, we all want to believe that our desire is our own and that it comes from ourselves or from the object of desire. In this case, it doesn't come from the object, the apple, which is not really that interesting. It doesn't come from the subject, from Eve, and it doesn't come from Adam. So the text doesn't tell you Adam and Eve should have their own desires. That's what they're trying to do. But, in fact, they shift away from the good model, God, who told them to not to do the very thing they are going to do. Whereas the bad model directs them towards the very thing God told them not to do. They don't pay any attention to God. The serpent is in effect saying, "Pay attention to me, and I tell you that God is trying to prevent you from having fun," which is exactly what we hear today about modernizing the church. Don't believe the old rules, the old God, since we have a new god who knows better, which is our own whim. We want to do this and that. The old law does not interest us. That's why I always distrust certain "progressive" attitudes in religion. When people start worshipping words like "modern," making things more relevant, you can be sure that they are shifting away from God, who is judged or regarded as outmoded relative to some more modern god, which always turns out to be the serpent. It always advises us to do the same thing. In other words, the only interesting objects are the ones that have been banned by God. In fact, they are not interesting at all. When Adam and Eve eat the apple, they gain nothing and they lose everything. They lose paradise. So this is very important for me, of course, because when people ask me what is mimetic desire in religious terms, my tendency is to say it's original sin. It's what's specific to humanity. Previously, I said humanity is more intelligent because it's more mimetic. But that means when it's exposed to evil, it can be good or it can also be evil. The one and the other go together. Therefore, we have an explanation of original sin that makes sense scientifically.

The offer of the serpent is still attractive, yes; it's always attractive, always very attractive, always more attractive than the command of God, no doubt. We are in a period right now where it's triumphant all over. There are a few institutions that try to resist a tiny bit, but they are really swamped in this magnificent modernism that we talk about, which doesn't look really very good if you start looking at it a little more closely.

SB: Theologians pay a lot of attention to this story, but they have not come up with your explanation. Why not?

RG: Well, ask them, don't ask me. What can I answer to that? Other students of mimetic theory like Raymund Schwager and Jean-Michel Oughourlian have talked about this.[13] The story teaches you that original sin is real. It's the same thing as the general temptation of disregarding the will of God and preferring our own will, which always turns out, I repeat, not to be our own but our neighbor's. In the Genesis text, the neighbor is represented as an animal that we call the serpent. The serpent is what we translate by the term Satan; we translate a symbol by another symbol. Maybe I'm going too far here, but I think that from a religious viewpoint, we do not have to believe in the personal existence of Satan. There is no article of the creed that says, "I believe in Satan and so forth." We say, "I believe in God." I do not believe in Satan. So the greatest ruse of Satan is to convince us that he doesn't exist. But the next best ruse is to convince us that he exists. You always have to speak in paradoxes in a way, but we know that the impulse to evil, or to disobedience anyway, is there in us.[14]

But look at the result of mimetic desire. It's in the next generation that it becomes really bad. The story of Cain and Abel should be included in the definition of original sin. As a matter of fact, it's the main event; it's the story of the founding murder. Now, you will immediately observe that it's not a collective murder but, if you look at the text closely, you will see that it can be interpreted as a collective murder. Cain says, "Now that I have killed my brother, everybody will kill me." In other words, the law against murder, the implicit law against murder, has been broken. Now everybody can kill me. So I will make a law against murder. The first consequence of the murder of the brother is also the law against murder. Therefore, it's a foundation of the human community. It has, in a way, "good" consequences.

We can put “good” between quotation marks here, because everything is founded on evil violence. But it makes it less bad if you know that murder is forbidden from now on. To say that murder is forbidden is to say that we have a human society. We are no longer in the wildness of Cain’s murder of Abel. Therefore, we are told that Cain is the founder of the first community. We are never told how he does it, but it's obvious. The only thing he does before this society is founded is to kill his brother. This murder can easily be interpreted as collective if, after he has killed his brother, Cain is threatened with murder all over the place. “Everybody is going to kill me,” he says. In other words, people will kill each other.

Therefore, Cain is the symbol of a tribe at first, but doesn't necessarily have to be regarded as a mere individual. We don't want to be literalists. If you want to be a literalist, you immediately run into contradictions. You see Cain as one individual only. So I ask, what does this sentence mean: “Now that I've killed my brother, everybody will kill me”? Who is "everybody"? Is it Adam and Eve? Is it two old parents? That makes no sense. Therefore, you have to say that we are in a fluid situation where we are dealing with a community and the founding of the community. It's no longer chaos. It's a community that is run by the rule against murder because there has been a murder. So I say the founding murder, which is a collective murder, is like that. There is something in the first epistle of John that is a reading of Cain and Abel.[15] Satan was a murderer from the beginning. The “from the beginning” is very important because it means what I just said to you: for the Gospel, Cain and Abel are part of original sin. Cain and Abel are part of the first definition of mankind. That's very important. We are dealing with the biblical interpretation of the founding of human communities as a result of original sin, which is the law against murder in the first Cainite community. After that they invent all sorts of things because they have ritual, because they have some form of sacrifice. So it's really very close to what we said previously. What I'm doing now is interpreting the beginning of the Bible in terms of the anthropological theory that we are discussing. [16]

SB: But the Hebrew Scriptures focus then on God coming back into the scene and prohibiting certain actions, prohibiting murder. He puts a mark on Cain.

RG: Yes. The mark on Cain means that Cain is differentiated. It is, I think, the idea of differentiation. It makes him different from other people. There is a community. This is the same thing. It's no longer an undifferentiated chaos. While there is God's disapproval of original sin, there is also an approval by God of sorts. It is an approval of the principle of community since Cain comes back and God more or less approves of the founding of the society, this social organization, whatever it may be. God is in the picture, as you say. It doesn't mean that this type of community is really good. It's not free from the original sin which has been introduced into it by the founding murder, but it means that given the situation, it's the only possible way of continuing, of going ahead. So it's a mixed picture.

SB: Five generations removed from Cain and Abel is the story of a man named Lamech.

RG: Here we are in a sacrificial society. We have created everything on violence. Therefore, you can be sure that this society will move slowly but steadily towards more and more violence. It has no failsafe recipe against violence. It only has the half-hearted, imperfect solution that is sacrifice. It's a society dominated by violence. It's less dominated by violence in its initial phase, but as time goes on, it disintegrates more and more into violence. Lamech killed one man, but he will exact seventy-seven-fold vengeance. This means you need more and more sacrificial violence; you can interpret it as judicial punishment, which is not very different from murder. In other words, in order to push back violence, to restrain it to some extent so that we can have humankind, you need more and more violence. Finally, you need so much violence that everything is destroyed. That's a deluge. The deluge is a metaphor of the crisis. Everything goes, and so we need a new scapegoat.

The Noah story is very close to a myth but it doesn't have a victim. The Bible refuses that type of victim, does away with it. But we know that many great founding myths are certain types of floods. You find this even in South America. There is a fascinating little myth in the work of Lévi-Strauss, which I'm going to recount to you to show you how close and, at the same time, how different the biblical story is. It's the story of a tribe that has to

cross a river where there is a bridge that is in poor condition. So the whole tribe moves to this bridge and goes out to it. The only one who stays behind is a little fellow who limps and cannot catch up with the others. Then they all fall into the river because the bridge is no good. The little fellow who stayed behind – the lame guy – saves the entire community. He differentiates them by helping those who fell into the water. In places where the water is like a mirror, they have flat hair, while the ones that fall into the waves and drown have wavy hair. Isn't that a marvelous founding myth? Now, the story of the flood is not very far from that, but it removes the violence. Well, it doesn't remove the violence insofar as everybody dies except Noah.

This is the mimetic crisis: it's a moment when it becomes so dreadful, and at the same time it's the reverse of it. Instead of having one victim and everybody else surviving, in Genesis everybody dies and there is only one survivor. This is true in the story of the flood that I gave you, and this is true in the Bible. Therefore, we are dealing with the same thing really since it's a reversal that emphasizes the opposition between the one who is the founder, the god, the leader, and the many who are saved. So it's very plainly a mythical story that is modified, but this is not to say that the Bible is mythical. The Bible is slowly moving away from mythology, trying to increasingly do away with sacred violence. Just because something is at the beginning of the Bible doesn't mean it's really older than texts that are at the end. Nevertheless, there is a vast historical span that separates certain texts of the Bible from other texts. The greatest texts of the Bible are the ones that are against violence; these are the texts in which the uniqueness of the biblical inspiration is most powerful. They are texts about nonviolence. The oldest ones, in my view, are the ones that are closest to myth, to mythology, like the great flood. But we have to see it as a dynamic move away from mythology with some mythical elements still in place. So, as I said before, we shouldn't use the Bible as a recipe against mythology. It's much more complex than that.

S**B:** Let's briefly retrace our steps. You said there are two things in the story of Cain and Abel. First is the murder of Abel, and second, Cain, the founder of the first culture. Explain how these two themes connect.

RG: These two themes connect from the standpoint of the mimetic theory. In the mimetic theory, when you have a crisis where people tend to desire the same thing, ultimately they all fight together. The tendency to desire the same thing turns into the tendency to pick a victim who seems to be the enemy of all, who is disliked by all rivals, because when you desire the same object, you can never get along. You're always divided. But when you start hating people, if someone hates someone else, you can share an enemy. You cannot share a desired object, but sharing an enemy is the human sport *par excellence*. It's called politics. This is what happens very early and mysteriously. Well, not so mysteriously: if everybody unites against a victim, they will kill that victim and, at least for a brief moment, the community will be without enemies. Everybody will be friends, and of course the community is amazed. The community does not understand what has happened. The community is enormously moved by its own violence. It's what the Greeks call *catharsis*, and so the people are kind of frozen by their own murder. They call this peace. Unfortunately, this peace is not permanent. Its effects will last for a while but not forever. So what are these people going to do? All they know is that they have been reconciled by the victim, by killing the victim together. So I think it's a first "intelligent" motion of human beings. Why not kill another victim together? Therefore, you are going to deliberately choose a victim and kill that victim solemnly. This is the institution we call sacrifice.

SB: Am I correct in saying that the murder, the originating murder of Cain killing Abel, is because Cain is jealous that God loves Abel more?

RG: That's right. This is the expression of a fundamental jealousy that is the human hostility to other human beings *par excellence*. What I call mimetic rivalry we could also call envy or jealousy. That's what it means. What is it to be envious? It is to desire the object someone else possesses and you don't. So envy is very definitely mimetic desire. Mimetic desire shows us its birth and its incredible abundance in human society. People always desire what other people have that they don't have. Sacrificial violence produces a salutary fear and, at the same time, a desire to perpetuate the effect of it. But in order to perpetuate the effect of it, you have to redo it. You redo it artificially. So sacrifice is the first technique, the

first cultural invention of man. It's not a pure invention. It's an imitation of a spontaneous happening.

SB: It appears when it comes to God's demand for a sacrifice and Abraham's willingness to take his son Isaac's life.

RG: The first thing to realize about sacrifices is that they can be different. Whom are you going to sacrifice? Why are you going to pick those particular victims? Now, we know that there are fundamentally two types of sacrifice: human sacrifice and animal sacrifice. Vegetable sacrifice too, but this is more minor, I think. Why? Because we want to pick a similar victim to the one who was killed in the first place. But why choose animals? Because the more violent we become, the more we want to do away with violence. Sacrifice works. Sacrifice diminishes the violence in the community. Sacrifice is inventive. See, why not animals that would look like a human? We know very well that many sacrificial societies establish animals within the community before sacrificing them. They want to make them more human. They want to diminish the distance between man and animal because it would be better, probably, to sacrifice a man, but let's sacrifice an animal so we don't kill a human victim and let's make that victim as human as possible. Let's have that victim within the community.

One of the greatest human institutions, that played a tremendous role in the development of culture, is the domestication of animals. I think the domestication of animals is a fruit of sacrifice. If you pick animals that can be domesticated, like antelopes, then turn them into cattle, you make them human. Now, we know that there are many institutions like that with animals that cannot be domesticated. The Ainu, for instance, the people in northern Japan, they had a ritual of the bear. When they would catch a mother bear, they would kill the mother bear but they would keep the cubs, you know? They would raise the cubs with human children and the cub would get bigger and bigger. Then one fine day, they would have a huge sacrifice and send the bear back to its ancestors. They would consume the bear. If the bear had been domesticable, it would have turned into a domesticated animal. What incentive could there be for keeping animals inside a community? It's not the desire to have more tender meat; that’s unthinkable before domestication has succeeded. So you see the idea of

domestication cannot be economic. People who think in economic terms think they are very realistic, but the opposite is true. If there was no such thing as domesticated animals, can you imagine yourself inventing the idea of domestication, perhaps saying to yourself, "Maybe if we keep these animals for generations among us, they'll become more usable"? No, obviously not. So only something like sacrifice – another intention, a religious one – can account for domestication.

SB: Leviticus speaks about sacrifice and atonement. It's done in relationship to goats. That's where we get the term scapegoat, isn't it?

RG: Yes. Now the term scapegoat is a very interesting one but not especially so in itself. The Jewish high priest was offered two goats. He picked one, then put his hands on the head of that goat to transfer the sins of the community to the goat. So, in order to get rid of these sins once and for all, after they were inside the goat, all you had to do was to cast the goat out into the desert. We know, as a matter of fact, through lots of documents, that the goat was finally killed in the desert. But that's the original meaning of the word scapegoat. The second meaning of the word scapegoat was invented by Frazer for all rituals similar to this one, where you try to put the sins or all the bad aspects of a community, all the cultural dirt, the social dirt, on a victim and then you expel that victim and usually kill that victim. The third meaning of the word scapegoat is more modern. We use the word scapegoat in everyday language, all the time, to designate a victim who is disliked by everybody, even though innocent. If you look in a dictionary, it will tell you that the third meaning of the scapegoat is the derived meaning, the metaphorical meaning, and that the literal meaning is the scapegoat of the Bible. But I reverse this order. I say the modern meaning is really the meaning of the institution. The fundamental psychosocial meaning, the reason why people expel victims, is because they have trouble inside the community and they always try to resolve it. So the scapegoat can be seen as a symbol for all sacrifices. My whole theory of sacrifice is there. We always expel scapegoats because we think that, by killing one victim, we're killing all the badness inside the community. If we manage to get contaminated and believe in the guilt of the victim, it will work. It will make us more peaceful. That's why we do it constantly.[17]

Here, as long as you believe that the scapegoat is guilty, the choice of the scapegoat is interesting because the goat is masculine. Feminists tell us that in a patriarchal society the feminine meaning of something is always the bad one. But if you take the scapegoat, it's a he-goat; the he-goat is worse. The he-goat smells bad, not the female goat. The he-goat has a cumbersome sexuality; he's always in heat and dirty. So when we say scapegoat, that's what we mean. The fact that the animal is unlikable makes it easier to discharge all our aggression onto it. That's what scapegoating means to us. We have already begun the interpretation of the ritual. The ritual text says nothing of the sort. But we interpret the ritual correctly in a mimetic way when we apply this third meaning to the word scapegoat, which, far from being the least important meaning, is the most important one, and shows, in my view, that we all understand the mimetic theory. It also shows that the mimetic theory is pure common sense. If we really meditated on the three meanings of scapegoat as I've given them to you, we would immediately reconstitute the mimetic theory.

In other words, in our world, we still have scapegoats, but we don't have ritual sacrifice to constantly expel the cultural dirt of the community. The sacrificial system could be compared to a sanitary system to evacuate garbage.[18] But what about cultural garbage, "human garbage" and violence? We no longer have that, and the question is why? However, the meaning, the third meaning of the word scapegoat, makes this easy to understand. We understand that the scapegoat is a substitute, and we feel ashamed to beat up the poor goat when we are aware that we want to beat up our neighbor. That's why, in the modern world, we don't have sacrifices any more. We understand them too well. In my view, we understand them too well because of the influence of Christianity.

SB: When did that transition take place?

RG: In the Gospels. Actually it takes place earlier in these great stories in the Jewish Bible. In myth, the scapegoat is always guilty. But in the Joseph story, while Joseph is obviously the scapegoat of his brothers, the Bible doesn't tell us he's guilty, that he's bad like his brothers. It says it's the brothers who made up those stories. In other words, these are not myths at all. These stories are the truth of myths. The scapegoat phenomenon only

works when it is nonconscious. You never say, “I had a scapegoat.” If you have a scapegoat, you deem him guilty. That's what myths say. But the biblical texts and the Gospels tell you the victim is only a scapegoat. He is not really guilty. Therefore, you have scientific proof that the Bible is revealing something, and especially the Gospels, because they become more and more explicit that the victim is innocent and Christ is the most innocent of all victims. If you're an anthropologist, you can see that myth and the Gospels have the same structure. You have a big crisis that ends with a scapegoat ritual, and the victim is turned into a god. This is true of myths, but this is true of the Gospels too. That's why anthropologists will tell you that myths and the Gospels are the same stories, the same religion. You have to understand what a scapegoat is to understand the difference. The Christians should have done that years ago, whereas they are scared of anthropologists who don't know what they are doing.

Anthropologists should understand that, since we are dealing with scapegoats in all these cases, all myths are wrong since they tell us that the scapegoat is guilty. They fulfill the function of mythology, which is to expel an innocent, but they don't know it. That's how they can do it. Whereas the Gospels tell us the victim is innocent. Once you have the Passion text inside your world, it contaminates all the scapegoats around and tends to make you discover that all collective victims must be a little bit similar to Christ, that they are condemned for no reason at all. That's why the great stories of the Bible, which reveal the innocence of Joseph, of Job, and so on, are beginning to shatter the scapegoat system all around, but Christianity does this more completely as it invades the pagan world. In its contact with religions of scapegoating, it undermines them. The presence of the Gospel undermines scapegoating. Therefore it tells us the truth, and we say we want the truth. Well, we have it. But we cannot really stand the truth because, if we have the truth, it means we are deprived of sacrifice. The Christian world is a world in which sacrifice, in the archaic manner, disappears. It disappears in Christian lands more than anywhere else. It's only in Christian territory, too, that “scapegoat” means an innocent victim. In Japan, they have to use the English world. They have no word for scapegoat, a phenomenon I discussed with Japanese scholars. They agree that a scapegoat is guilty.

SB: So are you saying that they still live in myth?

RG: Yes and no; because they are in the modern world, just as we are, they are also contaminated. They know very well that victims are innocent. They don't realize this is originally religious knowledge. But they criticize their myth. Everybody is influenced by Western culture in our contemporary world. Everybody is basically "inside" Christian culture, even if they don't know it. Christians hardly know better.

This is what interests me most in my work. It is really the apologetic part because people say, "Oh, Girard, you cannot discuss things with him because he's religious and religion comes first." That's not true at all. All my reasoning stems from purely concrete observation. When I say the scapegoat is innocent, and especially Christ, you just have to look at the text of the Gospel. It's true. It's not a Christian assertion that the scapegoat is innocent and that Oedipus is guilty. It's just an observation that any scholar should make. But they don't understand its importance. They don't understand that if you said Oedipus is innocent, you wouldn't even believe in psychoanalysis any more. The whole modern world would disappear in a puff of smoke.

Then you'd understand that Christianity is right. But some don't want to understand that. They keep repeating themselves. They are thinking completely mythologically. They keep repeating that, asserting that my reasoning is religious. So I say, "Where do you find a religious reasoning in what I say?" "But your conclusion is religious," they answer. It's true that my conclusion is religious, but from a purely anthropological viewpoint. You can't face the fact that the victim, Christ, condemned by everybody, is innocent. It's the Gospels that say so. It's not the people who kill him. Whereas myth recounts the perspective of the killers, the Gospels do not. The text is different. Therefore, we can say – ultimately we have to say – it must be the real divine revelation. It's a knowledge that humanity does not have. Humans have scapegoats. They believe in them. In other words, they believe in their attribution of guilt. They are unable to see. These German theologians that Schwager was contending with were absolutely incredible because they said to Schwager, for instance, that scapegoats and ideas of guilt are in the Bible and not in myth. Precisely! They don't understand that

they confirm the revelation found in the Bible. So they say, “Oh, the Bible makes you guilty.” But the Bible is right to make us guilty because we kill innocent victims. That's what myth is about. So that's why we resent the Bible. In the Bible, you can see the movement toward this truth because, at the beginning, it's really truth that there are mythical aspects.

There is, for instance, the ritual of the scapegoat in which you really believe that, if you cast that goat out, you’ll be better off because the goat will carry away all your sins. This is mythical, of course. This is archaic ritual, and the Bible, being very conservative, has preserved it for us, which is very good because if we know how to read it, it helps our understanding. The Bible is the historical trajectory that leads you from that type of belief to the opposite, to the awareness that it's all an illusion. So what we call the demystification of religion is a biblical thing. The Bible demystifies all religion, showing that victims are innocent and that people don't realize it.

SB: Let’s come back to the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. [19]

RG: This is already enormously important. Why is that story there? The Bible is essentially historical. It shows us the history of the relationship between God and man, the progressive revelation of more and more truth. So, at the beginning, not only was there sacrifice, there was the sacrifice of the firstborn. The first books of the Bible are really immersed in this theme of the sacrifice of the firstborn, which was real. The sacrifice, or I should say the non-sacrifice, of Isaac is the shift from sacrifice of the firstborn to sacrifice of an animal. That's what it’s about. The command that comes from god (El) is the old religion. The old religion was true in the sense that human beings could not do otherwise than to sacrifice their firstborn. We know that sacrifice of the firstborn happened all over the world. We know there were Indian tribes that had the sacrifice of the firstborn offered to their deity. The Carthaginians, the Phoenicians, all these people practiced child sacrifice.

SB: It would seem sacrifice is endemic to all human culture.

RG: Yes, it is. For a while, about ten or twenty years ago during the greatest madness of postmodernism, many wanted to do away with the concept of human sacrifice. They said that human sacrifice, especially in places like Phoenicia, was an invention of Western imperialism trying to make itself superior to archaic culture. I heard that so many times. Fortunately, there is the discipline of archeology. In Carthage, the great capital of the greatest colony of Phoenicia, which was great enough to threaten military Rome, they've been discovering, in recent years, entire cemeteries in which there are bodies, buried bodies of animals and children mixed together, confirming the reality of child sacrifice in that society. Here again, the novels of the nineteenth century are better. Flaubert wrote a Carthaginian book, which is like a historical movie about a Carthaginian princess who is in love and so on, but he has a whole chapter about children sacrificed to the god Molech. The scholars of the time did not believe in the sacrifice of children. That's nonsense; that's Western illusion. "Not true," they said. But it's perfectly real. Flaubert was right. Child sacrifice happened all over the place. The Bible is the text that tells us about the disappearance of child sacrifice. Why does it say that? That's the greatness of the text; it doesn't hide anything. It tells us that Abraham obeys God. He obeys the old common ways; he's a traditionalist. He follows the rules. It's tradition itself that changes here. The greatness of this text is not an isolated case, as Kierkegaard will tell us, some kind of mystical experience. The command to Abraham to sacrifice his child is not an order to a single special man; it's about a cultural change. It's a former culture that changes at the time of Abraham, with Abraham. Abraham is the symbol of that enormous change, which is from the sacrifice of humans and even children to the sacrifice of animals. It's a sign of tremendous progress in civilization.

SB: Let's take another story from Genesis. The children of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, are at war with each other in the womb. This is another story of mimetic rivalry, is that correct?

RG: Sure, since the children are twins. Let me mention the great French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss who is still alive at 96 – he's my colleague in the French Academy[20]. But he believed, as a structuralist, that language could only name differences, which is true. Things have to be different for you to give them different names. So he says that language cannot express

non-difference, the death of difference. But this is not true because language is metaphorical; it uses certain objects to mean something else. In most cultures of the world, in Greek culture, twins are a symbol of fighting doubles; there are many tragedies involving twins. They are there in the Bible as well.

That's what Jacob and Esau are. Why twins? Because with twins, you cannot tell who was born first, so you don't know who's going to get the inheritance. Therefore, they fight for it. So this is more than a metaphor. Probably, to start with, it's a reality. If you have twins, suddenly you're in trouble too. That's why twins are often the founders of cities, because one of them gets killed. Cain and Abel are a kind of twins. Romulus and Remus kill each other, too, but there's a great difference between the Bible and the Roman myth. The Roman myth tells us Romulus was right to kill Remus. The Bible says Cain was wrong. He is asked, "What did you do with your brother?" We find this natural; we might ask the same thing. But look for a myth that says the same thing as the Cain story. There isn't one. Therefore, I say it's not a myth at all. It's an explanation of what these doubles are about.

The Bible keeps coming back to a way that is very close to mythology but that always tends to be subtler than mythology. The Bible does not side with the triumphant twin of myth, who always tends to revere the nonsense of violence. But it should be compared very carefully with myth. You can see that the Bible is more perceptive if you know what twins, violence and differentiation really mean. You can see that the Bible is more perceptive; you will find a myriad of details that reveal a knowledge that myth doesn't have. But this knowledge is in the making there. Some still believe that there is something about twins that makes them fight, which is the twinning. Sometimes, I give a lecture, I talk about twins and mothers say, "Oh, I have twins." I say, "I'm not talking about real twins." I'm talking about imaginary twins as seen by culture that sees that they are alike, born at the same time so that you cannot decide which is which.

CHAPTER 5
Interpreting the Jewish Scriptures

Steven Berry: Let's turn our attention to the story of Jacob's sons and the importance of that story, particularly as it focuses on Joseph.

René Girard: In the story there are twelve sons, ten of them by one mother. Then there are two sons, the youngest two, Joseph and Benjamin, by another mother, who is really Jacob's favorite, Rachel. It's a story that begins with a theme that is very important, a mimetic theme that is the relationship between these twelve brothers but in particular the ten oldest brothers and Joseph. Joseph is incredibly more talented than his brothers. Joseph is a favorite of Jacob, and the ten brothers, as is inevitable in a human group, become jealous of Joseph. Like jealous people everywhere, they will end up lynching him. In archaic myth or religion, the jealous rivals will end up turning their brother into a scapegoat, accusing him of all sorts of sins and wanting to kill him. With Joseph, ultimately they don't kill him, but they sell him into slavery to a caravan, which is going to Egypt. Joseph is sold into slavery. Therefore I say Joseph is a scapegoat. We have to interpret this as a scapegoat phenomenon. This is a very important thing because we cannot interpret this just as the idea of "the family." They are very strange siblings, these ten brothers who expel their brother, but the Bible, and the Joseph story in particular, wants to talk about the main cultural story, which is the scapegoating of a single individual by an entire group. So we have a very good example of what we've been talking about, which is the expulsion of a single individual who is hated by everybody in the group. This hatred is contagious, obviously, but groundless. There is no objective reason except that they feel overshadowed by Joseph, who is the favorite of his father.

SB: But isn't Joseph arrogant and proud? He has a dream that he interprets of his brothers bowing down to him?

RG: Yes. But the dream is true. The dream is what is going to happen. So Joseph isn't making anything up. Joseph is not arrogant in the sense that he

speaks naively without even knowing. He talks about his own future superiority. I know that quite a few commentators of the text take seriously this idea that the brothers have a legitimate grievance against Joseph, but I don't think they do. They have no legitimate grievance against their brother. Joseph has done nothing against them. He's not trying to use his influence with his father against his brothers. He's doing everything right. So he certainly doesn't deserve to be lynched, and that's what we call scapegoating when we understand what's going on. But the brothers don't understand. They really believe in their grievances. They really believe that Joseph deserves it. So it's a little bit complex, but in the end they don't kill Joseph, as they always wanted to. They just sell him into slavery, which is some kind of lesser death sentence or expulsion.

So as soon as Joseph arrives in Egypt, he's bought by a man named Potiphar, who is a very good man and who understands Joseph's talent and work ethic. He makes good immediately as his adoptive father, you might say, because Potiphar is pretty much that; he entrusts everything to him. He makes Joseph his intendant, or whatever you want to call him, then he leaves on a trip and this is where the catastrophe happens because Lady Potiphar also appreciates Joseph's qualities; she wants to make love to him.

She approaches Joseph so vigorously that he has to leave his tunic in her hands. As in all good mystery stories, when she wants to exact vengeance against Joseph, she reveals the tunic. She says, "I have this tunic in my hand; therefore, it's proof that he really tried to make love to me." There's a Greek story that is very close to that of Joseph: the story of Phaedra, who wants to make love to her stepson. However, the Greek story turns out very differently. It's a very frequent theme in myth, this type of thing. But the Bible's handling is not really going to be mythical. So when Joseph rejects Lady Potiphar, she goes into a great uproar and calls her fellow countrymen. She complains that Joseph is trying to make love to her, so they put Joseph in jail. They put him in jail with two other important functionaries of Pharaoh's court who had also been jailed. One is a baker; the other is the wine steward. Soon they become friends because Joseph interprets dreams that they have. Joseph is an interpreter of dreams just as Oedipus is an interpreter of oracles. Joseph, the interpreter of dreams, tells one that he's going to be killed, condemned to death, which he is, and the

other that he's going to be pardoned and put back into Pharaoh's court, which is exactly what happens!

Anyway, the one who is reinstated, instead of saying, "Joseph is a great guy who can see into the future with dreams and you should get him out of jail," completely forgets about Joseph. Joseph remains in jail until finally, a third character shows up. Joseph interprets his dream, and this time, he gets Joseph out of jail. Then there's Pharaoh's dream, and the characters that have benefited from Joseph's talent tell Pharaoh, "Ask this guy to interpret your dream." Pharaoh tells his dream about the seven fat cows and seven lean cows. The seven fat cows mean there are going to be seven excellent years of good production, and the seven lean cows mean there will be seven years of famine after these good years, so the good thing to do is to accumulate as much food as possible during the first seven years. The crops will be used during the long seven-year drought that follows, and everything happens exactly as predicted by Joseph. They accumulate enormous supplies during the first seven years, so when the drought – which ranges over the whole Near East, not just Egypt alone – begins, they can provide food for people who come and ask for it… including, lo and behold, Joseph's brothers, who show up without knowing what they are doing. Joseph recognizes them, but they don't recognize him because by that time he's become the prime minister, the second in command of the court of Pharaoh. He's in charge of all Pharaoh's economic matters. They get their grain and go away, but they had not brought their youngest brother, Benjamin.

Joseph, who knows about the youngest brother, Benjamin, asks them about this. They reply that their father, Jacob, is very old and loves this youngest brother, loves him even more now because the next brother (Joseph) has died in unfortunate circumstances. Jacob was very attached to Joseph, and they fear that their father would die if anything happened to Benjamin. So Joseph tells them, "If you need grain again, be sure you don't come back without Benjamin or you won't get anything." So the brothers go back to Palestine and eat their grain.

Since the drought lasts for seven long years, they once again run out, and after reflecting on the matter, they decide to go back to the court of Egypt.

This time, of course, they bring Benjamin. Joseph receives them and recognizes them again, but once again they don't recognize him. Joseph entertains them, has dinner with them, and gives them everything. They have some kind of bag that they fill with grain, and then they all leave. But Joseph has someone place a very precious cup in Benjamin's bag and close it up again. So the brothers leave, and when they get to the border they're all arrested and searched, as they would be today. Of course, the people who search them find the cup in Benjamin's bag. They bring the brothers back to Joseph, who learns about what has happened, which cannot be much of a surprise to him, since he cleverly engineered everything in the first place. Joseph says, "You can all leave as long as I keep the culprit, Benjamin; I will do with him as I see fit to do to punish him." All the other brothers are willing to accept this deal except for one, Judah, who rises and says, "I cannot stand this. My father would die if Benjamin were to die. Take me instead of my brother." He volunteers as a substitute for the sacrifice of Benjamin. There and then Joseph's heart is touched and he reveals his identity to his brothers and tells them he recognizes them. Joseph forgives all eleven brothers for the sake of the one, Judah, who has resisted the temptation to flee the situation and abandon Benjamin to the inevitable vengeance of Joseph that all the brothers expect.

This story is extremely powerful because what Joseph evokes from his brothers is a kind of inversion of sacrifice; someone who agrees to give himself and be sacrificed in order to avoid the sacrifice of an innocent and the sacrifice of his father. All Christians, by the way, see this story as prophetic of Christ. Judah, of course, is the direct ancestor of Christ who belonged to the twelve brothers, the first ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel. Judah embodies the land of Judea, which will be the place where Christ is born and the place where he dies. The story is magnificent because it's a story about the refusal of vengeance, giving up sacrifice and shifting to the sacrifice of one's self for the sake of not having a sacrifice. So lots of themes that will later be greatly developed in Christianity appear here. The story is obviously another counter-myth against sacrifice, against vengeance, against the type of reconciliation through violence that we have in mythology. This is reconciliation through understanding the refusal of violence, exemplified primarily by Judah.

Judah interrupts the cycle of violence. He breaks it and brings about unity among the brothers, something that had never happened before. So at the beginning of the story we have a founding murder, a founding murder of an archaic society, which is the founding of the sacrificial world of everything; and at the end we have a Christ-like figure who is ready to die, who doesn't die but is ready to die, in order to interrupt the endless series of cycles of violence. So one could say that the story is, in a way, a kind of a symbol of the whole Bible, of its evolution from archaic sacrifice to Christianity.

This is really Gospel. At the same time it's a story that is quite mysterious. I mean these themes are there in the prophetic world. I think scholars consider this story to be produced quite late in the chronology of the Bible; it can therefore be labeled prophetic, belonging to the spirit of the great prophets, which is anti-sacrificial, explicitly anti-sacrificial. The idea of sacrifice is changing; God wants pity and compassion, not human or animal sacrifice. One can see this in Hosea, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and the greater prophetic tradition of the Jewish Bible.

SB: We see that also in some of the other biblical stories. I think Job is really an anti-sacrificial story too, isn't it?

RG: If you read both ancient and modern readings of Job, you see that they are primarily a reading of the first two chapters, the prologue, about Satan and God allowing Satan to punish Job. But the substantial part of the book of Job is the dialogue with the three friends. In my view, they are not friends. They are the beginning of the lynch mob that is getting ready to lynch the unfortunate Job. We can tell from some chapters that Job has played an exceptional role in his community. He was really an informal leader, a tyrant as the Greeks would say, like Oedipus. Suddenly, the entire community – for no reason at all – mimetically turns against him and scapegoats him. He was worshipped the day before; the following day they were against him. That's what would happen to Jesus too, and to most of the Hebrew prophets. There was a lot of collective violence in the archaic world. This is how rituals were born. But the Bible, instead of confirming the mythical view of these things, asserting the guilt of the victim, tells us the victim is innocent. In the book of Job it's Job's friends who say, "You're guilty. Confess it. Maybe you'll have a chance to save your life if you

confess your crimes." Job, unlike Oedipus, fights his attackers to the end. I would say the book of Job is an anti-Oedipus text, like the story of Joseph. It moves towards dismantling sacrifice, always hinting or explicitly telling us that the victim pursued by more and more people is innocent, but this doesn't prevent people from being hostile to the victim. The people want scapegoats.

SB: Here's another story. Tell us about King Solomon. There's a fabulous story about him, twins, and sacrifice. All of the mimetic theory is there, isn't it?[21]

RG: Solomon has just become king. He's rendering justice when two prostitutes show up. These two prostitutes both tell exactly the same story. Each one says, "I had a child and this other prostitute who lives with me in this house also had a child. During the night her child died. I was asleep with a living child, then she came and substituted the living child for the dead child and vice versa, so that I would have the dead child and she would have the living child." Both tell exactly the same story. To emphasize the similarity, Solomon repeats what the first prostitute says, as well as what the second prostitute says. So we have the story, the same text four times. We are left with no doubt that things are the same on both sides. Solomon says to his attendants, "Bring me a sword." They bring his sword and Solomon says, "I am going to cut the child in two. In this way I will reconcile you by giving half of the child to one prostitute and the other half to the other prostitute." So one of the two prostitutes agrees with Solomon, reasoning "this way my rival will not have the living child." The other prostitute has an entirely different reaction, saying "Give the other prostitute the child; I want the child to live." Her first desire is to see that the child is not cut in two. She would rather lose the child in order to preserve its life. Then Solomon says, "Give her the child. She is the real mother."

This story is extremely profound, because we can interpret the real mother in different terms. We can assume, for instance, that the two prostitutes have been exchanging the living child all night long, and fundamentally don't even know whose child is the living one. However, the one who deserves to have the child is the one who wants to preserve its life, who thinks in terms of the child and not in terms of her own possessiveness. This is a story of

mimetic desire. They both want the same thing, and Solomon finds a way to see which mother is interested in the child itself rather than in her own possessiveness. The story is magnificent because it tells us everything about mimetic rivalry. It takes a position against such rivalry in a wonderful way and shows us how a mother's love is the opposite of mimetic rivalry. It is total dedication to the child rather than the possessiveness of romantic love.

It's one of those stories that are inexhaustible. Remember that Solomon's judgment played a great role in my understanding of mimetic desire. What is it that's the same? Is it the two women? What is it that's different? How can you characterize the bad prostitute's desire for the child? She seems to want the child, yet at first sight there's no reason to decide against her or the other one. You have to look for some test that will reveal the mother's real feelings towards the child. So the story is enormous; it's a huge thing. It tells us everything about mimetic desire. The end of the story is that from that day on, Solomon's courtiers realized he had wisdom that was more than human. They had great respect for him because this was the beginning of his reign. It was the very beginning, Solomon's good period, but I say that from the point of view of mimetic desire it means everything. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, this story's at the center. I have a good friend who is the only person ever to have told me that this story is the key to the whole book, which it really is. It was the origin, the beginning of my response to the Bible, of my idea that the Bible said unique things about mimetic desire, rivalry, and good and evil in humanity.

SB: You're still looking at this as an anthropologist. Correct?

RG: I'm still looking at this as an anthropologist. There's no god who intervenes; there's no *deus ex machina*.[22] We're talking about a wisdom that is purely human. In the same way, the Joseph story is so prophetic of Christ that it just takes your breath away in its announcement of the place of the Passion when Judah offers himself and thus falls into the hands of a very exceptional man. It's another test. The similarity between the two texts is that they both put people to the test to see whether they are good or evil. This is a very biblical thing. It all begins to unfold where some people would say it's like Greek wisdom or ancient wisdom. I think there's nothing like this because in the Bible, the basic violence of human relations is

understood and mastered in an unfathomable way that has no equivalent anywhere else, in my view.

SB: Can we go back a little bit to violence? I can see where you're going and how important and vital it is to our understanding of difficult texts, but there have been people over the years who have said that God is an angry God involved in violent activity against wayward humanity, and they think God is violent due to what they read in the Bible.

RG: These people have a wrong reading of the Bible; you have to have a historical, genetic reading of the Bible. They take the Bible as a single unit. The God of Exodus, the God of Genesis, is certainly not the same God as the God of the great prophets, the God of Isaiah, the God of Jeremiah. So there's a change in how God is understood. But the thing that makes the Bible so interesting is that this change is a change from the mythical spirit, from the spirit of archaic religion, to the mature biblical spirit which, in the Jewish Bible, would be called the prophetic spirit. Now the Joseph story belongs to the prophetic spirit, even though it's located in Genesis. There might be very strange things that we don't know about the Bible. Scholars are not sure, but they tend to say the Joseph story must be a much later text; it's much more sophisticated in its concepts, psychology and everything else than the other texts of Genesis.

SB: Has God changed, or have human views of God changed in the Bible?

RG: No, it's not God who changed. It's humanity who has learned about the real God, but they can only learn about the real God if they have previously had sacrifices and false gods. One might also say false views of God as well. There's no doubt that the Bible is really a history of religion – a history of, I don't want to say false religion, even for the sacrificial religion. What is false is the choice of victims, the scapegoat, but since these sacrifices are critical to the survival of the species we call humanity, we cannot be against them. We owe our own existence today to the fact that our ancestors practiced sacrifice. Humanity would have destroyed itself without it.

SB: Let's bring this into the present where we're sending our young men and women to war so that they can "make a sacrifice" to keep us free.

RG: Here they are mixing two meanings of sacrifice because they are using sacrifice as self-sacrifice, which comes from Christianity, but they really mean killing the enemy too, which is the old meaning of sacrifice. So there's a conflation there. You should keep the elements apart and discuss them separately, then put them together and realize what these people are saying and doing is rooted in archaic religion. Fundamentally it's not Christian. I'm not saying that all uses of the word "sacrifice" when you die for your country are bad. I'm not a pacifist; I'm not against love of country. In certain cases, you may have to die for your country if it is invaded. But you have to be careful not to involve Christianity in wars that are fundamentally political rivalry and that sort of thing. You have to look at every case in concrete terms and see what's at stake there. I'm not saying I can judge.

SB: In the Hebrew Scriptures, as Raymund Schwager pointed out, you have over six hundred passages that explicitly talk about nations, kings or individuals attacking, destroying and killing others.[23] The biblical authors did not hesitate to speak of unrestrained violence. No other human activity is mentioned so often in the Bible as unrestrained violence.

RG: It's true that, for example, the book of Judges is very different. Well, there's room for everything. I go back to what I said before. I mean these are probably some of the earliest texts. In a way, the achievement of the Bible is all the greater once you realize that before the prophetic tradition there were the worst fundamentalists that ever lived, because the Bible is a constant process of conversion, which is not a single voice but which has great multiplicity of voices. If it were a given in the Bible, if the Bible were not a history of the human spirit instructed by the Holy Spirit, by God, if it were not that kind of history as well as the telling of stories, if we could not see that history in the writing of the Bible, the Bible would be less valuable than it is. Do you see what I mean? We cannot go back to a view of the Bible that takes every word as revealed and sacred, where you cannot touch it or interpret it. I'm against that. Anyway, the Catholic Church has never regarded the Jewish Bible as scripted in that sense. Catholics view the Bible

historically, so I feel their attitude is fundamentally more modern than that of Protestant fundamentalists. Pope John Paul II said there was no real conflict between the theory of evolution and the Bible, that in order to find a conflict you had to interpret too literally the story of Adam and Eve, which is just so much nonsense. There is just nothing to say about that except that it is ridiculous.

Now this is not a problem with religion in general. It's a problem with Protestant fundamentalism. Look, the Adam and Eve narrative is a symbolic story, an extremely powerful story since it has mimetic desire, rivalry and all that; but it cannot be taken literally, although maybe it can be taken pretty close to literally if you read it mimetically. What I see is that there must be a threshold of hominization. I believe in evolution not because I believe in evolution religiously. I don't care if someday maybe the theory will be discarded, but today we can easily align evolution with Christianity by saying that hominization begins when humanity's mimetic power becomes such that one is bound to have trouble with one's neighbors; in other words, that human communities cannot be natural anymore – they are to be religious based on the scapegoat system and sacrifices. Maybe what fundamentalists need to realize is that it is Christianity itself that criticizes fundamentalism.

SB: Let's once again turn our attention to the Bible. Second Isaiah is among the most significant writings that we have in the Hebrew text. There are four or five chapters that are devoted to what they call –

RG: The Songs of the Servant.[24]

SB: Could you talk about the mimetic theory, about victimage and that story?

RG: The Suffering Servant is a very good prophet: meek, humble, loving everybody. He's picked as a scapegoat for no reason at all. It's very interesting because the biblical text here teaches us something about archaic religion. It says he was the type of person people don't like. There were signs about him so he was, in a way, the sort of character people would pick as a scapegoat – which shows that scapegoats aren't picked completely at

random. If you look at myth, you'll see this is true because Oedipus limps. The number of mythical heroes who limp is enormous. Take mythical heroes who have some kind of physical defect or who have some kind of disgrace, who look different. I think this is extremely interesting from an evolutionary viewpoint where we can make links with the animal world. Zoologists will tell you that predators, when they pursue a flock of animals, will pick the one with a defect. They pick the one that's easiest to catch. They've learned; evolution has taught them to do this. That may be true, but when you shift to the human, this is where the scapegoat is.

People have observed that mythical heroes are an incredible lot when you look at them. Some of them limp, some of them are hunchbacked, some of them have an arm missing, some of them have twisted this or that; most of them are remarkable for their ugliness; but they can also be remarkable for their beauty, like Apollo. Very often there are also gods that work on iron, blacksmiths like Vulcan, or Hephaestus in Greece. We know that in most archaic societies when they first forged metal, the blacksmith was a little bit of a scapegoat: he was not allowed to live in the village, he had to be outside; he was feared. Why? Because he was providing tools that could be used as weapons. In a way he was changing violence in the community; he was making violence easier. He was making it easier to kill the neighbor. So when you killed your neighbor you were angry, but after that you could say it was the blacksmith's fault: he gave me that tool. Maybe it's not even a weapon. Maybe it's to work the ground, but you can't say he did it. Do you see what I mean? So you have a scapegoat. That's why you have so many gods who work in iron because they are scapegoats. There are all sorts of clues in ancient culture if you put together facts, observations that are very common, which are often repeated across quite a few cultures. You can understand why mythical heroes are very often wounded people, unusual people or cross-eyed sometimes; they are terrifying for some reason.

They are also very often strangers, and the reason is obvious. In archaic communities, people didn't travel. It was an immense luxury to travel. So when you see a stranger, you're extremely curious; but at the slightest gesture that is not the way people usually behave in the community, they're all going to jump on him and kill him. Then, as a result of the cathartic peace, the victim will be divinized. That's a reason why so many gods are

strangers in the community. So when you start thinking about all these things, they all make sense.

SB: You say that once the scapegoat is killed, he or she becomes a god. How do you explain that to a modern or postmodern person?

RG: I would refer to the emotion of the killing that stops the whole community dead in its tracks, the catharsis. These people are not criminals; they don't kill each other much, and when they do kill someone in this way, it's out of intense emotion, but as I said before, it doesn't last. That's why they have to redo it all the time.

SB: Second Isaiah is a case in point?

RG: Second Isaiah shows us a very good man who is picked as a scapegoat. Notice, though, there is a description of his collective debt, the enormity of the collective debt. In the Bible this is just so huge that if sociologists were to read the Bible, they would say this is a world that's constantly in revolution because death is going to happen to the prophets too. Another thing that's very, very interesting that people rarely notice in the Psalms is the fact that the narrator is very often in a situation where he sees people slinking around him, trying to encircle him in order to lynch him. Why so many of these texts? I think out of 150 psalms, 100 of them are about enemies, numerous deadly enemies. A hundred out of a hundred and fifty! That's a huge number! We manage not to talk about it because this theme is not important in our world. We have the police to take care of that. But if you read descriptions of great political murders, even in the sixteenth century, they still resemble riots and archaic lynching.

SB: Psalm 118 describes the ganging together of enemies, as does Psalm 55; others describe friends turning against friends. So we hear what's happening in these texts.

RG: What I'm talking about is that in these texts, we see this situation for the first time from the point of view of the one who never says a word in myth: the point of view of the victim. So we realize what we're seeing is a collective murder. In myth, we don't even realize this. In the Bible, we

become aware that the person is a scapegoat. We realize that what we're seeing is a collective murder. We realize there's disorder and violence in their society. That's why all these people say there's so much violence in the Bible. They think myths are less violent. It isn't true. When the story of violence is told from the point of view of the perpetrators of the violence, it never talks about the violence done to the victim. Myths talk about the "guilty person" being punished for the right reason. That's all. You have perfect order. You never see disorder in an archaic society. That's one of the reasons Greece looks so good to scholars. … But if you look behind the myth, you might just find something different.

In a way, this is about seeing violence from the point of view of the victim for the first time. You can't say these biblical texts are a myth; rather, they are the explanation of myth. Of course, the victim can speak only when the victim is still alive. So in many of Psalms, for example, the victims see the lynchers coming close but we cannot see the murder; we see the victims before the lynching.

SB: That's right. Psalm 118 articulates the difference between the perspective of both the enemies and the faithful in that one psalm. Part of that psalm says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." That's a very curious statement.

RG: This statement is so important, because it's a statement that Jesus picks up and formulates just before his death. He asks his listeners to explain this text to him. Two thousand years later, theologians are careful not to mention this text because they would also have to mention that Jesus asked them to explain it. They never do because you can only explain it in light of the mimetic theory. It's a definition of the foundation of culture; the stone that the builders rejected has become the keystone. This is a definition of what happens in Genesis between Cain and Abel with the foundation of the first culture. So when they tell me the foundation of murder is not in the Bible, I say yes it is; the stone that the builders rejected has become the keystone. What can it mean other than that? But it's presented as an enigma because the text, the writer of the text, knows very well that no one will understand. This is why Jesus says, "Tell me what it means, you who are so smart, who criticize me." We have yet to give an answer. One might say that my whole

work leads to answering this question. That would be another way of putting it. When historians talk about the Gospels as some kind of mystification that the disciples have invented, I wonder how it could be a mystification, since right in the middle of the Gospel we have this particular text that we still don't understand today. These skeptics ask what "the stone that the builders rejected" means. They don't understand, so they tell you it is nonsense. Of course it's not nonsense. It's talking to you about everything in the Bible. We've been talking about nothing but that.

SB: Christians have long engaged a figural reading of the Psalms and say that Jesus is talking about himself. How do you see this?

RG: That's also true. Jesus is talking about himself, but to talk about Jesus is to talk about everything, to explain everything that's in the Bible. It's the same thing because you have a potential victim who says, "You fools, you don't understand this scapegoat system. I'm going to show you what you are. You're going to kill me. I've never done anything but good to you, and I'm going to accept this death to explain to you where the truth is." This is why the Passion is everything Christians say it is. Once you see this, you should be completely floored to see that it's true from an anthropological viewpoint. The proof that we must be really close to the end is that we no longer need God to understand the truth that so far has been only the truth of God, but now we understand that God has explained it to us all along, but we didn't want to understand it. But history is teaching it to us at the same time, because the more violence there is in our world, the more compelled we are to understand violence since we don't have these foolish sacrifices to hide it from us.

SB: Jesus quotes Psalm 22. He recites it when He's on the cross.

RG: It's the end of the Passion, or pretty close to the end. "Why have you abandoned me?" This is in Mark and Matthew.[25] Now think about scapegoats. Who could feel more abandoned than a scapegoat? A scapegoat is really abandoned by God too, since God allows this in order to save humanity, to make humanness possible. So when you read the revelation of the full truth of the scapegoat, you have to include this psalm.

Chapter 6

God and Satan

Steven Berry: The Decalogue or Ten Commandments very clearly establish the rules and regulations by which human beings are to live.[26] What do you think is highly significant in the Ten Commandments?

René Girard: From the point of view of the mimetic theory, what is most significant is the tenth commandment, the last one. The last one is the only one that talks about desire, and it uses a word that in English is translated by 'covetousness.' In French there is also a special word that is different from desire, so I remember when the Italian translation of my book was being done, I asked the translator, whom I know, if he had any problems. He said, "Oh, I don't have any problem because in the Italian formulation of the commandments, the word is the word 'desire,' no different from the usual word, so I don't think we should worry too much about that special word." A special word makes us feel maybe we're dealing with a special desire, which is different, but if we use the word desire, the tenth commandment really says, "You shall not desire your neighbor's wife or your neighbor's donkey." Your neighbor's donkey is about the equivalent of your neighbor's Mercedes; then it ends with everything that belongs to the neighbor. I commented on this in one of my most recent books.[27] For a long time I had not seen that a prohibition of mimetic desire was right there, visible for all to see – that the desire that was prohibited in the Ten Commandments was mimetic desire. It's really amazing when I think if I had known that before, I would have begun my first book – the first book in which I talked about the Bible[28] – with this, which is absolutely fundamental.

You don't have to prove the existence of mimetic desire in the Bible when you read the Ten Commandments. The word neighbor is repeated, thus you can see that whoever wrote the tenth commandment tried to enumerate the objects you shouldn't desire, and then finally he realizes it makes no sense

to enumerate the objects. It ends with “whatever belongs to your neighbor.” In other words, the neighbor is more important than the object, because all objects of the neighbor are desirable because they belong to the neighbor. So the formulation itself is like a history of the discovery of mimetic desire. You begin with the object and you end up with the model, whatever belongs to your neighbor, even the formulation is just some kind of a part of the revelation. So you might meditate on this for a long time; the fact that it has never been picked up either by theologians or psychologists is really amazing.

There are probably historical reasons why we see this now, how important it is. Whatever belongs to your neighbor, your neighbor is going to fight for. If people normally desire especially what belongs to their neighbors, they have a serious social problem; they have a constant, permanent social problem. But sacrifices are not in the Ten Commandments, even though we know the Ten Commandments are very old. So, that's why Christ says it's not sacrifice that God wants. It's compassion instead of sacrifice. If your neighbor has something against you, not merely if you have something against your neighbor, first be reconciled with your neighbor. After that you may sacrifice or not, it doesn’t matter.[29] Anyway, the sacrifices – animal sacrifices in the temple – don't mean much anymore. They have become that routine tradition that sacrifice becomes when it's too old. One reason we don't discover the meaning of sacrifice is that we always catch it at a late stage in its own lifespan when it’s become completely routine, as in the Bible, though that doesn’t prevent Jesus from criticizing it. Robert Hamerton-Kelly thinks that the scene with the violence of Jesus in the temple against the merchants of animals is an anti-sacrificial moment.[30]

SB: You said that the Gospel is an intellectual breakthrough, the key to knowledge, the revelation of things hidden since the foundation of the world.

RG: Yes, the Passion is the underside of scapegoating sacrifice; it reveals everything. In other words, it brings to perfection what is already there in the Hebrew Bible. It is the revelation of sacrifice as false worship: it is nothing more than the result of a false accusation against the victim. It exposes. In other words, when institutions confront us, sacrificial

institutions, in order to understand them, it's enough to slip the text of the Passion underneath and to replace the victim by Christ. Christ is in the place of all victims since the foundation of the world, all sacrificial victims, revealing their innocence. The fact is that religion has for a long time been an accomplice – a willing accomplice – of the violence of humanity with divine permission, as it were, to enable us to reach the point where we become able to understand that. That's why ultimately in the Bible if you add the Gospels, you have everything. You have the history, the entire history of religion, and that's why the Bible must begin with archaic religion. You must not take the Bible from the first line to the last as a kind of absolute divinely inspired text, since it's rooted in archaic religion. In other words, in the sacrificial deception, this deception can only be revealed slowly stage-by-stage, hence we can see the various stages.
For instance, take the paschal ritual, the Passover. Eating the lamb together is no longer defined as a sacrifice. It's the eating of the lamb, not the killing of the lamb, that's important. So I think it's a stage beyond what is reached in the non-sacrifice of Isaac. It's beyond animal sacrifice. It's still on the way to the Eucharist, which is Christian doctrine.

SB: This is important for the cultural development of Judaism. Mimetic theory is an explanation of culture, its origin and development. Could you once again explain culture, of what culture consists?

RG: Culture is the way human beings live together. We've talked previously about the fact that the building block of animal culture is what the specialists today call dominance patterns; these are seen in physical encounters, for example, between wild wolves. The male wild wolves vie for the same female, but there is no death; there is surrender. When wolves fight this type of fight, the defeated wolf lies on his back and offers his throat to the victor, who does not kill him but becomes the dominant animal. So we can assume that the threshold of hominization is when this no longer happens but the killing of the submissive rival occurs. In human culture, when dominance patterns cannot be established, this killing is going to occur at some point collectively because of the contagion, the mimetic contamination, which directs a certain number of people against the same victim. It is these people who are going to be the first community, who are going to be united by their victim, who become the first model for

sacrifice. Culture is always essentially repeating these sacrifices, remembering the first victim. But the word “remember” in English is interesting. In order to put the members of a victim that has been torn apart back together, you re-member the victim. Then, when you sacrifice, you re-member again. Therefore, culture is essentially remembrance; so you can see that even in modern languages, words can be very useful to teach you what's behind them if you use them in the right way.
SB: Jesus also observed this. “On the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread and after giving thanks and praise to God, gave it to his friends. He said…?”

RG: “Do it in remembrance of me.” Bring the members together. That's right. Yet the thing is that the death of Jesus is somehow different. This is a big one for anthropologists who want to say, "Look, the Eucharist is exactly like a sacrifice." No doubt, but there is no blood. There is a little wine and a little bread. There is no doubt that there's a recalling of all the sacrificial history of mankind; the fact that some call the death of Jesus a willing sacrifice is fine. No problem with that, because the unity of sacrifice, in a way, is asserted in many of the texts we’ve been talking about. Let's go back to the judgment of Solomon for a second. When I first read it, I saw mostly what is pre-eminently visible there, which is pretty important: the difference between what the two prostitutes do. But you must ask one more question: these two prostitutes are so different from each other, why are they in the same text? Why is the potential sacrifice of the child and letting the child live in the same text? Because there’s a shift in consciousness. It’s a mystery that we use the same word for both,[31] but in a way we accentuate the solidarity of the two, because we’re not merely in a judicial world where we condemn the term sacrifice wherever we find it. Unfortunately, I did this a little bit in my first book on Christianity.[32] But we see the whole history of humanity as one where they must learn to repent of their sacrifices; yet at the same time, if they hadn't had these sacrifices, there would have been no humanity, no salvation, no Christ.

SB: Because everyone would've already been destroyed as a result of the contagion of mimetic violence?

RG: Yes, everything would have been destroyed. In other words, it's very important to recognize that we're dealing with a history of revelation. Revelation doesn't come all at once; it takes time. Take those passages in which Paul especially says, "Now we are going to give you real solid proof. No longer baby food."[33] Sacrifice is baby food. You kill something, you feel good and you don't realize you're guilty; so the opposition is between baby food as the world in which sacrifice in the destructive, violent sense is still allowed, and mature food in which you sacrifice yourself in order not to sacrifice your neighbor. If you don't understand that, you also don't understand the Kingdom of God, because the Kingdom of God tells you not to do to others what you don't want them to do to you, even if people harm you or do violence to you. There are to be no reprisals. Forgiveness is the new way we are called to handle hostility.

So in other words, the world can become Christian only if this good reciprocity replaces the bad reciprocity that is normal in human relations. The amazing thing is that all relations are mimetic. We all imitate each other. I look at you, and you look at me. If you look at animals together, even when they fight, they don't look at each other, and they don't see each other in the same way we do. They smell each other, and they fight in a very symmetrical way. It's almost impossible not to have symmetrical relationships with people. They are the most important relations we have. Even though we may be differentiated because you're a pastor in a church and I'm a retired professor, fundamentally our relationship is reciprocal. You proffer your hand and I shake it and so forth. If we try to make them non-reciprocal, you extend your hand to me, I refuse to take it, I put my hand behind my back, immediately you put yours behind your back, because if I don't want to shake hands with you, very quickly you don't want to shake hands with me. In other words, good relations are reciprocal, but bad relations are reciprocal too.

Relationships are always reciprocal, which simply means that we imitate each other. If I think you've played a dirty trick on me, I'm going to say, "Oh, I'm noble and generous, I would never play a dirty trick on him, but I'll show him that I understand how he treats me." So there will then be a little distinction, a difference in the way I'm going to behave with you. So since you don't know you've played a dirty trick on me, I'll interpret it

negatively. You're going to see me playing a dirty trick on you and you're going to say, "Why has he played a dirty trick on me? I'm not going to play a dirty trick on him because I'm noble and generous as well, but I'm going to show him that I understand his behavior." Then you become colder, and progressively our relationship will become one of mimetic hostility. It's very easy to turn a good reciprocal relation into a bad reciprocal relation, but it's very difficult to turn a bad reciprocal relation back into a good one, very, very difficult, and that's the problem of humankind. So in a way, the rules of the Kingdom of God – no reprisal at all – are precisely to have very good reciprocity. If we have good reciprocity, we don't need sacrifice. Good reciprocity. If it could be established in a permanent way, we would have the Kingdom of God, but as I said, it's very, very difficult.

SB: Let's come back to the Eucharist and Jesus' saying, "Do this in remembrance of me."[34]

RG: The Eucharist is really related to sacrifice, but rather than representing the violence against the victim, of it being the victim that you eat, you eat the total refusal of violence, which is Christ. It's a reversal, but it's still the same symbolism. The anthropologists are right to point that out. It doesn't mean it means the same thing, but what they see is that it is the same thing, so since they think that the killing is only symbolical anyway, they feel the Eucharist and sacrifice is pretty much the same thing. But it isn't, because the shedding of blood, the violence in sacrifice, is essential.

SB: Clergy don't teach that very frequently. In other words, when they get up and they recite the words of institution, "This is my body, this is my blood. … Do this in remembrance of me," it isn't explained to the people who are taking the bread and the cup that this means the end of violence.

RG: It means the end of violence, yet at the same time it shows the continuity with a whole history of religion. So when anthropologists tell you, "Hey, that's cannibalism," you should answer, "Yes, of course, cannibalism is part of human history and the Eucharist summarizes it all in nonviolence." Therefore, why not cannibalism there as well? Cannibalism is the essence of sacrifice. Cannibalism means you eat the sacrificial victim in order to be your victim, because you want to be that victim. The reason

you killed him is you want to be him or her. So if you absorb his or her flesh, you become them, just as if you absorb the flesh of Christ, you should become a little bit nonviolent, more than you were before. If you understand this text, you also perceive that it cannot have been put there by people who want to fool us. We can discover in these sayings tremendous aspects that no one has yet discovered that fit the Christian meaning. Like the stone that the builders rejected. So therefore faith is highly linked to the text; that must be something a little bit Protestant in me. It is Christ himself who assumes the responsibility of quoting that psalm[35], saying "explain it to me, explain the relationship with me." We haven't deciphered it yet. It should be enough for everybody to understand that Christianity is not a text like others where part of its truth is still hidden but decipherable. This is the sort of thing that can restore the damaged faith of our time.

We're talking about two types of religion. One fundamentally deifies scapegoating. Therefore, it ultimately deifies violence itself. When I called my second book *Violence and the Sacred*, it really meant that the sacred is nothing but violence; it's only insofar as you don't see this that violence is the sacred. The real sacred – or let us say the holy, let's not use the same word – is love, divine love: not human love, which is a miserable imitation of divine love, but real divine love. Mysteriously, God is using human violence to bring the human animal to the level where we will try to teach it love. Humanity is therefore going through a violent phase, which is archaic religion. There is the animal at the bottom, there are the violent religions, and then there is the religion of love. Are we going to understand it or not? In some ways, I say only in some ways, the symbolism of violence, the sacred, looks more like God's love to us, in our weakness, in our violence, than anything else. We don't reach that total violence in a way that we represent in our archaic religions. But in some ways archaic religion has features, real features of divinity, since it reconciles in a certain context. Oh, this sounds dreadful, but we don't want to worship violence. Christ teaches us that we have to worship only love, but we have to understand that worship of violence is a series of steps towards love. This is why I say revelation takes into account the whole history of human religion.

SB: I think this is the recognition that something profound has taken place. There has been a new birth of consciousness.

RG: A new birth of consciousness, yes, because human consciousness is born in violence, through violence.

SB: Thus Joseph can say, "You meant it for ill, but God meant it for good." [36]

RG: “God meant it for good.” So in other words, you have the two religions that are, in a way, signified by the story of Joseph. In the end what Joseph says is that shift, that shift which must be represented in the First Testament. That's why the First Testament is so powerful, because it constantly demonstrates that shift in its greatest stories. I think you said something very profound in the Joseph story, "You meant it for ill, but God turned it to good." In other words, all your violence leads you to a higher stage of humanity. So in a way that would also be one of the reasons why even if the Joseph story is a late story in terms of literary production, it is placed very early in the Bible, because it announces what the Bible is about.

SB: The other thing about these stories is that you'll notice they give hope because none of the people in the Bible are perfect. If they were perfect we couldn't identify with them.

RG: For certain they're all human, because you feel it in the Joseph story too, when they find Joseph dressed as the most important guy at the funeral. Their temptation must be to turn him into a god there, to see him as a god. Not only is he the viceroy, but he also has food, which they don't have. So he's like a transcendental Joseph, but since we’re in the Jewish world here they don't divinize their brother.

SB: No idols.

RG: No idols, that's right.

SB: This could not have been told in Greece.
RG: This could not have been told in Greece. That's for sure.

SB: Religion is indistinguishable from culture in archaic societies; we've been through that. The violence at the heart of the traditional sacred is therefore twofold: the negative sacred of the collective violence that was associated with the dangerous aspects of the god or hero, which may become split off into a devil or demon or trickster, and the positive sacred that is associated with the formation and maintenance of order. I'd like to spend some time on the devil, the demon, the trickster, the Satan, because it seems to me to be so essential to everything that goes on in the Bible: from the very first story to the very last story, everything is going to be affected by the Satan.

RG: When I talk about Satan I think Satan has to be contrasted with the Holy Spirit because 'Satan' comes from a Persian word that means the accuser. The Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John is called the *Paraclete*, which means counselor for the defense in a court. The Holy Spirit is the defender, the advocate. Many translations don't give the preeminent meaning in common Greek at the time, which is simply the defense lawyer in any court. The lawyer for the defense, the Holy Spirit, and Satan the accuser, are opposites. Myth is the product of the accuser, the false accuser, while the Passion is the product of the Holy Spirit, who is defending the accused. So everything I say can be covered, as one or the other. At the same time, in a historical light, we have to deny that mythology and archaic religions as a whole must be declared satanic. They only become satanic in a context where the Bible should be dominant. Where there's an attempt to bring them back, as some try to do today, we fall back into another kind of fundamentalism and forget about history.

SB: But it's a progression in history. In some texts, like Genesis 3, Satan is a serpent; in other texts, like Job, Satan is part of the heavenly cohort. So is Satan a being like God?

RG: In Job, Satan is an advisor of God: he's testing people, but he's not the most dreadful Satan, like we see in the movie The Exorcist. But I think these differences in the character are due to differences in the total interpretation we're talking about, where love gradually replaces violence while the Holy Spirit replaces the accuser, where the defender of victims

comes first. There's a development in the concept of the satanic throughout the Bible.

Jesus is also defined as a *Paraclete* because he is essentially the defender of victims.[37] The Passion reveals the innocence of all these scapegoats throughout history, not only the crucified Christ. Jesus is a *Paraclete*, or the same thing as the Holy Spirit, but all persons of the Trinity of course are each other, one another. In other words, you have a logic at work that is incredibly powerful, and at the same time generates itself in the Hebrew Bible gradually. So when people ask me, "Is Satan really a being?" I prefer not to answer. I don't think the question is helpful. Because what does it mean for me to answer such questions? I have insight about texts. I can see the shift of meaning in Satan, but whether Satan is a real person cannot become a concrete question for me. Maybe it should, I don't know. The reality of God, yes, of Christ, yes. Satan, I'm not so sure. There's no article about Satan in the creed. Nowhere does the creed say, "I believe in Satan and his rule."

SB: But you've written a book with the title *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*.

RG: Yes, but precisely fallen. He falls and he's shattered into pieces, like a potter's vessel. I'm willing to give a lot of reality to the satanic because the accuser is all over the place, since it is all mythology. But I don't affirm Satan as a transcendent being, because I feel this immediately turns into some kind of childish spiritualism or something fake. It has a bad odor. I'm doing anthropology where many things are implied about the reality of God. My anthropology tries to prove that God must be real because there are so many signs of his reality in the biblical text; but there isn't one sign that's really religious in the sense of postulating the existence of God where you can say, "Look, God did this." So why should it be different for Satan? That's ultimately the way I should verbalize my repugnance to assume some kind of real existence of Satan almost in the human sense. I don't assume any transcendence of Satan.

However, I think that the mimetic theory "proves scientifically" that there must be some author other than human behind the biblical text, but it doesn't go beyond that. We live in a world of atheism. I don't see why I

should go further than that with Satan; I think my instinct is correct, because it's a question of the nature of my endeavor. It's not a question of the nature of religion *per se* but of the nature of my endeavor, which is essentially skeptical. I come back to Psalm 118:22. The more skeptical you become in dealing with this text, the more suspicious you are, and ultimately you know that "The stone that the builders rejected has become a keystone" cannot be interpreted by mere suspicion, that there must be transcendence. However, I've never postulated that, because if I postulated it gratuitously, as we say, I would have undone all my reasoning. What I want to do is to move my audience to say, "Well, there must be a God who put in that quote from the Psalms,", or "It's a more-than-human inspiration that put that quote in the Gospels." However, we still don't understand this fully, and yet we can now make sense of it.

SB: So the concept of Satan is not just a figment of imagination. But it does have power, doesn't it?

RG: I see what you mean. If you give this power to Satan, is it still in human beings to do evil or are they the puppets of Satan? But is bad mimesis Satan in the sense of being a separate consciousness that would plan things, or is it just the play of negative mimesis in us? I don't know whether it's external or internal. We can't answer that question. I don't think we can answer it in the mimetic theory. I'm reluctant to answer it because in Christianity, I don't see where it provides me with a basic text to believe in Satan. I think I've found that the reason why I don't want to recognize the Satan as a being is because my whole anthropology stops short; it leads you to the transcendent but doesn't want to postulate it. But I don't have to postulate that Satan is a separate being with a separate consciousness who plans evil. I can't do that because I would lose the power of preservation that my reasoning has. I'm speaking to people who don't believe in God and in Satan, especially those who don't believe in God or Satan. My job is to lead them to drinking the right kind of water, but not to drink it for them. Or to postulate, to force them to acknowledge that it's there, that I'm not making it up or postulating it or using transcendental postulates, postulating something. You have to postulate the existence of the satanic because the mind of man is sufficient to develop all the negative mimetic effects. I believe in God. I certainly see it at the end, but why should you hypothesize

Satan and say it's a being when it may be nothing. To say that there is depth to mimesis that is unfathomable is one thing, but we need not postulate the existence of a being because theology also tells us that Satan has no being. Satan is called the ruler of this world, but Thomas Aquinas said Satan has no being. If he has no being, we cannot say he exists.

SB: What about the Pauline concept of the Principalities and Powers?

RG: I'm enormously interested in the Principalities and Powers, because the Principalities and Powers are what are going to be destroyed by the Passion. Why do the Principalities and Powers look magical in Paul? Because in Paul the Principalities and Powers are the states of this world, like the Roman Empire; once again, they're all based on the collective murder. They are therefore a kind of religious foundation; they are not merely a human creation. There's a religious aspect. It's a bad religion. Paul sees them as entities that must be respected, because Christianity has not yet become a significant part of world culture. You must respect the state; you must do all these things because the Principalities and Powers are still in charge. If we didn't have them, we would have chaos. At the same time, we must not do anything for them. Paul's teaching on the Principalities and Powers shows very clearly that he means the states' founding on religion, on the religion of violence ultimately. So is violence a being? Is violence Satan? I say that's a question and I cannot resolve it. I'm not sure Christianity gives me a guide to answer that question. I may be wrong, I may be wrong on many things, but here I just feel hesitant.

SB: But you don't feel hesitant about affirming the real existence of Jesus?

RG: Absolutely not. We know that Jesus existed. Even most of the most skeptical historical critics believe in the existence of Jesus.

SB: Both Pilate and Caiaphas existed and they converged together to crucify Jesus.

RG: It's completely certain historically: if even unbelievers had to bet, they would bet on the existence of these guys. Pilate and Caiaphas were playing their own game, though; they had their own reasons for getting rid of Jesus.

You don't need any transcendental Satan behind them to account for their actions. You need mimesis of course, but mimesis is a most basic human thing. There's good mimesis, which is called the imitation of Christ. There's bad mimesis, which I see as the imitation of a human model. I see Satan in a way as a symbol of this bad mimesis. But is this the reality? Is there a real model that's called Satan? No, there's always a human model.

SB: Does that mean that the concept of Satan has been demythologized?

RG: That may well be. I mean, undoubtedly the religion of Satan doesn't take you very far these days. Because the next guy in the street is more satanic than whatever you're trying to do.

If you want to call bad mimesis Satan, go right ahead. This means very definitely that all types of evil that are attributed to Satan but are now visible in this world are real. However, it seems to me that if we talk in terms of metaphysics, the postulate would be like saying the gods of archaic religion really existed and still exist, but they are Satan. I don't think so. I'm too historical maybe. I know this gets me in trouble with my church maybe, though I'm not sure what their position is on the question.

CHAPTER 7

Raymund Schwager†

Steven Berry: René, you had a friend named Raymund Schwager. He wrote a book called *Must There Be Scapegoats?: Violence and Redemption in the Bible*. Tell us about your relationship with Father Schwager.[38]

René Girard: Raymund Schwager was the dean of theology at the University of Innsbruck for most of the time I knew him. However, when I first met him, he had not yet gone to Austria; he was in Zurich, his native city. He was the director of a diocesan newspaper, as I recall, but he was a scholar who had studied in France with the Jesuits of Lyon, so he had both German and French theological training. He had read *Violence and the Sacred* in French when it was published in 1972 and almost immediately wrote to me and wanted to meet me. In the summer of 1973, I was teaching in an American summer school for undergraduate and graduate students, in my hometown of Avignon, and Raymund Schwager came to see me.[39] I immediately found that he was thoroughly acquainted with my two books and was thinking along the very same lines as me. As I said earlier, I initially wanted *Violence and the Sacred* to have a Christian part – to have not only my theory of archaic religion, but also the theory of the conception of Christianity that results from that view that is associated with it. Instead of having hidden scapegoats, scapegoats in whom the persecutors believe along with their myth, Christianity reveals the whole thing and proclaims the innocence first of Jesus, who is really objectively the most innocent of all scapegoats, but also in a way of scapegoat victims in general, which is the one thing theology has not seen. Theology has not seen the relationship between Christianity and archaic religion, which is what we've been talking about in this interview. Anthropology has seen it but has seen only the resemblance; the fact that there are scapegoats everywhere or, in other words, collective victims. What it has not seen is that in myth, these victims

are deemed guilty. The myth partakes in the scapegoating and makes us believe in it; the god is guilty before being innocent.

Archaic gods are just as mean as they are kind, according to the times and the means of the moment. In Christianity of course, Jesus himself reveals the truth of the scapegoat. Therefore, the innocence, not only the perfect innocence of Jesus, but also the reality of the innocence of all scapegoats, is revealed at the same time. Other religions are defused, as you say, are losing their power as a result. That's why they die quickly when Christianity invades the territory of an archaic religion. So Raymund Schwager saw that, and we talked about it. I hadn't been able to finish the job in *Violence and the Sacred*, but it was my purpose to do that in my next book, and it was Raymund's purpose at the same time. This purpose, in a way, this possibility, he realized all by himself after reading *Violence and the Sacred*. So the book you just mentioned, *Must There Be Scapegoats?* is really a twin book with *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. What Raymund Schwager says in it is dependent for archaic religion on *Violence and the Sacred*, but it is independent research and it reaches fundamentally the same results as my own book *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. So the two books are complementary, and I would say the objectivity of the research is demonstrated by their coincidence. They were published independently from each other. Schwager hadn’t read my book and I hadn't read his. One shouldn't consider that for the Christian aspect, he was really dependent on me. We had the same idea at the same time, which is a very interesting thing as there was no deviation. Once you realize what archaic religions are, you understand Christianity as the truth of them. It is, in my view, the absolute truth as well, but it is also the truth of archaic religion, the demonstrable truth of archaic religion.

I must say that, on a personal level, Raymund Schwager was totally alien to mimetic desire. There never was any spirit of rivalry between us, any race to the finish. He was totally selfless, perhaps the most selfless man I have ever encountered. The spirit of research was in him, but totally pure and totally dedicated to the truth of Christianity and the enhancement of that truth, to fighting unbelief in our world, which was a very beautiful thing. We've been associated ever since, and everything that came out of these two books really, he has a very important share in it. He was one of the founders

of COV&R and its first president for quite a few years, until his death last year, which was very unfortunate and unexpected because he wasn't old; he wasn't even 65.[40] He died more or less accidentally through some kind of medical examination that went wrong. I think it was a very bad thing for the mimetic theory and a very unfortunate thing, because he was the Dean at Innsbruck. Innsbruck was the only university in the world that was officially participating in mimetic research. They were not hostile to it and didn't feel that it wasn't academic enough. This is still true, because one of the things about Schwager was that he was a very wonderful teacher with very devoted students; in particular, his students included several people who are now teaching at Innsbruck. Wolfgang Palaver is probably the most active in the mimetic field. He wrote what is the best analysis of mimetic theory, published two years ago. It's a book that did a lot for the diffusion of the theory, because in Germany this diffusion was fairly slow inasmuch as the old theological establishment is very powerful there. Germany has been the most theological country in the world since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and even before that. There was a lot of resistance, but things are looking up, and I'm very happy with that. I think it's very important, and I hope that Schwager will be translated into more languages than he has been so far.

SB: How did the German intellectual community, the theologians, receive *Must There Be Scapegoats?*

RG: Academic life in general is a very lonely undertaking. From outside it often looks as if there's a lot of communication among the insiders, but that isn't really true. In the mimetic theory, there are at least 200 people who communicate with each other through COV&R and who felt the need to create this association, precisely because they felt that need. As I mentioned earlier, we have these meetings every year, one year in Europe and the next in America. In Europe we've met in quite a few countries already, in Germany several times, in Austria, in Belgium, another time in Antwerp, in Italy once, in France itself close to Paris one year. We've met more times in America because the first three or four meetings of COV&R were held at Stanford, where COV&R was created. This year we're meeting in Koblenz, Germany, which will be our third meeting in Germany. We have great hopes for that meeting.[41]

SB: Have you been pleased with the development of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion?

RG: I've been very pleased indeed, because quite a bit of research has been done, which has been original, forward-looking and very fascinating. I feel that the resistance to the mimetic theory on the part of academic circles is understandable, because in a way the mimetic theory interrupts or reverses a trend that has been with us since the eighteenth century, since the Enlightenment. This is the trend of secularism, of expelling religious studies from academic life, having less and less of it in many countries, including the ones that have departments of religion like the United States. These departments have been steadily losing power and influence and becoming smaller or non-existent in countries that are really secular, like France. Therefore, religious institutions are separate, and if you want to get a degree, you have to get a state degree, which is the situation I think in Italy. Mimetic theory interrupts that trend. For that reason, it's enormously controversial. It says the relationship between Christianity and archaic religion fundamentally must be dealt with in anthropological terms. If you do this correctly, you'll be able to justify the singularity and truth of the Bible and the Gospels in purely scientific terms, in terms of concrete observation without any injection of religious spirit or belief or faith or anything of the sort.

So this is controversial for lots of reasons. It's controversial even within religious circles, which will reproach us for not really talking about religion but about anthropology, and for good but insufficient reasons. They've learned through the years to distrust anthropology, which 99% of the time is totally anti-religious. They've confused us; they see us as some kind of Trojan horse in disguise that's trying to complete the destruction of religion. Nothing is further from the truth, but this is the way it is; and then you wonder if the theologians themselves are really interested in changing the situation. Academics are deeply conservative and extremely attached to the research trend that they themselves pursue, even and especially if it's very old and obviously irrelevant. They don't want to discuss it. It was one of the great physicists who said, "Don't hope to convert people to new theories, however superior they are, until they die; until the old people die, there will

be no change in academia." This is a bit tough. I don't really believe it, but it's proved to be true to some degree every day. Today we're extremely confident that something is happening right now, because there's no doubt that mimetic theory is gaining ground every year, though maybe not enough yet to become willingly acknowledged by academia. However, this doesn't prevent me from being a university professor myself, and being very grateful to institutions of higher learning.

SB: Fascinating. Raymund Schwager speaks about the uniqueness of the Bible, as you do. Can you talk about the Bible and its unique disclosure from the standpoint of the victim, just very briefly, because then we're going to jump into what Schwager has to say on Second Isaiah and then move into the uniqueness of the Gospel?

RG: The Bible is unique because the Bible breaks away from archaic complicity with the scapegoat mechanism, not as clearly from the beginning as it does later, but it makes a break. So it breaks away from the archaic ability to conceal that mechanism. The fact is that mythology never speaks about scapegoats, it never mention scapegoats. Scapegoating can only be revealed through a modern type of analysis, which reveals what is hidden, what is not seen, the unconscious structure behind the text.

SB: We've discussed the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah previously. The prophet who often speaks of conflicts of opponents, even the fury of the oppressor in Isaiah 50, says, "Morning by morning he wakens, he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught, the Lord has opened my ear. I have not been rebellious, I turn not backward, and I gave my back to the smiters and my cheek to those who pulled out the beard. I hid not my face from shame and spitting, for the Lord God helps me."

RG: This is the beginning of the corrective of the murder of the Suffering Servant, and it's the servant himself who talks about it. Here again, as in the Psalms, the victim is doing the talking, not the victimizers or the persecutors as in mythology, The servant, as a matter of fact, speaks throughout these texts, describing his own suffering. So we could say it's a vastly expanded song that continues until death. In the Psalms, usually the victim is talking before the victim becomes the object of violence, before

the victim is encircled by his lynchers, the people who are about to kill him. In the songs of the Suffering Servant, we go further, so much so that some exegetes feel it was probably a literary model for the Passion, but I don't think it can be. It's not a crucifixion; there's nothing Roman about it. If you look at the details, everything's different; but the spirit is very close, very much the same. It's a revelation *of* scapegoating *by* the scapegoat, which is uniquely biblical. It's a revelation of violence and suffering by the one who's doing the suffering, which you never find in mythology. That's why mythology seems superficially so much more pleasant and amusing and can become a kind of entertainment.

SB: Schwager observes that the Suffering Servant doesn't have a human master but that he's a disciple of God. God is his master.

RG: He's a disciple of God. So, to use the language of the Middle Ages, which wasn't so bad, he's a *figura Christi*, an image of Christ, a prophecy of Christ. He's as close to Christ as you can get in the sense of having the same role, fulfilling the same function of suffering by his persecutors. So this is extremely close to the most important Christian conception, which is precisely that of the scapegoat speaking and revealing the truth about scapegoating.

SB: Isaiah 49, verse 6 says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." The servant has a task to fulfill for all nations. That's what the message is, isn't it? In Isaiah 43, verses 18-19, we read, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up, do you not perceive it?"

RG: This is wonderful because what it talks about here is the change in perspective. God is doing a new thing in relation to the old sacrifices, which are another viewpoint, which didn't discuss or question the illegitimacy of violence. You're pointing to a very important text, which attempts to define (and, we might say, we don't have any modern vocabulary for this) a change of perspective, a change where the subject will tell you what's going on as

the victim, instead of the perspective of the victimizers. So this changes the perspective. The text doesn't quite say this, but when you realize that's what's really happening, you understand that that's what the text is talking about. It's a paradigm shift, and the word 'paradigm' is very apt here. It means the whole perspective of an entire unreality is changed. We shift from the victimizers to the victim.

SB: Isaiah 48:6: "From this time forth, I make you hear new things, things hidden, which you have not known."

RG: Jesus would say "things hidden since the foundation of the world," words that are used in the title of my book, but this is really the same thing. Jesus had heard all these texts, had understood his own mission in the light of these texts, thus fulfilling them. That's why later on Paul will say that the Principalities and Powers were nailed to the cross of Jesus. This really means that they're crucified in the sense that they disappear. They will ultimately disappear because the crucifixion reveals the origin of their power. You have to believe in the perspective of persecution, you have to be awed by the myth in order to perpetuate the myth of the Roman Empire or the purely worldly greatness of a Caesar, who, by the way, was also the sacrificial victim of a collective murder.

As a matter of fact, Shakespeare's great play *Julius Caesar*, rather than putting the collective murder at the end and not showing it, puts it in the middle of his tragedy, in full view, and declares it to be the foundation of the community in many different ways. He says the Romans will come and dip their hands in the blood of Caesar and that will be the foundation. The second foundation of Rome is the death of Caesar. Caesar is the god that every Roman emperor embodies, one after the other. Each time one dies, the next one becomes the new Caesar, and so the empire is a constant repetition of that sacrifice.[42] But this is what Christianity is going to dissolve by exposing its lack of truth and the fact that only Christ is there. So then, I think this always has apocalyptic implications. One of the aspects of the mimetic theory that must be emphasized is that once the violent foundation of the human communities of the Principalities and Powers is revealed, they are visible on the cross with Jesus, and thus lose their cathartic power. We see this in Paul, who saw all this and who talks about

the Principalities and Powers. If the powers of this world had known about the meaning of the crucifixion, they would never have crucified the Lord of Glory.[43] They would have realized that they were destroying themselves by doing so. For the first time, the murder would be out there in the open, visible to all, and would destroy the violent foundation of this world.

SB: Is that what you call the uniqueness of the Gospel?

RG: Yes, most definitely. The uniqueness of the Gospel is right there. You can define it ahead of time with the Suffering Servant, with the prophets and so forth. You can define it again, even more clearly, with Paul's sentences that I've been talking about, but both Testaments are needed. Once you see the meaning of the two Testaments, you can understand what's happening in our world. Today, what are we seeing? We're seeing that the powers of this world are, in a way, destroying themselves through their own excess of power. They're becoming threatened by their own weapons, by their own trickery, becoming more and more wobbly, and are ready to collapse.

They're still operative, though they aren't very efficient, because disorder is increasing in the world. They are all forms of undifferentiation, which are not making for peace. This is the illusion of modernist circles: that if you do away with differences, you create peace. In reality, however, the lack of differentiation is the fighting twins: the less difference there is in the world, the more violence increases. So this is why you can't believe modernism, with its empty promises of peace if we do with less differentiation all around. The Principalities and Powers are going to disappear in due time, but it more than likely will mean total destruction rather than reconstruction on the basis of peace. This is really fascinating in the sense that one or two centuries ago, people could see the approaching unity of the world and really be one in the sense that the same values would prevail all over the world. They saw that, in a way, as the realization of utopia. Now that it's upon us, we're becoming more and more aware that it's not peace at all that is our inheritance, but more war, more undifferentiated war, more undeclared war, more undifferentiation between the victims and the persecutors, the young and the old, the soldiers, the civilians and terrorists.[44]

SB: Speak a little bit more about terrorism.
RG: Between the terrorist and the victim there is no difference. Look, today we have more and more terrorism. Very often we don't even know what the purpose is, because the terrorists have died while committing their acts. We don't know what cause they were fighting for because there are so many of them, and some of them are so crazy. Most of them will never be appeased anyway, since violence breeds not peace but more violence, even though the illusion of the terrorists is that they are bringing about peace too, which has always been the illusion of violence. It's just that this illusion is more transparent today if you examine it in a reasonable manner. In other words, if you're not overwhelmed with anger, you know that rivalry and all these causes for violence, which are really non-existent, are mimetic desires always flowing in the world. So what we have is chaos. There's not much to understand. It's enough to see that this is a continuation which, unfortunately, has been the trend for much of the modern era. The only remedy is the awareness of it, which is in the Bible. There's less openness to the Bible than ever before, therefore the danger is great. Previously, perhaps, there was an incomplete interpretation of the Bible. Many aspects of the refusal of violence are perhaps more intelligible today, but it's still not acceptable to most people. Most people, even Christians, don't take the biblical emphasis on the renunciation of violence found in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels, very seriously.

SB: Many people today would claim that all religions are the same.

RG: Well, they aren't. I base myself on the fact that only prophetic Judaism and Christianity reveal the violent foundation of a community and the innocence of the victims that we multiply more and more.

Take, for example, the parable of The Tenants.[45] This is a fascinating text because the parable of the wine growers really defined the community. God the Father sends messengers to all communities. All these communities reject them as one man: they get together, and the idea of the collective murder is certainly there. The winegrowers cast out these people; the last to be cast out would be Jesus. Jesus, in a way, is like all the previous envoys. He's only different from God's point of view. He's more perfect because not only does he live and die the truth, he explains to us that the stone that the

builders rejected has become the cornerstone. He explains all of culture to us, and we pay no attention to it. So in the parable, Jesus includes the murder. In the end, God will send His Son and they will treat him just like they treated every other envoy. In other words, the same way they treated the prophets, who were all murdered. It doesn't matter if these previous murders are in the Bible or in mythology; the point is that Jesus sums them all up. This is an extremely important parable that's often distrusted – no, rejected, seen as some kind of indictment of humanity, which in a sense it really is.

SB: Let's turn to the Acts of the Apostles. Peter and John have healed a crippled man and are arrested. Peter defends himself by saying, "If we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a cripple, by what means this man has been healed, be it known to you, to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, that this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by the builders but which has become the head of the corner and there is salvation in no one else."[46]

RG: Here, Peter tells us that everything is accomplished and that this prophecy has been realized. Then a little later he will quote Psalm 118, which talks about the unity of all the murderers, like a plot against the real God. I think this is very important. This is very mysterious to most readers, in the sense that it emphasizes the similarity between this collective murder and the collective murder in the parable of The Tenants, the murderous winemakers. So all these things are continuously repeated in language that uses metaphorical images, whereas today we use theoretical language. We can say it in the language of modern anthropology in terms of scapegoating, but is that language better? I'm not sure. So if the language of the Bible doesn't work, doesn't seem to work, which language can work?

Ultimately, Derrida and the deconstructive philosophers will tell you that language is ultimately gratuitous, that it goes its own way, and that contact with reality… well, you don't have to worry about it because it's so insignificant. There's no truth, and to play with texts or interpret texts always refers to other texts, never to any reality. Now the exegesis I try to practice relating to scapegoating is very different from that. There are real

victims behind the text. That's the important thing. There are real victims. You might understand how it happens that they are victimized. It's just not true that no general lesson can be drawn from the parable of the vineyard, because this lesson is always the lesson of the whole Bible; it's a lesson of scapegoating. So we're deliberately putting our fingers in our ears. The assault against language is ultimately an assault against the biblical truth. I'm not incriminating people who practice this type of exegesis. I say, "Forgive them all, Lord; they do not know what they are doing." That they don't know what they are doing means it's unconscious. They are fulfilling the truth, but in an unconscious way, so they aren't as guilty as we might think, because even though we may have a little bit more of the truth in words, that doesn't mean we act in accordance with that truth in our relations with our neighbor. The ultimate test is not the interpretation of texts, of course, but how you behave with your neighbor. That's a real example that you provide in the flesh, that's going to convert people, and you're lucky if your language and your actions coincide. But if your actions don't coincide with your language, your language will have very little influence. People will sense this, even if they don't fully understand it.

SB: The question of the uniqueness of Christianity is raised by this question or this quote, again from Acts 4, this is verse 12: "There is no salvation in anyone other than Jesus." That just makes so many people go wild.

RG: To be a Christian is to believe that Jesus fulfills all prophecies, so this belief is textually justified in the sense that the Gospels tell you this more explicitly. One can also see this throughout the entire New Testament, particularly in the Acts of the Apostles. The beginning of the Acts of the Apostles is very important. This is where we see the importance of Peter, because it's Peter who tells us that the stone that the builders rejected has become the keystone, you see, not in the future, but now that everything is accomplished.

Peter is a fascinating character. In the Gospels, he's often tripping himself up. People who would give a psychological interpretation of Peter's denial miss the boat completely, when they tell you Peter is weak as an individual. I don't think so, because look at Peter. When Jesus is arrested, instead of fleeing with everybody else, he follows. So his heart is in the right place. He

enters the courtyard with everybody else, but when he finds himself in the crowd, he proves his own weakness. The fact is that a man alone among other men will just join the crowd; we all join the crowd. The other disciples don't because they've fled, but Judas joins the crowd. Sometimes I suspect that the emphasis on Judas is not right. All the disciples betray Christ. I think the real difference with Judas is that he doesn't come back, that he loses all hope. He doesn't realize he would be forgiven just like everybody else if he were able to repent like Peter. But Peter's denial is probably one of the greatest scenes in the Gospels, not only in terms of literature. Some people say, "Oh, the Gospels don't have these great stories" like the ones we've been talking about, the judgment of Solomon or the Joseph story. I would say, "Not true, there is Peter's denial," which is, in a way, the most beautiful story. Here, Peter is a figure representative of all humanity, who cannot resist the powerful pull of the crowd.

We cannot resist the mimetic contagion. When you're in a crowd, you become literally possessed by the crowd. The Gospels, from an anthropological viewpoint, show you that the crowd spirit is all-powerful, that only Jesus can conquer it. They show that the crowd or the mob is a real power on earth, since it can conquer even Peter, which is pretty disturbing if you regard this also as a prophecy of what will happen at the last day, which it may well be, because right now that's what we're seeing. When people tell you that Christianity must be modern and follow the spirit of the time, what do they say? "Follow the crowd, follow advertising." That's why I think we must refrain from following that spirit and listening to these biblical voices, however pious they sound.

Peter's denial is absolutely amazing. Peter, when he hears the crowd, hears the voice of a young servant girl. One of the Gospels makes it very clear, and tells us that the servant is young. I wouldn't say Peter is in danger of being sexually seduced, but she's young so she has some appeal. Why is it mentioned that she's young? If she were an old woman, maybe she wouldn't elicit the same response from Peter. Peter suddenly has to show her that he's not part of the gang that's being judged. He denies that he's a friend of Jesus. He must surrender, and she says another thing, which in my view is extremely important. She says, "Anyway, I recognize you because you have that Galilean accent," which is unpopular in Jerusalem. In other words,

you're a kind of foreigner: you're not even one of us, you're a stranger. So what does Peter do? He wants to show he's one of them, so the only way to show you're part of a crowd is to join in the scapegoating. If I have the same enemy you have, then I'm one of you. So really, in a very subtle way, we have indications of what the incentives are for Peter, which are universally human. This is why we mustn't say, "Oh, Peter is a special case." He betrays Jesus because he's a weak individual really. I don't think he's just the representative of all the apostles, since he's the head. He represents all of us. So I think this is a scene that's absolutely priceless.

Not so many centuries ago, everybody automatically believed in God. That didn't mean much. Today, when no one automatically believes in God, it's purely a mob phenomenon. It's not because there are powerful scientific arguments. It's Peter's denial, that's all it is. That Peter's denial is infinitely more powerful tells you, more than any other text, what society is about. Then at the same time, the idea that Peter doesn't know what he's doing is extremely important. In other words, he's denying Jesus for sure, but he's not conscious of what he's really doing. That's why maybe the most beautiful thing is the ending of the story, which shows how nonconscious Peter was. We say words like *nonconscious* don't mean much, but the Gospels know very well how to represent that nonconsciousness very directly, very understandably. When the cock was heard, it reminded Peter of what he had conveniently forgotten, which was that Jesus had predicted the very betrayal that would happen. You can see that Jesus' prediction is not some kind of divine inspiration. Here again, people say, "Well, it's his Father who teaches him that Peter is going to deny him." Yes, it is his Father, but it's also his human knowledge, the fact that because he listens to his Father, he understands human communities infinitely better than all these guys. Jesus knows that Peter is going to find himself in a situation of collective pressure, of mob pressure, in which he will deny Jesus. So all we have to do is say the cock crowed and Peter started to cry. Peter had put it out of his mind, but suddenly the cock crowed and reminded him. There is only one Gospel that narrates this a different way, that's less picturesque, but which is the same thing: the Gospel of Luke. This Gospel has Jesus meet Peter in the courtyard and look at Peter. He only has to look at Peter and Peter understands. It's the same as the cock. So that scene, to me, is one of the greatest in the Gospels. It's only a few little touches; it's a few words.

When you think about the economy of these texts from a literary viewpoint, how much they can tell you in three words, it's just unbelievable.

SB: So Peter is a broken man at that point.

RG: He's a broken man, but that will change. There will come an opportunity of conversion for Peter. It's a conversion very similar to Paul's conversion, because what Peter discovers is exactly the same thing as Paul, but Paul hears from the mouth of Christ, "Why do you persecute me?" In other words, what Peter hears from Jesus is, "You've joined the people who are crucifying me. Even you. You've done it in the most natural, nonconscious way possible without being aware that you are a kind of criminal. You're not, in a way; you are and you are not. You are forgivable, if you understand everything, because you just behave like everybody else." We all do so in one way or another.

SB: In Acts Peter says to the crowd, "Salvation comes from no one but Jesus…"

RG: "…but Jesus." He knows what he's talking about at this point, after his denial.

SB: Earlier in the synoptic Gospels, there's a story about the rivalry between Jesus and Peter, when Jesus has gathered his followers in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus rebukes Peter and calls him "Satan."…

RG: That's at the beginning when Jesus announces that he will be crucified[47]. The disciples are just like we all are, and Peter is an ambitious person; he wants to make good in the world and he thinks Jesus is the way to achieve this. Jesus is the Messiah, a worldly messiah who's going to be the head of the state and everything. So when he hears this, he's shattered because it's the end of his own ambition. That's why he says, "No, this will not happen to you." He's exactly like a political advisor who sees that the leader is losing confidence in his own future. He's trying to restore that confidence because he's part of the enterprise that he sees as a worldly enterprise. So this worldly enterprise is the enterprise of all leaders. It's no more satanic than any political enterprise, royalty or democracy or any such

thing. Some are a little better, some a little worse than others, but the difference is not that great. This is how Peter conceives the Messiah, like everybody around him. This is the only possible conception that could exist at the time. Peter is part of it, and Jesus tells him in no uncertain terms that he's mistaken, that's not the way it is, and it can never be that way. Yet Peter does not understand. In a way, we feel for Peter who is shattered, who falls from his own pedestal because he's one of the associates. He's just like a political advisor in a presidential election who thinks they're going to win. We're all going to win together, and if the main guy loses hope, the guy who's in front, I mean, what then? So he rebukes Jesus, saying, "Think of your responsibilities; you have disciples." He just doesn't get it at all.

CHAPTER 8
Christianity

Steven Berry: In Acts, Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, speaks of the resurrection of Jesus, but he says nothing about his rejection. The speech that Acts attributes to Paul does not contain all Pauline thought. Referring to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, your friend Raymund Schwager says, "Indeed, the epistle shows that he never concealed Jesus' rejection, even from his non-Jewish audience, and even emphasizes clearly that the message of the cross is incomprehensible to the Jews as well as the Greeks." This is what Paul says in I Corinthians 1:18-24: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For Jews demand signs while Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified. A stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

René Girard: Well, the first thing that comes to mind as I listen to you is the translations we have here, which use the old word "stumbling block" for *scandalon*. The Greek here is *scandalon*, which can be translated 'scandal,' stumbling block and so forth. But today it's very interesting; there's a tendency to weaken the translation of this text or to translate *scandalon* by "occasion of sin," for instance, or weaker things that I don't like at all. The stumbling block is what makes you stumble. There's a Hebrew word behind that which means the same thing, the obstacle that you cannot surmount, which makes you fall.[48]

Most people see the crucifixion as a failure, of course, and nothing else. It's the end of the story. Jesus has failed. He's been revealed as the imposter, really; he was the false messiah and now it's all over. Of course, we understand better because we have all the language explained to us about why this had to happen. We have the revelation of the necessary failure of the truth in a human world that is devoted to false truth, to the lie of violence.

In this world, Christ necessarily fails. But the folly is represented, recounted in the Passion. The early Christians read this text right in the light of the other texts of the First Testament, and pretty soon the New Testament put two and two together: what is demanded of us is logic as well. Look, it's the same thing; this is a repetition of what happens to the servant of Yahweh; it's already there in the First Testament. It's been prophesied many times, and now it happens. The stone that the others had rejected has become the keystone. You draw the conclusion of the New Testament writers and everything becomes meaningful. So this is primarily an act of interpretation. Things fit together so well that you can't deny this fitting together. It's both religious and scientific, in my opinion. So you have to stand in awe before this text, which tells you so much and yet which is so misunderstood by our contemporaries.

SB: Paul also says in I Corinthians 2:7-8, "But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory."

RG: There is the idea that God, when he created humanity, knew about everything that would happen and had his own plan. God the Father, of course, had his own plan, and what is happening now is part of that plan. This is precisely what the powers of this world do; the powers of this world are going to behave as they always do when faced with some kind of disturbance. They're going to destroy someone who refuses to play the game according to their rules. So they're going to repeat what they always do. But they don't realize that this time they're repeating what they always do when faced with something like these cameras here, which are going to record things truthfully, in a way that will make it clear to all people who have enough goodwill, enough intelligence, enough divine inspiration, enough grace, if you like, to understand that it all fits together and that the prophesies are accomplished, which is the main theme. It's the same mechanism that's going to destroy Jesus, but the fact that they don't discern that power isn't visible until Jesus shows it. So they haven't foreseen this possibility; they don't know, they don't believe, they don't realize therefore that they've been fooled and that from now on they're doomed. Even if people don't yet understand there will be more and more people who

believe, and the Powers will gradually weaken, lose their force and therefore be replaced by the truth, by Jesus himself, who is Lord of the universe.

SB: In the Gospel according to Mark, there's a prophecy of Jesus concerning the destruction of Jerusalem. It's in all three synoptic Gospels. It's at the beginning of a great discourse of the end of time. This is what Jesus says in Mark 13:7-8: "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place. But the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places. There will famines." The description of calamites at the end of times includes earthquakes and famines, but the tendency again is towards violence. What do you make of this?

RG: This is most important because as the Powers are weakened, they are not able to perform as they used to. They no longer have sacrifice, which makes it possible for humanity to expel its own violence with the help of victims from its own community. So these communities are going to be liberated, the human mind is going to expand more and more, and is not going to be bound by these false barriers. In other words, those who accuse Christianity of being responsible for violence are not right, of course, but indirectly they are saying something which is true: the more the Gospel influences the world, the more it destroys the sacrificial apparatus that up to now has protected human culture. The fact that we Christians are kind of enslaved to the Powers means that we also live in the past, the past that was that expansion of human culture that we've seen since Christianity, which has been both very good and very bad. We must not deny the good of the Gospel nor its effects on the world because, while it's true that there is increasing violence in the world, it's also true there's also more and more peace. We're making make more victims all the time, but at the same time we're saving more victims. So you can't judge our world unconditionally from a negative perspective. There are many aspects that are even praiseworthy. We can say that. Humanity has been liberated for both good and evil. It is true that the creation of man is the creation of a creature that is infinitely more mimetic; the human is both more constructive and destructive than animals, more intelligent and more prone to violence. In other words, more free. Christ is a new phase in human freedom, which is

so total and so great that humanity becomes the victim of its own devices. But some of these devices are not destructive. So we have an extremely complex situation that we can't judge in a kind of single-minded and simple fashion.

SB: Jesus' prophecy about the future as found in the Gospels seems to emphasize the negative aspects of these calamities.

RG: Yes, that's because he goes straight to the end. But he also says in the Gospel of John, "You will do miracles even greater than I." [49] We find something similar in the second ending of Mark.[50] We know this isn't the original ending of Mark, which has been lost, but I think it's very important because it talks about, or at least mentions, aspects of the future that are very different from the present – very innovative, as we would say. The difference is that we believe that all innovations are good, whereas in the past people tended to believe that all innovations were bad.

SB: Both of those perspectives are flawed.

RG: Both of those perspectives are flawed, of course. That's why the situation is very complicated and we can't be prophets ourselves. I feel that great Christian experiences include that element of apocalyptic tension, which is part of the Christian experience. If it isn't there, if everything is sweetness and light or progressive harmony and a world from which all violence is banished because the bad guys have been excluded, yet both sides have their bad guys, I don't trust that. But it's obvious that we can't judge our world; it's too complex. It's both too good and too evil. We're aware of this complexity, but I don't think we can pass a judgment on it. But the great Christian experience includes the element of danger, the fact that the world is on its own in a way, no longer protected by sacrificial barriers that were narrow and stupid but also violent, and which protected man from himself, made man incapable of destroying himself, whereas now we can see this.

SB: Jesus says in Mark 13:12, "Brother will deliver brother to death and father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death." That seems so incongruous with Jesus' teaching, but it's not.

RG: No, it's not, because what it says is that human relations not protected by sacrifice or by a strong legal establishment are going to become worse when they should be best. The closest relations themselves are going to be endangered and become violent. So, of course, the predictions about the Christian future are not single-mindedly rosy; they're the opposite. But at the same time, we shouldn't make them single-mindedly apocalyptic either. Apocalyptic is an unveiling of the truth, no doubt. Jesus goes straight to the end. Of course, he never says when the end is going to be. Some people regard apocalyptic texts as a mistake of Christianity, naïvely harking back to whatever, trying to scare themselves. In reality, these texts are a fundamental consequence of everything we've said about the loss of sacrificial protection, the loss of the Powers, however bad they are. You see this is why, very often, people accuse Christianity. I remember not many years ago, and even still now, Paul was condemned for saying you must respect the Powers[51], you must be good boys, you must respect the law as if it were some kind of a submission to Western imperialism. As long as the law exists, observe it. It will pass away soon enough thanks to Christianity, so be prepared for that. But don't act as though you were Jesus himself, punishing the world and destroying the law, because he also knows the good of the law. It's false to say that Paul is against the law. He says we are moving beyond it. It can't be avoided, even though there are great dangers as well as great rewards.

SB: Speak a little bit more about Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Early in the Gospel narratives of his birth, we hear about him coming as the Prince of Peace. There's a prediction in the Hebrew scripture about one who would come to bring peace. But then Jesus has this incredibly difficult statement that's found in Matthew 10:34-36 and also Luke 12:51ff. He says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have come to bring not peace but a sword, for I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's foes will be those in his own household."

RG: I love to quote that as a direct answer to people because in many places where they are not particularly Christian, if they have meetings about violence today they say religion is responsible for it, especially Christianity.

Christianity has promised us peace yet brought more religious wars than any other religion. So I say, "Has Christianity promised you that? Are you sure you've read the Gospels?" Then I quote this passage. I say, "How can you indict Christianity, when in fact Christianity says the opposite of what you say?" So, on the one hand, you have more of a reason than you think to indict it, but on the other hand you don't even know about that reason and you don't understand what Jesus is talking about. Of course, these sentences of Jesus are another reference to the fact that the Passion undermines the credibility of all sacrifices, all previous systems of religious rules and establishment.

SB: The glorification of God and peace among humans are announced as the great deeds of the newborn child that that will be achieved. All of Jesus' public life stood under this sign. Isn't it the case that he taught us to love each and every fellow human being, even the enemy? In Matthew 5:38-48 and Luke 6:27-36, he blesses the peacemakers.

RG: To be sure. The only way to implement Christianity without the violence and suffering that we see around us is, of course, to observe the rules of the Kingdom of God, which say simply, "No reprisal, turn the other cheek." People don't understand this. They don't understand that it's all down to them. Of course, Jesus is aware that human beings are probably not going to all turn the other cheek, but if they did, no cheek would be slapped. If they really acted according to the rules of the Kingdom of God, there would be peace. It's obvious that any other way is reciprocal; I will act the way other people act toward me. If you do that, it's like the United Nations. That's just diplomacy; it's relationships between modern states. We'll both believe that each other is the aggressor and we're inevitably moving toward the type of violence that has always dominated nations. So we'll do the same thing. So the rule of the Kingdom of God, once again, is not some fancy idea of Jesus; it's the absolute precondition of peace in a world where people have mimetic relations. In a world where people have mimetic relations, where they imitate each other, the slightest sign of hostility will be mimetically amplified to the point where it will result in total conflict. So we have to eliminate all of that, period.

It's a matter of understanding human relations. Since humans aren't going to do that, what they really want is a sacrificial system, which is the old violence. They have a choice between the one and the other. There's no in between in the long run. However, one can say there is an "in-between history" when the Kingdom of God hasn't been implemented in the way that Jesus invited us to implement it: everybody joins in, and peace will triumph immediately. The kingdom will be established without the Passion, without the apocalyptic violence of the end. This is in our hands. That's what Jesus says in his initial preaching and teaching. He's speaking to his people in their present condition; he knows very well it's not going to happen, but at the same time there's nothing simpler than to make it happen. It's simply a matter of being nonviolent, of avoiding all reprisals, bar none.

If we look at history, we can't say it's all bad. It's a mixed bag: people have been Christian enough to make the Christian world, at least some parts of it, infinitely better than any other society that has ever existed on the face of the earth. This is what we brag about as if it was our own human doing, whereas in fact it's the Christian element in our world, in our civilization. Here again, some like to say today that all civilizations are equal, that there's no difference, they're all independent and unrelated to each other, but it's simply not true. I mean, we could repeat the arguments of conservatives who say people vote with their feet: they immigrate into America and Western Europe, not into East Asia, the communist world or the third world. There's absolutely no doubt. Today, our intellectuals condemn Christian missionaries. People should not be Christianized because they lose their picturesque religions and their cultures, but statistics show that as people become Christian, crime goes down, the standard of living goes up, and so on. They aren't interested in improving people's fate. Christianity, even when it's half-implemented, always works to a certain extent and has concrete effects that can't be denied.

Christ recommended the Kingdom of God: no reprisals at all, turn the other cheek. These behaviors, people never really do. But even the in-between time is, from a mere human historical point of view, infinitely superior. So Western civilization – the civilization that has been the least unchristian – has created a world that is incomparable with any other before. But today we have to deny that too. We have to deny that because it would be

bragging; but no, it's not bragging, because it's not about us, it's about the impact of the Gospel on human culture. We have to be concrete and factual and give up political correctness.

SB: So you're saying is that Christianity is a superior religion.

RG: What I'm saying is that Christianity is the only true religion. Christianity, associated with Judaism, which is the root of Christianity, is the only true religion. It's the only religion that reveals the scapegoating nature of all archaic religions. Of course, there are many types of Christianities today, and denominations related to Christianity. But what Christianity, or rather the Gospel, really transforms, changes, for the truth, is archaic religion, and archaic religion is infinitely more important than all the modern religions more or less derived from Christianity that we have around us. Another thing one should talk about is that all modern movements are ultimately derived from Christianity. They are a refusal of Christianity that tries to use the Christian founder against itself. But ultimately they are full of Christian ideas gone mad, as Chesterton said.
SB: Jesus says in the Gospel according to John, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the father except by me."[52]

RG: Christianity affirms that sentence, and if you believe that sentence you have to say it's true. In other words, in order to not believe in the superiority, the absolute superiority of Christianity, you have to amputate the Gospel; you have to remove that sentence because it clearly affirms the absolute superiority of Christianity.

SB: That superiority is looked at anthropologically and says what?

RG: Anthropologists only see the similarities between archaic religion and Christianity. They see the same profile, they see this big crisis of a community that ends with a collective murder where the victim is demonized. What they don't realize is that in one case what we have is scapegoating. We assumed, accepted, and believed sacrificial scapegoating, with its lie; but Christianity is the revelation of that lie. Which means it's true. In other words, if you follow the mimetic theory, it's undoubtedly an apologetic system that concludes that Christianity is the only true religion.

SB: So "the way, the truth and the life", what does that mean from a mimetic point of view?

RG: The way, the truth and the life, all three are Christ himself, I would say. The way of Christ is to follow his life, his actions and, as much as you can, to accept the role of the scapegoat, because you'll be victimized if you're perfect. There's a very interesting thing that should be pointed out more often: the idea that the perfect man who will be persecuted is not merely a Christian idea, it's also in Plato. In the *Republic* there's a character who says what would happen to a perfect man if he behaved perfectly with everybody and there wasn't an ounce of violence in him. I think it's Socrates himself who answers that such a man would surely be persecuted. Of course, Socrates is a pre-Christian prophetic actor because he represents the platonic view of something approaching perfection. While this is not Christian perfection, nevertheless Socrates is persecuted. There's an idea of perfection that implies scapegoating in Plato that is pretty amazing. Some people say the Jewish Bible may have had an influence on Plato. That's not impossible: we know that there were so many alien influences on Plato from Egypt that there could also have been an influence from the Bible, perhaps the servant of Yahweh, the perfect man who is persecuted. Anyway, it's very definitely a Christian idea; yet there's no doubt it's there in the *Republic*. It's a fascinating thing.

SB: Do you have anything else that you'd like to say about "I am the way, the truth and the life"?

RG: Yes, on Jesus as the life, because the life is the resurrection. He is the truth we've been talking about, nothing but that. The way, of course, is to imitate God, which is to imitate Christ, because if you act like Christ you're not going to be happier, you're going to be persecuted. You'll be happier in a higher sense, but you're going to be persecuted; but therefore you're going toward the truth. Thus, ultimately, you're going toward life because you're going toward resurrection. So in a way, in these three words, the entire Christian trajectory of Christ himself and of his real disciples is summed up: the way, the truth and the life. The life should be last because it's about resurrection.

SB: Jesus speaks about Abraham in the Gospel of John as a model of faith and obedience. What do you think is his focus?

RG: When you think of Abraham, what do you think about? You think about the scene that is called the sacrifice of Isaac, but which is precisely not a sacrifice of Isaac. It's a story about the great shift to animal victims, which is human progress. The real human progress inside archaic religion was exactly that, so the movement of the Bible is always towards less violence.

SB: In John 8, speaking to his opponents, Jesus says, "If God were your father, you would love me, for I proceed and came forth from God. I came not of my own accord but he sent me."[53] Since Jesus came from God, the religious authorities would love him if they too had God as their father. But now they want to kill him. So Jesus draws from this the consequence, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning."

RG: Jesus is saying that they belong to the mimetic desire, which is a murderer from the beginning. In other words, this is another reference to the collective murder. It might seem obscure, but if we that say Satan equals mimetic desire, what is alluded to here is the whole mimetic rigmarole ending with wrongful criminal death. We're moving towards the crucifixion. When some people hear these words, they say the Gospels are anti-Semitic, which is ridiculous. Some say the Gospels are anti-Judaic. No: what they say, they say of everyone, no exceptions. This is how all people are, and no human being really accepted Christ after that. So these words are worthy of inclusion in the Gospel precisely because they apply to all human beings, not just to the Jews alone. These words are becoming truer every day. They are probably going to become completely true, and one can predict that Christianity will really be wiped out from the surface of the earth to fulfill the prophecies. Or so one could interpret them. Isn't this what the end of time really means?

One of the amazing things about Christianity is that it is the only religion that predicts its own failure. Christianity predicts its own failure, therefore

it's immunized. People who convert today don't shy away from Christianity simply to say, "Look, Christianity is a power that's going down." That doesn't scare them. It's in the works. It's been predicted from the beginning. It means just the opposite: that the urgency to convert is greater than ever because little time is left. Which religion other than Christianity predicts its own demise?

SB: What about people who find Christianity irrelevant?

RG: It's true. We might say that in the sense that few really follow it. But this irrelevancy is in a world that is deprived of sacrifice. So whatever happens is not directly caused by faith; it's caused by lack of faith. The fact that Christianity is really irrelevant is really the sign that it's moving straight towards the end predicted by Jesus: will there be any faith when the Son of Man comes back?[54] So the instinct of the populace, I mean I shouldn't say such unfavorable words, but of most simple people, that we're going through apocalyptic times is in my view well-founded in a way.

SB: What about those who are speaking about the apocalypse in relationship to the rapture, the belief that Christians will be taken up to heaven prior to any great apocalyptic tribulation?

RG: That's really very bad precisely because these people say, "I'm one of the elect and I'm going to watch the rest of them burn in the fire." So this is about as unchristian as can be. No. If you're a Christian, you see yourself in the soup with everybody else, because you see your own sin. You don't see yourself as a saint because there are very few such people.

SB: In Jesus' farewell discourse in the Gospel of John, he concludes his remarks about the hatred of the world by referring specifically to Psalm 69:4: "It is to fulfill the word that is written in their law, 'they hated me without a cause.'"

RG: "They hated me without a cause," as a prophetic word, is a fascinating phrase because it's the definition of a scapegoat. The scapegoat is the one we all hate without a cause – not only Jesus but also other scapegoats. This is literally a definition of the scapegoat. In other words, you can see what

the prophecy means. The prophecy is tied to the main definition of what happens to Jesus. “But they hated me without a cause.” If we say this of Jesus, once again we realize that Jesus is a blameless victim, which is precisely the opposite of myth. Mythology makes us feel good because it always says that whomever we commit violence against as a people is guilty, just as we do in our wars and in our political fights. The other guy is always the culprit responsible for the violence. It works at all levels.

Above all we are going to have reciprocal fighting that will be endless, because we’ll probably be evenly matched. The more alike we are with our enemies, and usually we are evenly matched, the more we will fight forever. We persecute ourselves pretty efficiently in the sense that we make our enemies so similar to us that they have equal strength, until we mutually wipe each other out.

SB: This might seem pretty bleak if it were not for the fact that, as you mentioned earlier, there is new life in Christ. There has been much discussion among Girardians about the concept of good mimesis. Where do you come down in this conversation?

RG: Good mimesis is defined in the Gospels as not only imitation of Christ but also imitation of those who imitate Christ. That’s the reason I think Paul may say very directly, and without any hesitation, “Imitate me.”[55] It’s not that he’s trying to replace Christ, but he’s pretty sure he’s a good enough imitator of Christ that he can be an intermediary model. The people he’s talking to see him; they don’t see Jesus. But only the Christian faith has good mimesis because Christianity provides us with a model that imitates God best of all, and most perfectly, Jesus. As a matter of fact, the whole idea of the Trinity is based on this, on the fact that the Son imitates the Father so perfectly that he “is” the father. But the Father imitates the Son and shares everything with him. This process of good imitation, of course, in the Trinity is itself not an abstract principle but a person, another imitator who is called the Holy Spirit. So I go back to the definition of the Holy Spirit. The definition of the Holy Spirit as the *Paraclete* in John, refers to the lawyer for the defense which is the opposite of Satan.[56] In other words, good imitation is always moving against the violence, the bad

imitation that ends in murder and is moving towards the Father, the Trinity, becoming a part of the Trinity, joining the Trinity in a way.

To share in the Trinitarian life is to share in the defense of victims who are condemned unjustly. Because the tremendous thing about the Trinity, which people don't understand – they say it's a mad doctrine – is that in us human beings, if we understand what a human being is, then we understand that relationship is everything. Take the idea that everyone is an island unto himself or herself. This stoic individualism is sterile: it's solitude and it's ineffective. So only the doctrine of the Trinity includes relationship with a God who is still one in the sense that the God of the Bible is one. If we didn't have relationship inside God, sharing in the Trinitarian life, that would mean that God would be deprived of our greatest experience just as if we didn't have Jesus' Passion, if God had not suffered violence and suffering and death the way humans have. Simone Weil said this: God could envy man for having a great spiritual experience that God cannot have because he's alone and has no relationship. But God has relationship in God's self since God is Trinity.

I'm not saying God is alone. Of course not. God doesn't have to envy, and that's not what Simone Weil is saying. What she's saying is a defense of the idea of the Trinity. Don't think the idea of the Trinity is a foolish idea. If you discard it, you're left with the kind of reified, solidified monotheism that becomes really what some people accuse monotheism of being: monolithic. Christian monotheism is not monolithic because it has relationship inside itself. Now, we cannot understand this, humanly speaking. We cannot work it out. Our intelligence just cannot solve this problem, cannot really conceive of it. But the fact that Christianity postulates it means that it answers all possible objections.

So the Gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God."[57] The Son is creator and the Son is the *Paraclete*. That's why you have to separate them and you have to unify them constantly as you start working with these ideas. So the doctrine of the Trinity is not the foolish idea of some people who met in some kind of ecumenical council in the fourth century and didn't know what they were doing and were simply

plotting for this or that outcome. The idea of the Trinity is so extremely powerful that we can barely comprehend it.

SB: The Gospels talk a lot about Jesus casting out demons and healing the sick. What do you think is going on with those statements about exorcism and healing that Jesus is to perform in terms of good mimesis?

RG: I immediately think of the text where some of the witnesses say that if you expel demons, you expel them by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. That means sacrificial expulsions. The expulsion of demons by other demons is real. Here I have a bit of a disagreement with Raymund Schwager, who thinks there's no demonic expulsion of demons. But I think there is, and it's the archaic expulsion through the killing of a victim: the scapegoat expulsion. Of course, we find traces of this in the Bible. We expel a goat. Why do we expel a goat? Because it's very easy to feel antipathy toward a male goat, as we talked about previously. So there's a demonic aspect to the scapegoat ritual that belongs to the past, but which will disappear. So Jesus opposes these criticisms of what he's doing by saying that the demonic world – ultimately the world of sacrifice – must destroy itself because if Satan expels Satan, ultimately he is against himself. There's something negative about him, something destructive that means that he's exhausting himself. I think that judging from these façades, we can assume that the sacrificial world, even if there had not been any Christian revelation to interrupt it, would eventually have lost its efficacy and turned to naught. In other words, the type of destruction that we can expect if we don't follow Jesus would have happened without Jesus, once sacrifices had exhausted their possibilities. So Jesus cannot be accused of being directly responsible for the end of sacrifices. They lose their power. You have to have new expulsions to restore that power, a new sacrificial system; but all sacrificial systems become routine and eventually collapse. So Satan expels himself, but he cannot do so for all eternity.

CHAPTER 9

The Victory of the Cross

Steven Berry: In the Beatitudes Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the peacemakers, and so on."[58] Those were not the typical beatitudes of people prior to Jesus. Most of God's perceived blessing went to the people who were rich and powerful and in positions of authority.

René Girard: Even blessed are the persecuted, which is pretty amazing. So this saying is entirely paradoxical, like the Gospels themselves, because it means ultimately blessed are the victims of society; blessed are the scapegoats because everything's going to be turned around. So this is enormously paradoxical in terms of normal life, of life as the happy life, the good life as we understand it, which is the life in which you are not only rich and prosperous but you are a darling of the community and a favorite of your own people in a position of prestige and power. It's absolutely the opposite. Recently I was surprised to read something that claimed to be a commentary on the Beatitudes that did not seem to even notice this paradox and the infinitely disconcerting character that there is throughout the Beatitudes. Confronted by the Beatitudes, we're all like Peter who says, "Oh, Lord, this will not happen to you." So what Jesus says is that ultimately it's better to go through the Passion with him than to be successful in the world. If everything we've been saying before is true, it flows directly from this reversal of our values that we have in Christianity. It's another expression of it. It's an expression that is poetical in a sense. You have a series of statements that are harmonious. It seems to be the same way in the original Greek.

This is the heart of the Gospels at the beginning of the Sermon of the Mount. Matthew once more expresses the essence of Christianity from the point of the view of the individual who's trying to follow Jesus, who

experiences all these things that are supposed to be bad from a worldly point of view, but in Jesus the point of view of the world is being overturned, being denied. Ultimately, it's part of the logic of what Jesus is saying which is, I repeat, infinitely paradoxical. Even today, Christians cannot accept it. For instance, Christians think it's absolutely essential to turn the poor into rich. The Gospel never said that. I myself feel that the Gospels have a social dimension, and I'm not against that; but when you start thinking about this transversal element in terms of the Gospels, the Gospels never said to make the poor rich. Jesus said the poor have more of a chance to be my followers than anyone else. The Gospel of Luke insists so much on the danger of wealth. I mean, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to gain eternal life.

The disciples, of course, are so flabbergasted that they say, "Oh, Lord, who is going to be saved, if even the rich people aren't saved?" This paradox is constantly there. But in the Beatitudes, what's striking is the form: they are both stern injunctions and poetical statements. I would say this is one of the most mysterious aspects of the Gospel because Jesus becomes lyrical in a way, which is very unusual with him – lyrical enough to express a kind of condensation of the entire Gospel paradox.

SB: One of the statements he makes is so difficult to unpack. He's preaching to them and says, "Resist not evil. Do not resist one who is evil, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."[59]

RG: These are precepts. If you resist evil, you yourself are in evil. You imitate. Resistance and agreement ultimately amount to the same thing. This is one of the paradoxes of Satan where I'd say, "The more you resist him, the more he plays dead." The satanic loves that kind of resistance. That resistance is what creates devils, what turns people into twins in the mimetic sense. So the key to this is readily accessible: If you resist evil, you do what evil invites you to do.

Do not try to fight evil, to combat evil, to do evil to evil, because that's what it amounts to. Of course, to understand the statement fully is to see that Jesus is talking about our perception of evil. It's our way of looking at it

that makes it more evil than what we are doing ourselves. Maybe this isn't good, but maybe it's no more evil than our response. To resist evil is to introduce more violence into the world. In order to evacuate evil, you want to forcefully expel evil. So even if evil is a little bit evil, do not turn even evil into a scapegoat.

SB: Luke writes, "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. From him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your coat as well."[60] That too is a summation of the Gospel, isn't it?

RG: Sure. All these statements are very close to one another. It's always the paradox of violent resistance being part of evil, because we regard the other as the aggressor, but the other regards us as the aggressor and he sees himself as the resistor. So ultimately, it's the same on all sides; you're preparing for more battles of twins, more tragedies.

SB: The New Testament letters contain the same demand. Paul writes in the letter to the Romans, and I paraphrase, "Pay no one evil for evil. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing so, you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."[61]

RG: This idea that you're going to put your enemy to shame seems to go a little further than Jesus in the Gospels. You're going to once again compel your enemy to imitate you, put him to shame for his own violence. Therefore, he will imitate you in a positive way. He does it with the formula that to heat coals means some kind of pressure that is not hostile, but in a way forces the enemy into a position where he's dialectically forced to acknowledge the wrongness of his position.

So I must say this. You must remember that if you turn positive mimesis into bad mimesis, and it's very easy to do this, you create the possibility of rivalry all over again. You follow your inclination to do that because it's so easy to find things you don't like about your counterpart, your opposite

speaking to you, but the other way around is very, very difficult. To regain someone's trust when you've lost it is almost impossible.

SB: Paul calls Jesus the second Adam or the new Adam.[62] Can you explain why he's called the new Adam?

RG: Jesus, as the second Adam, is an attempt to remake humanity without original sin. If original sin is what we talked about earlier in our conversation, this imitation of the serpent by Eve, of Eve by Adam, and the results of all this, it's clear that the imitation of the good mimesis of a good model who imitates God the right way is the presence of Christ on this earth. Another reason for the juxtaposition of Adam and Christ is that it gives a model of good mimesis that wasn't there before when God was completely separated from humanity. So the Gospels speak only indirectly about good imitation, but of course bad imitation, which is its counterpart, is there, present at every stage of the game. We just use a slightly different vocabulary when we speak in terms of mimetic desire. Jesus provides us with a model not of individualism, but of imitation of God. So does Paul, and so do all genuine Christians. We have a chain of imitation that is the same thing as the idea of sainthood; the Catholic Church offers the saints as good models to people, and the more good models you have, the better. They must be close to you rather than being like Don Quixote, to send you on the road without any guarantee that you're not going to be beaten black and blue by the people with whom you would interfere without knowing what their real situation is. You give good models and these good models teach you about reality, make you more realistic instead of sending you into a kind of pure mad imagination.

SB: If bad mimesis is rivalry and violence, good mimesis is forgiveness and reconciliation. Five generations removed from Adam and Eve, there is Lamech who promises that if someone comes after him, he's going to seek seventy times seven-fold vengeance.[63] But now, in the Gospel, we have that totally reversed. Jesus says that we must forgive seventy times seven.[64]

RG: Yes. This is the only way to avoid the consequences of a mimetic crisis and scapegoating. In other words, the purpose of Jesus is always to achieve

the Kingdom of God without any violence, without the Passion. But humanity refused. So it would have to be done through a repetition of the whole process, but a repetition that would reveal the process instead of accomplishing it through the unconscious action of human beings.

SB: Jesus called upon his disciples to follow him. Modern theology makes a distinction between imitation and following.

RG: I think that's because they share the dislike of imitation that characterizes the modern world. They don't want to say that Christians are like sheep naïvely imitating a model. I think this is very shallow. It's a fear that should be disregarded because following and imitating really mean the same thing. Just like you can imitate blindly and you can imitate intelligently, you can follow blindly and follow intelligently because you understand that the one who's guiding you is going in the right direction. I'm aware of that distinction of the theologians. But the theologians are always worried about the world and the type of thinking that is in fashion in the world they happen to inhabit. So right now, they want to be deconstructionists and all sorts of things that don't comport with Christianity at all. They are afraid to be Christians. They think that if they please the customer, if they disguise Christianity behind something else, if they can turn it into some kind of challenge to the establishment and that sort of thing, they'll be successful. But you know the most powerful challenge to the establishment is the Christian one, precisely because it is no challenge at all. It's a revelation of aspects that cannot last, endure, or be of any use to humanity.

SB: What was the most significant Christian challenge to the establishment in your lifetime?

RG: I think the last Pope[65] really challenged Christians. He challenged them in various ways, first because of his ecumenical beliefs, his efforts to reconcile the Church to the Jews without doing so in a way that denies Christianity, which many people are doing now by saying Christians are really more guilty than others, or telling us now that the Jews didn't kill Jesus, the Romans did. But that's to deny the reality of the facts. I would say from a theological viewpoint, to deny that the Jews were part of the

Passion is, in a way, to deprive them of their role as the elect. Ultimately nothing is more significant than the Passion from a theological point of view. You cannot deprive, from a Christian point of view, the Jews of their role in the Passion. But to do so is a great advantage from the standpoint of the media today. This is a meaningless position. It would deprive them of their election from a Christian viewpoint because you might say that they are the priests in the Passion. If you view the Passion without prejudice, you cannot dispense with any of the participants and forget them and say they didn't play that role, or replace them by another people who would therefore become more elect. All elect people in the Bible are failures in the sense that they aren't up to the demands that are placed on them. So in my view, what we should talk about is the failure of the Christians that duplicates the failures of Judaism, which Paul talks about it in Romans.[66] After talking about Jewish failure, he says, "If now, by some chance, the Christians fail too, act in the same way, suddenly God, who did not hesitate to cut off Israel, the native branch, will not hesitate with them." Well, we are in that situation. The Christians have failed. The whole world has failed, not just the Jews and not just the Christians. So instead of saying the Jews are not guilty for the death of Christ, we should say the Christians are infinitely guiltier than the Jews and that the Holocaust was like killing millions of Christs.

This is the way to respond to anti-Semitism: not to say the Jews did not kill Christ, which is just so much nonsense. The whole world killed Christ, no doubt; but it was there in Jerusalem in 30 C.E. that the Passion occurred. It did not happen in Oslo or in St. Petersburg or in Paris; it happened in Jerusalem when the Jews were still there. We live in a nonsensical world to say otherwise.

SB: It seems that the whole world is in the grip of evil, as though we are all possessed, like the demoniac of Gerasa. There's an interchange in that story. Jesus asks the possessed person who he is and the demoniac replies, "I am legion, for there are so many of us."[67]

RG: This is a very striking thing because it's one of the few allusions to the Romans in the Gospels. They seem to show that the Roman soldiers were quite a few in Palestine at the time because Palestine had not yet been

pacified. With regard to the demoniac of Gerasa, there are lots of interesting details if you start comparing the different versions. In Matthew, there are two possessed, instead of one as in the other two Gospels. I think we can understand why. They're an example of what is worst in mimetic possession – i.e., imitation. Therefore doubles embody the problem even better than one single individual. Then there's another detail: the painful fact that he was taking sharp stones and cutting himself with them. I really think he's a man who's afraid of being stoned. So he enacts his own stoning in a kind of theater that he creates for himself. He's highly neurotic. He's aware that the community is against him. He can't do without it, yet at the same time, he suffers greatly from it. But these stones are very striking. Then the most striking thing of course is the refusal of the community.

When the people show up, they notice that this man is just safe and sound. He's acting normally, dressed normally, talking to Jesus, and they're terrified. This shows that, in a way, the reason the demoniac was not tied sufficiently so he could always be safely imprisoned, was so he could free himself from time to time, so that the whole thing is a show that the people are playing for themselves. It's part of their neurotic life. They need some of these people as fools in the medieval sense who perform the craziness of which they themselves are free, and which they want to scapegoat of course, but which they need, in a way, for the balance of the community. It's a kind of sacrificial system where you don't really kill people, but you perpetuate their sickness because you allow him to have these escapades from time to time, in which he goes on a rampage and they all watch with a certain pleasurable awe. Sort of like we do with our modern celebrities when they fall. The reason they don't want Jesus is that they feel they'd have to face their own problems without all these mad contraptions. Ultimately, it's a description of a neurotic community. Not a single man or not two men, but the whole community is really performing its own play. They aren't performing it directly; they let the madman perform it for them from time to time. It's a kind of permanent theater that they have.

The villagers don't want to be deprived of their theater. That's the reason they wanted Jesus to go. But I feel even more important than the pigs is the show that they are giving to themselves; they don't want to be deprived of that. They know that what Jesus is bringing would do away with that

nonsense. Deep down inside, they're aware that they're playing a game with their possessed, and they don't want to be deprived of it. The text is extremely complex and beautiful.

SB: The man lives among the tombs, they say. Jesus talks about the tombs of the fathers elsewhere.[68] He talks about people who are in positions of authority as being whitewashed tombs.

RG: They're full of dead men's bones. In other words, they're full of decaying stuff inside. They look pretty good on the outside because we're talking about stone tombs, *sarcophagi*, which you still find on roads in Italy, or in southern France. These tombs were whitewashed, painted from time to time, so that the road would look good. Jesus uses this as a metaphor of putting on a good face, even though inside is quite horrid. The story of the Gerasa demon is one such example. In a way, it's a satire. Of course, the story takes place in a pagan context. Jesus is no longer in the Jewish world when he goes to that town. That's why they can send Jesus back. Say, maybe Judea is ready for your stuff, but we aren't. We're still pagans and we want to remain pagans.

SB: You've written on the horrible miracle of Apollonius of Tyana.[69] Our discussion of pagan responses to possessed people reminds me of this. That story seems to be the exact opposite of what is occurring in the expulsion of demons from the Gerasene demoniac.

RG: Apollonius of Tyana was some kind of a guru in the second century who had a reputation for great wisdom, and he was perceived as a rival of Christ. He was frequently opposed to Christ by the people in favor of him. I think the miracle we're talking about is introduced as proof that Apollonius was greater than Christ because he could cure a whole city with just one single miracle. That city is Ephesus. Ephesus was the greatest Greek city outside of continental Greece. It's on the coast of Turkey today. As the story goes, there was a plague in Ephesus, so they called Apollonius who was some other place at a great distance, and he came miraculously, more or less instantaneously. Then he decided to call the whole town up to the theater. It's interesting that the theater would be used, not the temple, because the

theater could accommodate the community. These Greek theaters were huge.

He brings the whole male community there and then he sees a beggar in some corner who looks very bad: he's described in fairly precise terms. He seems to be blind or he plays the blind man. He pretends to be blind so as to get money. While he's begging, Apollonius directs the Ephesians – all the Ephesians – to rush him and stone him. At first, they refuse, which is very interesting. They refuse for reasons that, I think, are given to us in the text about the adulterous woman in the Gospel of John.[70] It's very difficult to cast the first stone when you have a man who is helpless like that, a poor old beggar.

Why is the first stone the hardest to cast? Because no stone before has been cast and you have no one to imitate. It's really a mimetic phenomenon. Jesus tries to prevent the first stone from being cast. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone against the adulterous woman." Jesus is talking to people for whom it was a great sin for a woman to make love to a man outside of marriage, but for a man, it was nothing. Therefore, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." He's trying to prevent the stoning because they are all with sin, and he succeeds. They aren't going to stone the woman. Apollonius is trying to do the opposite, to get them to cast the first stone. The Ephesians protest. They say they have no reason to cast stones against the man. He's done nothing to them. But then finally Apollonius succeeds. As soon as the first stone is cast, a deluge of stones follows and very soon the man is reduced to a pulp. In *I See Satan Fall as Lightning* I juxtapose the two texts, which are very different. But at the same time, from a technical point of view, from the point of view of stoning, which is a mimetic action, the first stone is a very interesting thing. The first stone comes up for the same reason in both texts, with a very different solution in each case, because the good prophet Jesus tries to prevent that stone from being cast, and he succeeds, but the bad prophet, Apollonius, is trying to get it cast. Sadly, he also succeeds. The beggar will be killed.

When the beggar realizes these people surround him, when he realizes he's going to be stoned, suddenly he opens his eyes and looks for a way out. We

can see he's not blind at all. He can see. When they have that eye contact, it's very important in the decision to cast the first stone. They have some kind of eye encounter and think he has the look of a demon. In the story of the adulterous woman, the text tells us that when Jesus says, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," he turns his eyes toward the ground. He was writing in the sand before and he starts writing again. Some people say silly things about that. They say that he's writing down the name of those who will be sent to hell. But in fact, he's trying to avoid eye contact. He knows that if he makes eye contact with his interlocutors, rivalry is going to be born in that mutual glance, and it will be impossible to avoid a violent resolution. The woman will be stoned. It's not like Jesus to avoid eye contact, but in this case, he does so to save the woman, and it works. They all leave one by one, beginning with the elder.

SB: But the whole murderous idea of Apollonius was predicated on the fact that the plague came as a result of this beggar.

RG: That's right, but that's to think mythically, which is false. The whole idea of Apollonius was really predicated on the fact that the plague was already a mimetic phenomenon, and that killing a victim would do wonders. This story is descriptive of a sacrificial world even though it's set in the second century after Christ and the text was written a century after that. But we're in a sacrificial world where killing a victim might solve a plague, just as in the case of Oedipus. We expel Oedipus and the plague is over. The plague is a permanent; a society that is in crisis half of the time is said to be plagued.

In the sixteenth century, there was a great surgeon in France who was probably the first one to distinguish the mythical plague – the plague of human relations, people fighting together – from the medical plague. Before that, they didn't have such scientific knowledge. So when they talk about a plague before the sixteenth century, they don't distinguish a social from a medical plague. We know that in the case of the Black Death, there was a real plague; but very often, it's difficult to distinguish the social plague from the medical plague because if you have the medical plague, the social plague will soon be there, and vice versa. That's why they're so difficult to distinguish unless you have scientific means. In the sixteenth century, this

surgeon said when the medical epidemic shows up, very quickly you have another plague, which is a social plague. Everybody's suspicious of everybody else. But he distinguishes them by saying they are very much alike and can be confused. So we have both types of plague. In the case of Apollonius, Ephesus has a plague; we have a plague in the case of Oedipus, and in both instances the medicine is always the same. The medicine is to expel a victim. If we all agree, we'll be reconciled. So there's a chance that the plague will be gone, at least the social plague. In the case of Jesus, there's no plague. There's only the adulterous woman. They want to stone the adulterous woman.

SB: She symbolizes a plague though, doesn't she?

RG: According to the commentators, at that time the stoning of adulterous women had become a polemical question in Judaism. Some people were against it; some people were for it. So, in asking Jesus, "What should we do with her?" they wanted to put him on the spot because he had to answer, "I'm against stoning women," or "I'm for it." In either case, he was going to make enemies. It's like the question about taxes.[71] But he didn't decide between options. He just talked to the people about stoning the woman and asked them to decide. He tried to influence and succeeded in influencing them against stoning.

SB: I want to ask you a question about the victory of the cross. You have a chapter in your book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* in which you speak about the uniqueness of the Gospels. The Gospel bears no resemblance to myths. You say that "Christian dogma has always inspired distrust in Judaism and Islam, and nowadays many Christians are beginning to share that attitude. The cross appears too strange to them, too outdated to be taken seriously. How could one believe that a young Jew killed nearly two thousand years ago by a type of torture long since abolished, how could that person be the incarnation of the almighty God? Christianity has been losing ground for centuries in the Western world, a decline that continues to accelerate. Now, not only isolated individuals abandon the Church, but entire churches led by their clergy switch their allegiance and go on over to the camp of pluralism. This pluralism is a relativism that claims it is 'more Christian' than the adherence to dogma because it is 'kinder' and more 'tolerant' toward non-Christian religions."

RG: People are in favor of a democracy of religions. All religions are equal, but some are more equal than others. All religions are equal? I don't think so, because first I divide between archaic religions and Jewish-Christian monotheism. Here again, I would go to my theme. Either you accept the scapegoat process and think inside of it, or you remain in the world of myth. You take sacred violence seriously and share the idea that the victim is guilty because everybody believes it. How could it be wrong? We can't all be wrong, since we all agree together. Or you don't believe in it and affirm the Christian perspective.

We live in a world of pluralism, where all religions are equal; so they all have a voice. We proceed by Robert's Rules of Order. If we have a majority against Christianity, Christianity must be wrong. I don't believe that. I believe Christianity today is the scapegoat for absolutely fundamental reasons, because it says something about humanity that people don't want to believe, which sounds impossible. It destroys our pride. It says our cultures feed on scapegoats, so no wonder Christianity is the hated religion. For instance, if you look at the media, have you ever seen the media attack religions other than Christianity? No! They never do. As a matter of fact, concerning Islam, the media consistently sides with Islam. But Christianity has everybody against it, just as Jesus had. So it should be that way.

SB: The Apostle Paul said, "The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God; for it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will satisfy."[72]

RG: Scandal to the Jews, madness to the Greeks. Today, this is truer than ever. It's being fulfilled. I think to be a real Christian is to see that all this has to happen. This wisdom of the cross is against philosophy and against thinking. People will tell you that when Paul went to Athens, he encountered the philosophers; however, in fact, he encountered a little group of people on the main square of Athens, where people were there talking infinitely, as intellectuals always do. Of course, he didn't convince them. He didn't convince them any more than he does today. He turned to the pagans, but not to the great intellectuals. Rather, he went to the common

people, the people who had common sense, the people who knew nothing about "deconstruction."

I feel like saying one more thing about Paul. Do you know what I'm most sensitive to when I read Acts? Acts is just a series of … I don't want to be disrespectful, certainly not, but I say it's a little bit like Don Quixote, you know? Paul is conquering the entire world, and eventually he'll succeed. He'll conquer the entire world and empower it in a few centuries. But he's beaten black and blue everywhere he goes. He's stoned here, he's jailed there, and so forth. At the same time, Acts gives you a feeling of joy, of happiness that's unbelievable, and everywhere you have these references to friends of Paul. You can see it was a world in which friendliness was incredibly powerful, with solidarity between these people. So when you see these references to all these little people who were followers of Paul, it gives you a feeling of more unity than ever. It's the book of the Christians in a way enjoying themselves enormously. It's a happy book.

SB: Why did you title your book *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*?

RG: This is a quote from Jesus speaking to his disciples after he sent them on a trip known for spreading the good word.[73] He sees Satan falling like lightning. But why is Satan falling? I think he's fallen to earth, where's he still going to do quite a bit of damage. But nevertheless, he's no longer in heaven. In other words, there are no longer false gods of mimetic desire that run the show. This is the end of it thanks to the revelation of Christ on the cross. At the same time, if Satan falls to earth he's going to be pretty destructive for a while. You can see in this a symbol of the revelation itself, the Christian revelation and its effect on the world, which is always ambiguous because the action of the revelation on the sacrificial powers, the Powers and Principalities. However, the revelation is ultimately good, since it teaches us the truth. But it also means a lot of agitation, many of the difficult things that Jesus predicts his action will cause, like more violence in the world due to the breakdown of what I call the lack of sacrificial protection, even among people who are very close to each other.

SB: So *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* has to do with Satan's fall. You say it has to do with change. Does that change have to do with the depiction of

God as a God of wrath and how that change has come about?

RG: Yes, of course it does, because the God of wrath is always somewhat connected with the scapegoat system in which the god is both good and bad. This is no longer true of the biblical God. When the biblical God is wrathful, he's wrathful for good reasons; we might even say just reasons. However, still there is a change, it seems, in the nature of God from the oldest part of the First Testament to the prophetic God of the great prophets and then to Christ himself. You see, this "new" God is no longer punitive; it's people who punish themselves. It's people who are going to threaten the survival of the world. It's people who refuse to turn the other cheek and maintain peace who get into all sorts of trouble.

SB: Thankfully that is not all there is. The Gospel of John says, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."[74]

RG: That's right. It's God's intention to save the world. This can only mean to have a world that would observe the law of Jesus, which is the law of nonviolence, of the turning the other cheek by refusing all types of reprisals. This is the Gospel, of course. But we must mention the fact that since it's not followed, other things happen which are mentioned in the Gospels. These include the Passion and the subsequent history of the world; that is, the consequences mentioned by Jesus, who says that there will be an increase in evil. He came not to bring peace, ultimately, but to wage war against the darkness that holds humanity in the superstitious way of sacred violence. These things are not hard to reconcile in the sense that the second one is due to the way human beings react to the revelation of Jesus.

SB: It appears you're somewhat of an apologist for Christianity. Some of your critics, like Lucien Scubla, have difficulty with this.[75] Yet you insist that Christianity has brought something positive to the anthropological table and human history. In your opinion, what has Christianity contributed in terms of the good?

RG: In my opinion, most of us would see the present world as a combination of bad and good. It's unquestionably more tolerant, more

humane, more productive, and more beneficent in every way than it used to be. We know this is an evolution that has taken place throughout the history of the Western world. We have to remember that the world that was Christianized was not the Roman Empire only, but was also a bunch of Germanic tribes that had not benefited from the influence of the ones that had stabilized the Roman world. They were slowly civilized. There were centuries when the only real powers weren't purely military ambition or attempts to dominate your neighbor. The only authorities that represented something beyond that were the church authorities, the bishops. There's a reason why the bishops became worldly rulers. They were the only ones left with any authority. That's why monasticism developed as such a huge institution. During the early Middle Ages, deforestation had devastated much of Western Europe. People don't realize that. It's really the enormous monastic movement – in particular the Benedictine movement – that started to cut down the forest. This deforestation brought about a slow return to civilization after centuries of chaos due to the invasion of Germanic tribes, but also the Vikings, who were going up the rivers, burning everything on the way. This went on for quite .a few centuries.

When we find remnants of a church of that period between the fifth century – the destruction of the Roman Empire – and the tenth century, the churches are extremely small. So we have reason to believe that the population had drastically decreased because of the chaos of those times. There was a real renewal of Western civilization, but it took centuries between the Christianity of the late Roman Empire and the Christianity that conquered again at the turn of the first millennium C.E. Everybody was scared then because they gave the year 1,000 C.E. a special apocalyptic significance. Many people felt that it was the end of the world. But we have some chroniclers who tell us what happened immediately after. The earth covered itself with a white mantle of churches. This is about the year one thousand. This is a beginning of the great Middle Ages. The Middle Ages, far from being a dark era, was the real beginning of Western civilization.

SB: You write in your book, "The most effective power of transformation is not revolutionary violence, but the modern concern for victims."

RG: In our world, of course. The modern concern for victims goes back pretty far. For instance, some people say that the hospital was invented by this and that, but I really think the most plausible thesis is that the first hospitals were developed in France; for instance, in Paris. Paris was limited to the island of the city that is a few square blocks really. Next to the cathedral, Notre Dame, there is what they call the *Hôtel-Dieu*. It is a hospital.

Does this mean archaic tribes didn't try to take care of their sick? Yes, but they tried to take care only of their own sick, the people of their own tribes. The birth of the hospital was really when no questions were asked. Sick people were treated regardless of their origin. Even modern economics is mixed up in there, because it means people could move around and be taken care of in places that weren't their own. It means that great buildings inside the cathedrals could be built because they needed a lot of labor in the same spot. So we see that in the eleventh and twelfth century, aspects of modern civilization are being born. The thirteenth century was the most developed period of medieval philosophy of the Christianity of that period. It was kind of a civilization of its own. There were kings like Louis IX in France, who was later canonized, whose main concern was for laity to be good Christians. There were not too many, but there were a few. So, I mean, Louis IX voluntarily returned to the king of England a province that he felt it would be better to give to the English so as to have a good relationship with them, which was highly unusual. He believed in the crusade, no doubt. Today, we don't agree with that. Their conception of society was unquestionably less nonviolent than ours, but it was Christian in the sense that it was already unbelievably original and more humane in comparison with everything that had preceded it.

CHAPTER 10
Nietzsche and The World Today

Steven Berry: You conclude your last chapter of *I See Satan* by speaking about the twofold Nietzschean heritage. Many people who don't study philosophy don't know who Nietzsche is. Could you speak about the impact of Nietzsche in relation to the Christian ethos?

Rene Girard: Nietzsche was born at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century. He died in 1900, but went mad ten years before, in 1889, I think.[76] He wasn't very old. Nietzsche was the son of a German pastor, a Protestant minister in Eastern Germany. He was a rebel against the church, against the tradition of his family, and became a great writer. Nietzsche was unquestionably a great writer. For a while, he taught in Basel, Switzerland. He was a university professor. He then gave it up and lived on a very small income on his own while writing books all the time. Ultimately he became clinically insane in the last years of his life. He developed a philosophy that has been popular because it's the most radical rebellion against humanistic values, Christian or secular, which resulted from the Enlightenment. In his books, Nietzsche preaches a radical individualism, which is extremely critical of all the thinking of the time, in a very powerful way, because he sees a big picture. As a great writer, he sees much of the false pretense of his time, of its hypocrisy that is not very different from our own. For a long time, he was totally ignored and rejected. He pretended not to pay any attention to this, but I don't believe that's true. I believe he was made extremely bitter by it, especially against the German public.

Nietzsche had one big encounter in his life, which was with Richard Wagner. Wagner was a great conservative reactionary and a musician. He was a revolutionary at the time of the 1848 revolt, which was a kind of revival of the French revolution of 1789, but which influenced Germany greatly. Nietzsche had tremendous admiration for Wagner. Wagner was very interested in music. Nietzsche thought himself a good musician, but he

wasn't. So Wagner became his idol. Wagner was beginning to be extremely successful. It was the time when he was composing his greatest opera, and Nietzsche was there. It's a long story, but Nietzsche was inspired by Wagner and under his influence. But finally he rebelled against this furiously. I really think the relationship between Wagner and Nietzsche was unbelievably mimetic. Wagner was unusually successful, because he managed to get the King of Bavaria to build the great theater of Bayreuth for him, which is still playing mostly Wagner; they hold a Wagner festival there every year. Although the cult of Wagner is not what it was, Wagner at the end of the nineteenth century was unbelievably successful. His greatest work was the first great performance of the Ring, which was kind of an apotheosis of German culture and pagan culture.[77]

Wagner was divided all his life between paganism and Christianity, writing one opera that had a Christian emphasis, then one that had a pagan emphasis. Some had both in the same opera. He was a very elegant man, very brilliant, a pleasure seeker in many ways, with many mistresses. Wagner was a friend of many important people, yet he was a man divided against himself. When the Bayreuth festival was held, the German emperor attended. It was beginning of the greatest modern period of Germany, the one that didn't last after the victory of Prussia. The emperor of Germany was really the ex-king of Prussia who, as a moralist, had destroyed the Austrian empire, which was a different kettle of fish. He had just defeated the French in the war of 1870. So Germany was the great thing, a superpower of its time. When the first Bayreuth festival was held, the German emperor attended and paid homage to Wagner. By that time, Nietzsche had become infuriated with Wagner. I think insanely jealous would be the best way to describe it.

It was this jealousy that fueled the idea of Zarathustra. The Nietzschean idea of a hero is a superman; his word is *Ubermensch*, which means superman. In order to embody his ideas, he wrote a book titled *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*). The name comes from Zoroaster, who was the founder of a religion in Persia. But Zarathustra as a superman is an idea of Nietzsche's. It's a gospel of a superman that's against Christianity. You could say that modernism began with Descartes, who invented modern individualism with his *Cogito Ergo Sum* philosophy.[78]

Instead of starting from God, or from the world perception, Descartes started from the subject and was the founder of individualism and modern philosophy. But Nietzsche would be the supreme expression of this, in the sense that he was no longer satisfied with *Cogito Ergo Sum*; he must be superman. I must be more than human. I must be the supreme individualist; I must crush everybody with my individualism. So Zarathustra is a kind of mystical statement. It's a great mystical statement of the super-individualism of the modern world.

At the same time, you just have to look at Nietzsche. He was the very opposite of a superman. Many people would say that my view is anti-Nietzsche. However, as a little bit of an impotent man, including sexually, he always needed his friends to introduce him to the girls he was in love with; he couldn't stand on his own two feet. The superman idea, I feel, is a little like his relationship with Wagner. Wagner crushed him in an incredible way. Maybe we shouldn't say this, but Wagner had decided that the problem with Nietzsche was that there was no woman in his life. There were many women in Wagner's life. Wagner was more of a superman, if there ever was one, than Nietzsche would ever be. But Wagner not only infuriated Nietzsche with his tremendous success, but also wanted to cure Nietzsche. He felt there was a problem with Nietzsche; it was solitude, his problem was masturbation, he needed to have a mistress. So this is fascinating because it was a total humiliation for Nietzsche, who, after praising Wagner to high heaven, started to insult him in writing. Nietzsche hated Wagner. Nietzsche was just mad with rage. That's when he wrote *Ecce Homo*[79] where he says, "I'm the greatest this, I'm the greatest that" and so on. He broke down in complete insanity, total manic depression. One minute he was a god; the next he was down in the dumps. He very quickly became clinically insane after that.

SB: Why is it that so much of the Western world follows this madman?

RG: We don't have anything else to follow. He's just more radical in the sense of hyper-individualism, in the sense of rebelling against all the values of Western civilization more than anyone else. It's true that he has genius; he's a man of genius. Some of his anthropological analyses are very important. Nietzsche's a mixed bag.

I think Nietzsche was a highly mimetic man. He always fell in love with his friends' girlfriends. But he was always defeated. You see, so far from being the superman, if you look at his life, he was a complete failure. In the end, he couldn't even get his books printed for free. He had to give some of his own money. The paradox is that a few years after his death, he became the greatest modern philosopher. So, this is a fascinating thing. I compare him with Don Quixote. He's a super Don Quixote, the super mimetic hero. There's an episode in *Don Quixote*, when Don Quixote encounters a chariot which is really a cage, in which there are two lions. They're taking lions from Morocco to the King of Spain, as the king had a menagerie. So when Don Quixote sees these lions, he stops the driver and says, "Open the cage. I want to fight these lions." So the driver says, "You don't want to do that. They are just dreadful lions. They'll eat you! Don't do that. They belong to the King of Spain anyway. You'll go to jail or something." Nothing doing! Finally, Don Quixote forces him to open the lions' cage. One of the two lions keeps sleeping, doesn't even pay attention to anything. The other one comes out, yawns, turns around and goes to sleep, too. So, the driver says, "Well, you're victorious. They didn't want to fight you; so you can declare yourself the winner." Don Quixote is still sane enough to accept that outcome. I'd say if it had been Nietzsche, he would have forced the man to goad the lions to make them mad so they would fight him. You see what I mean. He wouldn't have been satisfied with that kind of victory. Nietzsche was a super Don Quixote. But he lost all his battles, except the one with posterity, at least until now.

Another thing we should consider about Nietzsche is his conception of Christianity, because in a way, I would say one of the paradoxes Nietzsche saw was the uniqueness of Christianity in a way that no theologian did. Much of what Nietzsche wrote was just short essays. Sometimes, he would write ten versions of the same thing, with a few word changes. In one of them, he says, "Dionysus and Christ, same death." That is, same collective death, victims of the same crowd, which is very powerful. This, of course, is what anthropologists also see. But, instead of believing with the anthropologists that the meaning was the same, Nietzsche was the one who really discovered the truth, because he said the difference was that Dionysus was for sacrifice, for killing the victim, whereas Jesus was for the victim.

So I'd say one of the ironies of modern thinking is that the truth I'm talking about was first discovered by Nietzsche. He's the one man who wanted to discover it least when he should have recognized the superiority of Christianity. He should have recognized that the innocence of the victim was the truth. But, instead, he came up with another answer: that Christianity was the fruit of a bunch of slaves of low-class people. He had a kind of para-Marxist interpretation of Christianity, that Christianity was for the victims because the victims in the Roman Empire were cast-offs, useless garbage who had to be crucified. Nietzsche said Christianity was the religion of the slaves and paganism the religion of the masters. So he managed to land back on his feet. But at the same time, this is where he became pretty much of a Nazi. He said the pagans were right to kill all those no-good people and to defend an aristocracy of the spirit of physical and spiritual strength, an aristocracy of power.

What he didn't see was that this was the opposite of what he thought. It's Dionysus that represents the religion of the crowd. Christianity is the religion of a small elite. The first disciples were in no way a social elite. Nietzsche had to give an interpretation of Christianity as a religion of the slaves, which has become popular for a while. According to Nietzsche, the bad aspects of democracy come from Christianity because ultimately Nietzsche was the first fascist, even though many people are scandalized when I say that. But it's true. Christianity was the true religion of the slaves, of the common man, whereas paganism was trying to build beautiful individuals, heroes, renaissance figures. But a modern democracy is Christian. That's what Nietzsche thinks.

SB: But look at modern democracy in America. It's trying to build these superhuman beings. It's all predicated on success. Everything you turn around to involves success and more success.

RG: Except that one must say a word for Nietzsche here: his idea was more universal. It was not merely making money – what we have now, it's mostly about making money, though the Neo-Cons in America today could be considered Nietzschean. There's a danger of a resurgence of this deadly kind of thinking, especially here in America. Neo-Cons could quote

Nietzsche. If they were more cultivated, they would quote Nietzsche. But they quote the founding fathers instead.

They're a little bit protected by American democracy from becoming fully Nietzschean, which would be worse. But they're probably going to do so, because there are young intellectuals among the Neo-Cons who are really cultivated people. Perhaps they can't do it now, because it would remind people too much of some periods of history we just we recently went through. But, in a way, they should go to Nietzsche. They prefer the beautiful individual, the renaissance and modern Zarathustra, the Nietzschean hero.

SB: I want to talk about competition and rivalry. There are so many books written about business success year after year that have become bestsellers. It seems as though, from the very beginning of our lives, all we're taught is to be better than the next person. So we have to be prettier, or a better student, or a better musician or athlete, or whatever. So from the time we're little children, all there is all this upward mobility. That seems to antithetical to Christian faith.

RG: It is. I think it's a complicated problem at the same time. In the archaic world, you have no competition at all because it's too dangerous; it might immediately run into a mimetic crisis and cause the destruction of the community. Now the fact that we can have competition is not all bad; it's because of competition that our society is infinitely more – I hate the word – "advanced." Nevertheless, sometimes this is necessary. It's more advanced in a technical way. One has more means, or there is more food. We make discoveries in many things that are useful, in medicine and that sort of thing.

Our society exists due to the fact that, in a way, competition can be unleashed up to a point in areas where it happens to produce good effects. But, of course, you're right in saying that in our world we're dealing with competition for competition's sake. Very often we see competition that's not productive of anything really innovative or creative: purely cut-throat competition to secure the financial resources of our rivals. So I agree with you. But at the same time, we must be aware of the superiority of our

world, the fact that we have many things that have become essential to civilized life, and in particular to the free exercise of our intellectual and spiritual powers. This is the result of that freeing of competition that archaic communities couldn't experience because it would immediately have turned into a battle to the death. But in our world, businesspeople and scholars don't kill each other with weapons. They just kill each other with heart attacks and ulcers. They invent many bad things, but they may also invent some good things as well. Competition isn't always bad, because human activity isn't all bad. I don't think Christianity is ultimately hostile to economic development. If we say that we get into trouble, because it's going to become too radical in a negative way. But at the same time, we go to excess because it's the nature of humanity to go to excess; it's especially the nature of competition.

Competition is infinite. Competition is a rise to extremes. As von Clausewitz says, "for war."[80] In competition, someone is always losing. So the one who is losing will not give up competition. The one who is winning would like to end it. This is true especially among nations. Now we have peace and we enjoy the fruit of what we've won, but it doesn't happen that way. It continues on and on; therefore, it's going to ultimately have bad results. It will be unleashed one hundred percent. But there are great periods in societies where things are still moderately civil; there are not too many, but I don't want to talk against civilization. So we have to make adjustments every time we talk. We can't be Manichean, as they say, asserting that everything is black and white. It's not true. Modern development has very good aspects that must be acknowledged. But these good aspects may well be behind us. We may be in a period of decadence that's very different from the decadence of the Roman Empire in the sense that it's decadence through excess activity. We know that in the Roman Empire economic production had a tendency to spiral downward. Things had a tendency towards immobility.

Whereas today, with us, it's just irrational activity and downright loss of control over the ambitions of individuals and groups that produces not only industrial development, but wars. Today, humanity is incapable of moderation because it's lost all rules. It's moving towards the absolute unknown. It doesn't even know what the results of future scientific

discoveries will be. We know that right now, according to most scientists, we're exceeding the possibilities that are necessary for the preservation of the natural environment. The earth is being endangered. We don't seem to be able to react because individual ambition, competition and national ambitions are so powerful. For instance, the Chinese aren't going to stop having more cars until they have exactly the same percentage that we have in this country or in Europe, which is sheer madness. It was sheer madness with us, but it was obvious that it was going to be imitated. Now, it's being imitated not only in China, but also in India. Apparently expansion is beginning to run wild in India, because they're mastering technology and discovering new things as well. In other words, the Western world is expanding to the whole planet. Is that possible? We know it isn't. Or we think it isn't. Maybe we think that it isn't because we want to keep it to ourselves. Who knows? That's what the Chinese and the Indians certainly think.

The very idea of catching up is a metaphor of a race in the stadium, something we've been talking about in Paul. There's a competitive aspect to Christianity. Paul tells us, "I'm in the race." Christianity unleashes the power of humanity. There's no doubt about it. It seeks to unleash it within a religious framework. It succeeded for a while. We make fun of the asceticism of the Middle Ages today, but the competition of asceticism was much less dangerous than the competition for more billions and now trillions of dollars. Now we're aware that we are getting beyond all possibilities. That it's no longer the Western spirit thing. It's a world spirit because we've been imitated. It would seem that the only aspects of Christianity the world has accepted are its competitive byproducts. I remember when I was reading Malraux, the French writer of the 1930s, he said the way Christianity was reaching China was through Communism. [81] But deep down, it's a form of Christianity. Not being a Christian, it didn't make any difference to him if it was real Christianity or not. But he was aware of something that's true; it's our spirit, which is very different from the competitive spirit, which is certainly linked to Christianity.

SB: It would seem that we have turned competition into its own value; it's a race against its own will, its own competitive nature.

RG: You're absolutely right. Today we have crazy illnesses like anorexia and bulimia that are fascinating.[82] How to remain thin while eating as much as you want. Bulimia has solved the problem; you vomit at the end of the meal. It's a technique. It's pretty amazing; it's a corruption of so many things at the same time. It would have been unthinkable a few hundred years ago. But now we interpret medieval asceticism as a form of anorexia from a certain point of view, which is not correct. There's a relationship between the two, in the sense that anorexia is the end of the road when you've lost all religious inspiration and your own body has become your God. So one has to remain beautiful, which is more important than even sensuous pleasure. But this wasn't true in the Middle Ages. We tend to project our own vices on the past, which is, I think, very bad. We have no more measure in anything. If we reject our society, which we have good reasons to do, we might reject the good aspects together with the bad ones. Because undoubtedly, there are good aspects. Sure, people are hungry and it's due to the viciousness of our social and political systems. It would be so easy to feed them in terms of practicality. If we don't do so, it's because we don't want to do so. But the fact that we produce so many of the good things in life is not bad in itself. It's extremely good.

The real problem lies in us: in our lack of measure, our lack of wisdom. We have to talk about something that Judaism and Christianity talk about because there's the book of the Bible, the Wisdom of Solomon. Elements of wisdom are also present in the Gospel. Wisdom is our sole measure, the golden mean. Some of that is present in the Gospel. Even though at the same time, it's that extremely unique spiritual adventure that we've defined. But here I must say, let me be a little bit polemical. Protestantism has raised the bar. Catholicism is much more tolerant of the average man remaining the average man. Look at it with the eyes of the Protestant spirit of Dostoevsky in the famous text about the return of Christ, The Grand Inquisitor.[83] The Grand Inquisitor is a satire on Catholicism that is seen as an institution bent upon destroying the real ideals of humanity and enslaving man. But it cannot be read from the radical point of view of 9/11 or from the point of radical Protestantism, which is the inability to see that from a Catholic point of view the apocalypse will to come soon enough. You don't have to hurry it up. It will come any way. You're not going to tame the forces. Catholics don't believe that. They aren't trying to.

However, if the movement is a little slow, we may be able to enjoy some of the good things in life in between that may be good, even for our souls. So there's an element of humanism that doesn't detract or suppress radical Christianity, it doesn't want to hurry it up. I suppose I'm coming up with a defense of what I see as Catholic humanism. I'm talking about something else, in a way. I'm talking about some relaxation of tension, which is a form of charity at the same time toward your fellow man. I'm talking about an acceptance of good fellowship, joy, and relaxation, which are sometimes a bit missing in modern forms of Christianity, democracy and so forth, which are never relaxing. There's a real distinction between Protestantism from Catholicism and Orthodoxy in that sense. Protestantism is driven for the good, but this drive can become excessive; it's very much part of the modern ethos. I'm just sketching the fact that various forms of Christianity have developed certain types of ethos that are very different from each other. The Orthodox mentality, even if people are no longer practicing it, was visible, even in people like Gorbachev, just as the Catholic mentality was visible in John Paul II and the Protestant mentality was visible in former President George Bush. But this isn't basic to our discourse.

SB: Henri Nouwen says that our sense of self is dependent on the way we compare ourselves with others and upon the differences we can identify. So he says that it is in our differences and distinctions that we are recognized, honored, rejected or despised.

RG: In a way he is indirectly talking about mimetic desire there, comparing ourselves with others. This comparison is static and purely descriptive and connected with purpose in life, with motion, with direction, with what I want to be. Do I want to be like him or do I want to be different from him? So ultimately I'd say the mimetic desire explanation is very close to this. There's an increasing amount of mimetic desire all the time in the world, more and more comparison. That's what I call the difference between external and internal mediation. Mediation is another word for mimetic desire. In external mediation, the model is so far from you, maybe he's in a book, or maybe he's part of culture that you can't compete with. My first book was an effort to show that the more modern these great novels are, the more they show you internal mediation. Internal mediation is when people

are so close to each other that they're inevitably driven into competition; it's a world of democracy. Don Quixote can't compete with his knights-errant. They've never existed; they only exist in a book. Madame Bovary's heart is in Paris, where she never goes. She's a provincial. But after that everything takes place in Paris; it becomes internal mediation. It's like being a politician instead of looking at politics on the outside and discussing it with your friends.

You inevitably become part of it. So you're more and more driven. As for mediated desire, the more democratic the world becomes, the less concrete difference there is between people. Everybody wants to be a billionaire today, and quite a few achieve it. We have a friend at Stanford who made 50 million dollars, in spite of not having a cent to start with.[84] So everything is possible, but these examples are attractive, they're a mimetic model, which means everybody wants to become a millionaire or marry a princess. This is the world of internal mediation, and it's inevitably a world of jealousy and envy. Envy in our world is the real unconscious, the real taboo. You mustn't talk about envy. I think one of the reasons we talk so much about sex, and pretend that we're very daring when we talk about sex, is that deep down we're avoiding talking about competition, and therefore about envy.

Sex is the false taboo that everybody brags about breaking because they don't talk about their real motivation, which is ambition, envy of a billionaire or the husband of the most beautiful girl; but usually sex in our world is not the object of a sufficient taboo to be the force that it seems to be. I think it's ceasing to be that, because all romantic love is disappearing.

SB: Now, wouldn't Freud take issue with that?

RG: He would take issue with that. Freud appeared at the time when the family was beginning to disintegrate, so the main target was the father. He continuously took aim at the father and made the father the big scapegoat of culture really, but today you can't do that. You know very well that peers are more important than parents. Even to children of an early age. That's why I don't believe in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis in a way lives on values that are already outdated. I have a friend, a good friend, who's seeing

a psychiatrist but he's also a psychoanalyst. He said today people use formulas that are unbelievable. Previously in psychoanalytic theory the Oedipus complex was what you had to fight; now psychiatrists talk about injecting more Oedipus into people. They don't have enough meaning; they don't have enough backbone. My friend, because we have great discussions, says he thinks it can be a death of mimetic desire, which is the worst thing of all. I mean, not a death through conquering mimetic desire, but just no more mimetic desire. I mean a world where there are so many cheap pleasures and no more taboos.

SB: This sounds like Huxley's *Brave New World*.

RG: *Brave New World*; there's some of that in our world too. There's a division between the new elite, who are still driven by competition, and the majority of the people, who tend to be content with cheap satisfactions that are accessible even to people who have very little money. At the same time, this situation doesn't apply to most of the world. Most of the world lives just on the edge of famine; perhaps two-thirds of the world. This is really only the situation in America, Western Europe and some other isolated places like Japan; and apparently China is joining this club. Maybe India. The two of them together makes pretty close to half of the world.

SB: Does competition stand in the way of our being compassionate?

RG: I think so, yes. I think the answer can definitely be yes. The time for change is now, before it gets too late.

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"I hold that truth is not an empty word, or a 'mere' effect as people say nowadays… I have always believed that if I managed to communicate what some of my reading meant to me, the conclusions I was forced to reach would force themselves on other people as well."

-*Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*

"The time has come for us to forgive one another. If we wait any longer there will not be time enough."

-Conclusion to *The Scapegoat*

"Compassion for the victim is the deeper meaning of Christianity. We will always be mimetic, but we do not have to engage automatically in mimetic rivalries. We do not have to accuse our neighbor; we can learn to forgive instead."

-Conclusion to *Evolution and Conversion*

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[1] A Theater of Envy (London: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[2] See also Jeremiah Alberg, *A Reinterpretation of Rousseau: A Religious System* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) with a Foreword by René Girard.

[3] Cf. René Girard, *Sacrifice* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

[4] *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

[5] John 11:50

[6] Psalm 118:22, Matthew 21:42 and par.

[7] Oedipus the King, line 365.

[8] On this see Andrew McKenna, *Violence and Difference* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

[9] COV&R was formed at Stanford in 1990. Jim Williams has written a history of the first twenty years, *Girardians: The Colloquium on Violence and Religion 1990-2010* (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2011).

[10] Ambroise-Marie Carré, July 25, 1908 – January 15, 2004.

[11] September 27, 1627 – April 12, 1704.

[12] See Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 43-80; Paul Duff and Joseph Hallman, "Murder in the Garden? The Envy of the Gods in Genesis 2 and 3," *Contagion* Volume 3 (Spring) 1996; Sandor Goodhart, "The End of Sacrifice: Reading Rene Girard and the Hebrew Bible," *Contagion* Volume 14 (Spring) 2007; Raymund Schwager, *Banished From Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation* (Gloucester: Gracewing, 2006); Michael Hardin, *The Jesus Driven Life* (Lancaster: JDL Press, 2010), 170ff.

[13] Raymund Schwager, *Banished from Eden*; Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*.

[14] What Jewish tradition refers to as the *yetzer ha-ra*.

[15] I John 3:11-15.

[16] On Cain and Abel and the significance of the founding murder see James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence & the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 33ff.

[17] A philological history of the term "scapegoat" in English can be found in David Dawson, *Flesh Becomes Word*: *A Lexicography of the Scapegoat* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012).

[18] This analogy can also be found in Jon Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 20.

[19] Genesis 22: 1-19.

[20] Claude Lévi-Strauss died in 2009.

[21] I Kings 3:16-28

[22] In classical Greek dramatic performance, the god would be lowered in a basket to come and save the day, hence the term *deus ex machina* (God out of a "machine").

[23] *Must There Be Scapegoats?* (New York: Harper, 1987).

[24] In Isaiah 40-53 scholars recognize four songs of the servant, viz., Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12.

[25] Matthew 26:46, Mark 15:34.

[26] Exodus 20.

[27] *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001).

[28] *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*.

[29] Matthew 5:23-24

[30] Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

[31] Girard is arguing that the term "sacrifice" can be used in two ways, 1) as sacrifice of the other and 2) as self-sacrifice. This reflects the difference in Greek between *thuo* and its cognates and *fero* and its cognates.

[32] *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. See Girard's re-appraisal of the concept of sacrifice in *Evolution and Conversion* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 214ff.

[33] I Corinthians 3:1-2

[34] Luke 22:19ff and par.

[35] Psalm 118:22

[36] Genesis 50:20

[37] I John 2:2

[38] The correspondence between Fr. Schwager and Rene Girard was published in German last year. It awaits an official English translation. It is essential reading for understanding their relationship and what they learned from each other.

[39] According to Nikolaus Wandinger (in a private e-mail), Girard's memory is not correct at this point. Schwager initiated a conversation by letter: "The first letter was written by Schwager on March 18, 1974; they did not have any contact before that, they only met in 1975." I leave this conundrum for a critical biographer to solve.

[40] That should be 69 years old, as Schwager was born November, 11, 1935, and died on February, 27 2004.

[41] In addition to its annual meeting, COV&R also meets as an affiliate group as part of the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting. Various Girard Societies have formed, some sponsored by Imitatio (www.imitatio.org), in Holland, Australia and Japan. COV&R publishes an annual journal, *Contagion*, under the auspices of the Michigan State University Press.

[42] Girard's discussion of this play, as well as many other works of Shakespeare, can be found in *A Theater of Envy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[43] I Corinthians 2:8

[44] Girard elaborates on the theme of the apocalyptic violence of our time in *Battling to the End* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

[45] Matthew 21:33-46

[46] Acts 4:9-12

[47] Mark 8:27-37 and par. This is the first time in the Gospels Jesus speaks of the "suffering" of the "Son of Man" (or the human being).

[48] "The Septuagint uses *scandalizo/lon* to translate two Hebrew verb stems and their cognate nouns, *yksh* and *kshl*. The latter term means 'to slip, to stumble,' e.g., Isaiah 8:15 *mkshl* is thus 'an obstacle on the path over which one falls,' Lev. 19:14, Isa. 57.14; figuratively Isa. 8:14, Jer. 6:21, Ezek. 3:20." G. Stahlin in TDNT Vol 7, 339ff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

[49] John 14:12

[50] Mark 16:9-20. Girard is referring to the textual witnesses that include verses 9-20, which most textual critics believe was not part of the original document but was added later. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament* (United Bible Societies),1971, 122-128.

[51] Girard is most likely referring here to Romans 13:1-7.

[52] John 14:6

[53] The interviewer has conflated texts from John 5 and 8.

[54] Luke 18:8

[55] Philippians 3:17

[56] John 14:16-17, 25, 15:26, 16:7-15.

[57] John 1:1

[58] Matthew 5:3-12

[59] Matthew 5:39

[60] Luke 6:27-29

[61] Romans 12: 17-21

[62] Romans 5:12-21, I Corinthians 15:22, 45.

[63] Genesis 4: 23-24

[64] Matthew 18:21-22

[65] John Paul II

[66] Romans 9-11

[67] Mark 5:1-20

[68] Matthew 23:27-31

[69] *I See Satan Fall as Lightning*, 49-61.

[70] John 7:53-8:11. This is a narrative that is not part of the original gospel but was added to the textual tradition later.

[71] Matthew 22:15-22

[72] I Corinthians 1:18-19

[73] Luke 10:18

[74] John 3:17

[75] Lucien Scubla, "The Christianity of René Girard and the Nature of Religion" in Paul Dumochel ed., *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).

[76] October 15, 1844 – August 25, 1900. On January 3, 1889 Nietzsche suffered a breakdown in the city of Turin.

[77] *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

[78] "I think, therefore I am."

[79] "Behold the Man." This is a quote from Pontius Pilate at the trial of Jesus in John 19:5, quoting the text of the Latin Vulgate.

[80] See Rene Girard, *Battling to the End* for a discussion of this problem.

[81] Andre Malraux, d. 1976.

[82] Rene Girard, *Anorexia and Mimetic Desire* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

[83] From *The Brothers Karamazov*.

[84] Peter Thiel, entrepreneur, scholar and philanthropist who is the co-founder of Imitatio, Inc.