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## René Girard: Mimesis and Violence Study Guide

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# RENÉ GIRARD: MIMESIS AND VIOLENCE

## STUDY GUIDE, 2003

### Steven Alan Samson

- A. IMITATION AND VIOLENCE (9-10)
1. Acquisition and Appropriation
    - a. Literature on Imitation Excludes Them from Modes of Behavior Apt to Be Imitated
    - b. Imitation as a Social Phenomenon Is More Problematic If They Are Included
  2. **Rivalry** over an Object Is to Be Expected If Appropriative Behavior Is Imitative
    - a. Imitative Rivalry Must Tend to Become **Reciprocal**: Positive Feedback
    - b. Result: Mutual Imitation
    - c. The Process Generates Violence
    - d. Judicial Viewpoint: We Must Search for the Culprits [Ascription of Blame]
    - e. We Assume a Discontinuity Separating the Culprit from the Innocent
      - (1) We Substitute Such Differences for the Continuities and Reciprocities of **mimetic escalation**
  3. Violence and Aggression
    - a. Violence Is Regarded by Some as an Instinct
      - (1) Weakness of This View: It Assumes Aggression Is Unilateral
    - b. Many Economists Attribute Violence to Scarcity and Monopoly
      - (1) These Are Insufficient to Cause Inferiors to Challenge Superiors
  4. **Appropriative Mimicry**: Basis for a Theory of Conflict
- B. RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS (10-15)
1. Religious **Prohibitions** (Taboos)
    - a. Rituals of Primitive Societies Reveal an Obsession with **Undifferentiation**: Conflictual Reciprocity That Results from the Spread of Mimetic Rivalry
    - b. **Chaos**, Disorders, and Plagues at the Beginning of Many Myths Must Be Interpreted in Terms of Mimetic Rivalry (Conflict between Mythical Partners)
    - c. These Themes Represent the Undifferentiated Reciprocity of Mimetic Conflict
  2. Rituals
    - a. Origin: They Begin with a Mimetic Free-for-All
    - b. Mimetic Rivalry Is the Common Denominator to the Following Types
      - (1) Seasonal Festivals [such as the Roman Saturnalia]
      - (2) The Ordeals of Initiation Rituals
      - (3) Death and Rejuvenation Rituals Associated with Sacred Kings [Funeral Obsequies and Coronations]
    - c. Rites are Symbolic Reenactments of Mimetic Crises
    - d. They Are **Evocations** of a Dreaded Object [Absolution or Catharsis, Perhaps Purging the Fear of Becoming What We Behold]
  3. Failure to Unlock the Mystery of Ritual: a Failure of Religious Anthropology
  4. Key to Unlocking the Mystery: Decisive Reordering at the End of Its Performance
    - a. Sacrifice: It Parallels the Death or Expulsion of the Hero
      - (1) Collective Action of the Community to Purify Itself of Its Disorder at the Paroxysm of the Ritual Crisis
  5. Common Denominator: The **Sacrificial Immolation**
    - a. Why Is There Such Belief in Its Efficacy?
      - (1) This Belief Suggests a Real Event That Is Memorialized
    - b. Freud's View
      - (1) The Model Was a Collective Murder [See *Moses and Monotheism*]
      - (2) Freud Erred in Interpreting the Murder
    - c. Necessary Misinterpretation and Transfiguration of the Collective Murder
  6. Why Sacrifice Is the Resolution and Conclusion of Ritual

- a. A Collective Murder or Expulsion Resolves the Mimetic Crisis That Ritual Mimics (The **Scapegoat Effect**)
  - b. Two Meanings of Scapegoat
    - (1) The Scapegoat Ritual (see Lev. 16)
    - (2) The Scapegoat Effect: Reconciliation or Uniting of Two Parties through the Destruction of a Third Party [e.g., Pilate and Herod vs. Jesus]
7. Mobs
- a. Victimage to Assuage Desire for Violence
    - (1) Its Absurdity Raises a Question in the Mind of a Detached Observer: Does the Mob Really Blame the Victim or Is This Mere Hypocrisy?
    - (2) Scapegoat Effect Indicate That the Mob Believes
8. Scapegoat Effects Are Mimetic Effects
- a. **Mimetic Attraction**: Other Members of a Group Are Drawn into a Mimetic Rivalry: Attracted by the Presence of Mimetic Desire
  - b. **Acute Disorder Phase** (Chaos) of a Ritual Suggests the Spread of Rivalry: Community Becomes a Mob
  - c. Result: **Loss of Differentiation** [cf. Roger Scruton on Bauhaus and Le Corbusier in *The West and the Rest*, p. 129]
9. Reciprocity
- a. Model of Mimetic Desire Is Mimetically Affected by the Desire of His Imitator
  - b. The Violence Is Not Originary; It Is a By-product of Mimetic Rivalry
  - c. Reciprocity Is a Mutual Thwarting of Antagonists
10. Escalation of Frustration
- a. Mutual Fascination: to the Level of a Hypnotic Trance
  - b. Principal Goal of Certain Religious Practices: Possession [Rapture, Awe]
11. Paroxysmic Level of Mimetic Rivalry
- a. It Focuses in the Antagonists Themselves
    - (1) Transfers of Antagonism Must Take Place for Purely Mimetic Reasons
    - (2) Mimetic Attraction Increases with the Number of Those Who Converge on One and the Same Antagonist [Mutual Projection of Animosity]
  - b. Snowball Effect [**Paroxysm** Similarly Implies Exacerbation, Intensification]
  - c. Mimetic Appropriation Is Divisive [Losers Feel They Are Expropriated]
  - d. Mimetic Antagonism Is *Reunitive*: It Provides Antagonists with a Shared Object
12. Shared Purpose of Prohibitions and Rituals
- a. Prohibitions Are Sufficient in Normal Circumstances
  - b. When These Avail Not: Ritual Sacrifice with the Help of a Substitute Victim
  - c. There Is No Difference of Purpose between Prohibitions and Rituals Despite a Difference in Behavior
13. Misinterpretations of This Opposition in Behavior
- a. Anthropologists Minimize the Opposition or Conceive of Religion as Nonsense
  - b. Psychoanalysts View the Transgressive Aspect of Ritual as Its End or Goal, Appealing to a Modern Predilection for Disorder [Idea of Vicarious Satisfaction]
14. Religion Is Different from These Misinterpretations
- a. These Misinterpretations Are Plausible Because Believers Have Often Lost Touch with This Unity of Purpose
  - b. Liturgical Revisionism [Secularization and Loss of Meaning]
  - c. Wide Road of Modern Interpretation Is an Impasse
  - d. The True Paradox of Ritual: Genesis, Regeneration, and Degeneration of the Cultural Order through **Paroxysmic Disorder** [cf. Mardi Gras = "Fat Tuesday"]
15. Systems of Representation Are Untrue to Their Origin
- a. The Narrative and Reenactment of the Violence and Reconciliation Is from the Perspective of the Beneficiaries, Who Are Its Puppets
  - b. A Scapegoat Effect Cannot Be Acknowledged as Such by the Scapegoaters
  - c. The Community Could Not Be at Peace If the Scapegoat's Capacity for Evil

- Were Doubted
16. An Arbitrary Victim Would Not Reconcile a Disturbed Community If Its Members Perceived They Are the Dupes of a Mimetic Effect
    - a. The Mythic Systems of Representation Are Dependent on Obliterating the Scapegoating on Which They Are Founded
    - b. Modern Knowledge of the Phenomenon Allows Scapegoating Only If Its Victims Are Perceived Primarily as **Scapegoaters** [Projection or Transference: It Is Similar to Rationales for Preemptive War and Accusations of Imperialism]
  17. Elusive Traces of Collective Scapegoating Demonstrate Girard's Thesis
    - a. **Common Features** (Constants) of the Deluded Standpoint of the Scapegoaters
      - (1) Victim Cannot Be Seen as Innocent and Impotent [cf. Cartoon Villains]
      - (2) Victim Is Viewed as Subversive of the Communal Order
    - b. Example: **Oedipus** Myth [Another Example: Ross Terrill on *Madame Mao: The White-Boned Demon*]
      - (1) The [Imputed] Transgressions of Oedipus Were Horrifying
    - c. Another Example: **Blood Libel** of Jews in the Middle Ages
- C. ANALYSIS (15-18)
1. Why Have Students of Mythology Been Fooled about These Themes?
    - a. Western Historians Are More Alert to the Indications of Persecution
    - b. Archaic Peoples Are Most Fooled by Their Own Myths
  2. Our Sterility as Creators of Myth Is Connected with Our Growing Ability to See through Scapegoating
  3. Girard's Answer to Critics of the Efficacy of Victimhood Phenomena
    - a. **Uncertainty Principle:** We Can Observe the Phenomena But They Are Marginalized
  4. Victimhood Is Present in Degenerate Forms That Do Not Produce Mythic Reconciliation and Ritual
  5. Girard's Answer as to Why: **Biblical Tendency to Side with the Victims**
    - a. But Believers and Unbelievers Alike Are Scandalized to Have Our Own Religious Texts Brought into the Picture
  6. This Tendency Must Have **Epistemological Consequences**
    - a. Examples: Stories of **Joseph** and **Job**
      - (1) The Biblical Text Disbelieves the Accusations
    - b. A Profound Reflection Is at Work Regarding the Ethical Demands That a Revelation of Victimhood and Its Refusal Places upon Human Beings [cf. Second Part of the Great Commandment]
    - c. Significance of Joseph's Test of His Brothers
    - d. Bible's Counter-Mythical Thrust: Epitomized in the Songs of Isaiah's Suffering Servant
      - (1) Complete Revelation of Collective Victimhood as the Founding Mechanism of Human Culture
      - (2) Complete Responsibility for the Victim's Death Is Placed Squarely on the Community
    - e. Christ's Passion
  7. Girard Concludes by Criticizing the Sacrificial "Misreading" of Scripture
    - a. Girard's Argument for a Non-Sacrificial Reading of the Scriptures
    - b. [Elsewhere He Acknowledges Another Meaning of Sacrifice That Is Voluntary]

-- René Girard, The Girard Reader, ed. James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad, 1996, pp. 9-19.

## Review

acquisition and appropriation

mimetic rivalry

reciprocity

judicial viewpoint  
sacrifice  
mob psychology  
transfers of antagonism  
Oedipus myth  
Isaiah's Suffering Servant

problematic of aggression  
Freud's view  
loss of differentiation  
snowball effect (paroxysm)  
Biblical view

rituals  
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violence: cause or effect?  
features of the deluded standpoint  
Joseph story