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René Girard's concept of mimetic desire, scapegoat mechanism and biblical demistification

Z PROBLEMATYKI FILOZOFICZNEJ

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RENÉ GIRARD'S CONCEPT OF MIMETIC DESIRE, SCAPEGOAT MECHANISM AND BIBLICAL DEMISTIFICATION

1. Introduction

Recent article analyzes basic concepts of René Girard's anthropology. Its aim is to provide an overview of the theory which was formulated by one of the greatest contemporary French thinkers, a member of French Academy and emeritus professor of Stanford University. It is not only restricted to present all themes of Girard's thoughts, but it also attempts to contextualize his work in relation to other important thinkers like Freud and Nietzsche.

The thought of René Girard fits no category. He presents his ideas from the perspective of many disciplines: literary critique, psychology, sociology, history, biblical exegesis and even theology. But this interdisciplinary diversity is only a starting point for specific and more general purpose – to answer the question "who is Man?". The answer to this question is given by Girard in the spirit of his mimetic theory, the theory which contains three important ideas: the concept of mimetic desire, scapegoat mechanism and biblical demystification.

2. Mimetic desire

Beginning with his first book *Deceit, desire and the Novel* René Girard develops specific theory of desire, based on the ancient category of *mimesis*. The term *mimesis* in Girard's view means the basic imitative predisposition. It designates primary, unconscious, intrinsic and vital dynamism which forces human behavior and his way of thinking. Human beings through the imitation develop language, the ability to learn and gain knowledge. Primary mimetism is also an indispensable element of socialization and enculturation. This idea is well known from Aristotle, who wrote: "Man differs from other animals in his great aptitude for imitation"[1].

The understanding of the structure of desire and its relation to the world of human beings and things requires taking into account the fact that: „there is nothing, or next to nothing, in human behavior that is not learned, and all learn-

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[1] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b, 4-10.

ing is based on imitation. If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish. Neurologists reminded us frequently that brain is an enormous imitating machine. To develop a science of man it is necessary to compare human imitation with animal mimicry, and to specify properly human modalities of mimetic behavior"[2].

It is important to note that Girard makes a distinction between desire and need or appetite. He also distances his own thinking from Freud's psychoanalysis, where desire is defined as *libido* or sexual instinct. Unlike needs the desire is amorphous and heterogeneous structure. It is not as easy to satisfy desires as appetites or needs like hunger or thirst. Desire as a feature which differs the man from other beings is more a cultural phenomenon, shaped by interpersonal relations.

Desire is then mediated by the desires of other people. It has a triangular structure, not linear as it was presented in psychoanalysis by the idea of *catexis*. There is the third element – the Other or mediator - between desired self and the object of desire. In *The Deceit, Desire and The Novel* Girard writes: "Don Quixote surrendered to Amadis the individuals fundamental prerogative: he no longer choses the object of his own desire – Amadis must choose for him. The disciple pursues objects which are determined for him, or at least seem to be determined for him, by the model of all chivalry. We shall call this model the mediator of desire. Chivalric existence is the imitation of Amadis in the same sense that the Christian's existence is the imitation of Christ"[3]. The example of the "knight errant" from the novel of Cervantes shows clearly that the very epitome of chivalry reinforces the desire of Don. This makes Quixote an imitator *par excellence.*

The presence of the mediator in the structure of desire has an essential influence on how we see the object of desire. His desire is a source of the value of the object. Behind the desire of the subject there is indeed a suggestion of the third person. Thus Girard overcomes the ideas that desire can be either objective or subjective. He introduces the concept of interindividual desire (it is beyond the substance of self and object).

This relational concept of desire grounds the foundation for Girard's critique of romanticism, which postulates autonomy and originality of the subject and his great aptitude for self-creation. Girard distances his own thinking from this modern myth of self-sufficiency. "The romantic *vaniteux* always wants to convince himself that his desire is written into the nature of things, or, which amounts to the same thing, that it is the emanation of a serene subjectivity, the creation *ex nihilo* of a quasi-divine ego"[4]. The *desire according to Oneself* is only the illusion of an

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[2] R. Girard, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world. Research undertaken in collaboration with J.-M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort*, trans. P. Bann and M. Metter, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1987, p. 7.

[3] R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Y. Freccero, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1966, p. 1-2.

[4] Ibidem, p. 15.

egocentric hero who wants to see himself in the middle of whole universe. But the truth – according to Girard – is different. There are no individual sources of desire.

3. Mimetic rivalry

French thinker is far from optimistic vision that interpersonal relations are positive by nature. Two desires directed toward the same object are inevitably competitive. Such conflict as a result of imitation is called "mimetic rivalry".

For Girard, there are two possibilities for how desire is mediated: a) externally: when "the distance is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of *possibilities* of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers"[5], b) internally: where the subject and the model are not separated from the desiring subject by space, time, social, vital or spiritual distance, and "thus is more liable to become a rival in the latter's attempts to attain an object"[6]. In case of external mediation the subject proclaims aloud the true nature of his desire ("He worships his model openly and declares himself his disciple"[7]), he believes in the same values as his model. In case of internal mediation imitation is unaware or carefully hidden by the subject. And then: "the impulse toward the object is ultimately the impulse toward the mediator; in internal mediation this impulse is checked by the mediator himself since he desires, or perhaps possess, the object"[8].

Girard shows how the mimetic desire is directed toward the effacement of differences between rivals (*undifferentiation*). The mimetic conflict turns antagonists into *doubles*. The mediator who previously encouraged the subject to imitate him suddenly becomes a rival and an obstacle. At the heart of mimetic rivalry there is a double imperative then: the demand of the mediator is the command, 'imitate me', but this message is coupled with a warning, 'do not imitate me'. So, the source of conflict is the presence of the contradictory double imperative: "Man and his desires thus perpetually transmit contradictory signals to one another. Neither model nor disciple really understands why one constantly thwarts the other because neither perceives that his desire has become the reflection of the other's"[9].

Mimetic rivalry operates along the same lines as Gregory Bateson's concept of *the double bind*. Girard's observations concerning the ambivalence of feelings involves the dynamism noted above. According to Girard the truth of desire is revealed by the novels of Dostoyevsky, where: "hatred is so intense it finally 'ex-

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[5] Ibidem, p.18.

[6] C. Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden 2004, p. 19.

[7] R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, p.10.

[8] Ibidem.

[9] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1977, p. 147.

plodes', revealing its double nature or rather the double role of model and obstacle played by the mediator. This adoring hatred, this admiration that insults and even kills its object, is the paroxysms of the conflict caused by internal mediation"[10].

Beginning with the basic presuppositions of the mediated structure of desire Girard tries to reformulate some thesis of Freud's psychoanalysis and his theory of conflict. Although he sees some basic ideas about mimesis in Freud's way of thinking, he does not see it there directly. The concept of imitation is often used by Freud, but the German psychiatrist does not mention anything about mimetism because his vision is infected by psychologism and pansexualism. In other words, psychoanalysis is willing to recognize that human beings are autonomous, and thus every desire is object oriented.

Girard also analyzes Freud's concept of Oedipus complex. According to Freud, the child has an innate sexual desire towards his mother, and eventually discovers that his father is an obstacle to satisfy this desire. Girard, on the other hand, reinterprets the Oedipus complex in terms of mimetic theory: the child identifies with his father and imitates him: "A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like him, and take his place everywhere. We may simply say that he takes his father as his ideal. This behaviour has nothing to do with a passive or feminine attitude towards his father (and towards males in general); it is, on the contrary, typically masculine"[11]. However, as boy imitates his father, thus he imitates the sexual desire for the mother. Then his father becomes his model-rival. This explains the ambivalence of feelings to father, so characteristic of the Oedipus complex.

Freud points out two sources of desire for the mother: 1) identification with father, and 2) libido directed towards mother. Both of these phenomena underlie hostility of son to his father, but by treating the first source marginally, while assigning greater importance to the concepts of id, ego and libido to his mother, Freud removes the relationship between Oedipus complex and mimesis[12].

The intensification of violence can reach a social and cultural order. It absorbs not only individuals but also whole communities. For Girard, culture is simply a "regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to established their 'identity' and their mutual relationships"[13]. The effacement of such differences leads communities back to the state of nature, which is the Hobbesian state of "war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*): "Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members

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[10] R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, p.42.

[11] S. Freud, 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey, Hogarth Press, London 1953-66, vol. 18, p. 105.

[12] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 185.

[13] Ibidem, p. 49.

of the same family or social group at one another's throats"[14]. When the rivalry starts to escalate, total violence expands on the whole society. The question then arises how the societies overcome this internal crisis? According to Girard the collective violence can take two forms: a) the violence "all against all", b) the violence "all against one"; the former leads to social disintegration, the latter brings back a social order.

4. Scapegoat mechanism

Girard argues that violent rivalry is contagious. It spreads like a plague. When the tension reach paroxysm, the undifferentiation moves from individuals and groups toward the social hierarchy and institutions. The social response to the collapse of differences tends toward the attribution of cause. The community, previously totally disintegrated, now becomes deeply unanimous. At the most intense moment of conflict a violent resolution emerges. As Girard argues, such mimetic impulse is then directed against the victim, "the scapegoat". The collective violence of all against all, which threatens with the social collapse, is spontaneously transformed into the violence of all against one. Thus the collective unity is rebuilt.

Girard, by making allusions to archaic rituals where the sins of community are transferred into a victim, calls this process the scapegoat or victimage mechanism. The victim is a "scapegoat" in this sense that her or his death is necessary for reintegration of social harmony. The scapegoat mechanism works according to so called Caiaphas principle: "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish"[15].

The scapegoat mechanism demands some level of unconsciousness. The victim cannot be considered as innocent. Girard shows, that: "in order to be genuine, in order to exist as a social reality, as a stabilized viewpoint on some act of collective violence, scapegoating must remain nonconscious. Persecutors do not realize that they chose their victim for inadequate reasons, or perhaps for no reason at all, more or less at random"[16].

The conception of collective violence presented above reveals that Girard distances his thinking from enlightenment ideas, which recognize social order in social contract. French thinker indicates rather irrational and spontaneous sources.

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[14] Ibidem.

[15] J 11,50.

[16] R. Girard, *Generative Scapegoating*, in: *Violent Origins: Walter Burkett, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1987, p. 78.

5. Violence and the sacred

According to Girard, the scapegoat mechanism brings peace to undifferenti-
ated community, at least for a certain length of time. The intensity of such expe-
rience is so extraordinary, that it gains a metaphysical meaning. It can be also said
that community is subjected to illusion of "sacred hierophany". It leaves convic-
tion among people that there is life in death. The role of the sacred now is clear
- it has to protect peace and social stability. This function is unchangeable across
centuries, and it also occurs in our secularized culture. We can see clearly now
how Girard is inspired by Durkheim's school of sociology, who thought that reli-
gion realizes the function of social integration[17]. However, while Durkheim consi-
ders unifying function of all religions, contributed this function only to sacrificial
rituals, which are actually the oldest forms of religion and culture. Ritual sacrifice
is then a cyclic reproduction of the original murder of the scapegoat. Rituals, by
mimetic imitation of the founding murder, "dispense" violence as a symbolic kill-
ing of the victim, and thus prevents the real violence.

As Girard claims, the historical reality of the scapegoat mechanism is cov-
ered up by religious, social and even political myths. The outsider perspective of
the victim is never reflected in the myth, which is "the retrospective transfigu-
ration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the
cultural order that has arisen from them"[18] Myths are texts of persecution which
express the point of view of the community reconciled by the collective murder of
one victim. Myths represent the unanimous belief that the act of killing the scape-
goat was legal and sacred, willed by the God itself, and that there is no reason to
criticize or analyze it.

6. The biblical demystification

Finding the mimetic cycle at the heart of archaic religions, René Girard de-
velops new approach to the Judeo-Christian scriptures. At the beginning of his
book *I Saw Satan Fall Like Lightening* he states, "What I propose illuminates the
divergences as well as the convergences between biblical and the mythical, not
merely the innocence of the victims versus their guilt, but the fact that, in my-
thology, no one ever questions this guilt. In the Gospels, the revealing account
of scapegoating emanates not from the unanimous crowd but from a dissenting
few"[19].

Interpretation of the Bible seems to be a crucial issue to Girard's thought.
The Judeo-Christian tradition comes to deconstruction and destabilization of so-

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[17] See É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. J.W. Swain, George Allen &
Unwin, London 1915.

[18] R. Girard*, Violence and the Sacred*, p. 64.

[19] R. Girard, *I Saw Satan Fall Like Lighting*, trans. J. G. Williams, Orbis Books, New York 2001,
p. 2.

cieties founded on collective violence. The Bible takes a very different perspective, not the perspective of the executioners, but the victims. Thus there starts a process of slow movement away from violence and rape toward evangelical mercy.

There were in fact some authors in the ancient world who saw the dynamics of the collective violence, the horror and the arbitrariness of choice of the victim. The Greek tragedies are an attempt to reveal the scapegoat mechanism. However, this attempt is not brought to an end. Tragedian's insight does not exceed a certain threshold of unconsciousness, but compromises with the message of the myth. Oedipus the King, even though he is not responsible for the plague that has been infecting the city of Thebes, must ultimately agree with his role of the scapegoat, which was assigned to him by the crowd. Greek tragedy is an important moment of transition from the myth to the biblical demythologization.

The great stories of Bible, in contrast to the archaic mythology, introduce significant changes, which, according to Girard, are worth emphasizing. Compare the stories of Cain and Abel with myth of Remus and Romulus. In both stories there is a dramatic rivalry between the brothers which ends with fratricide. But, in the Roman myth, Romulus is justified in killing Remus. The latter desired to be the king and he transgressed the territorial limits they had earlier agreed upon. In the biblical story the Cain is never justified in killing his brother, and the blood of Abel is blood of an innocent victim. God then speaks words that unequivocally condemn the act of Cain: "Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?'; 'I don't know', he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground'"[20].

According to Girard Hebrew Bible is also crucial in rejecting the sacrifice. Especially the psalmists and prophets constantly admonish the Jews not to undergo the impulses of sacrificial violence. For example, the prophet Jeremiah strongly condemned the worship of false gods and the acts of human sacrifice as an offering to deity: "They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molek, though I never commanded--nor did it enter my mind--that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin"[21].

According to Girard what is distinctive in the Old Testament, finds its final in the Gospels, culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus. In the Scriptures the mimetic cycle and the scapegoat mechanism is being progressively unveiled. It is particularly visible in the story of Pilate's court. Pilate in fear of the furious mob condemns Jesus to be crucified, although he does not believe in his guilt. But New Testament goes on to reveal that even Jesus's *apostles* are not immune from the movements of mimesis when it comes to his condemnation by the crowd. The symbol of this mimetic blindness is the story of Peter's denial. The greatest of Jesus's apostles becomes possessed by the crowd: "Peter is the most spectacular

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[20] Gen 4,9-10
[21] Jer 32,35

example of mimetic contagion. His love for Jesus is not in question: it is as sincere as it profound. Yet as soon as the apostle is plunged into a crowed hostile to Jesus, he is unable to avoid imitating its hostility. If the first of the disciples, the rock on which the Church will be established, succumbs to the collective pressure, how will the others around Peter, just average people, be able to resist?"[22].

For Girard, Christianity represents a new stage of biblical revelation that goes beyond the message of Old Testament: "Far from relapsing into the divinization of victims and the victimization of the divine that characterizes mythology, as many people inevitably imagine, the divinity of Jesus obligates us to distinguish two types of transcendence externally similar but radically opposed. The one type is false, deceptive, misleading, and it is the unconscious fulfillment of the victimage mechanism. The other transcendence is truthful, luminous, and it destroys mythical illusion by revealing how violent contagion poisons communities"[23]. Girard placed the false resurrections of the mythical heroes deified by collective violence in opposition to the resurrection of Jesus.

The French thinker acknowledges that he was not the first to have seen the radical change that the Judeo-Christian tradition has made in the history of mankind. It was Nietzsche who recognized this and wrote obsessively about it. But he saw the difference not in the facts but in their interpretation[24]. The archaic mentality, that Nietzsche called "Dionysus" is the affirmation of all that Jesus condemns. His discovery Nietzsche proclaims in the *Will to Power:* "Dionysus versus the crucified: there you have the antithesis. It is not a difference in regard to their martyrdom. It is a difference in the meaning of it. Life itself. Its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilate. In the other case, suffering—the "Crucified as the innocent one"— counts as an objection to this life, as a formula for its condemnation (...) a god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life; Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it will be eternally reborn and reborn and return again from destruction"[25].

Girard criticized the Nietzschean contempt for compassion and mercy towards the weak. Dionysus of Bacchae is the deity who sows violence. The wandering god is associated with madness, vine and destruction, and this is what, as Girard claims, Nietzsche demands from deity – the sacrificial violence: "Through Christianity, the individual was made so important, so absolute, that he could no longer be sacrificed: but the species endures only through human sacrifice (...) Genuine charity demands sacrifice for the good of the species – it is hard, it is full of selfovercoming, because it needs human sacrifice. And this pseudohumaneness called Christianity wants it established that no one should be sacrificed"[26].

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[22] R. Girard, *I Saw Satan Fall Like Lighting*, p. 19.

[23] Ibidem, p. 131.

[24] See R. Girard, *Dionysus Versus the Crucified*, *Modern Language Notes* 4 (1984)99, p. 816-835.

[25] F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufman and R. J. Collingdale, Vintage, New York 1967, p. 542–543.

[26] Ibidem, p. 142.

7. Conclusion

At the end, we should note that some of the commentators of Girard's thought have criticized his radical reductionism, his obsession that centers around the idea of a scapegoat, his unsophisticated tendency to generalize and his usage of interpretational tricks. For that reason he has been described as "hedgehog" thinker who sees only one thing, as opposed to "fox" who sees many things[27]. Some even argue that starting with his first publication he consistently introduced disorder into humanities. He proposes merely implicit vision of solving all issues of mankind instead. In fact it is not difficult to see in his books an eloquent and prophetic style, which creates a relationship of domination of the narrator over the reader.

Nevertheless, I do not hesitate to claim after Paul Dumouchel that: "Beginning from literary criticism and ending up with a general theory of culture, throught an explanation of the role of religion in primitive societies and radical reinterpretation of Christianity, René Girard has completly modified the lamdscape of social sciences. Ethnology, history or religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis, psychology and literary criticism are explicitly mobilized in this enterprise. Theology, economics and political sciences, history and sociology – in short, all the social sciences, and those that used to be moral ciences – are influenced by it" (P. Domuchel, 1988, s. 23). Undoubtedly the work of René Girard has had a significant impact on many areas of knowledge. But Girard is also a thinker who is convinced about the human capacity to know the ultimate truth about themselves. In this sense, his work is an important alternative to the fashionable contemporary philosophical trends, postulating a multiplicity of truths, lifestyles and interpretation. As opposed to the prevailing fashion for anti-christianism, Girard acts as a Christian thinker. Thus he tries to tell us that, by closer examination of the truth of the Gospel, no one remains indifferent to the phenomena of violence, suffering and injustice. If a man only could understand it, if they could recognize the forces of mimesis, they would be able to reduce his sinister action so as not to be a threat to other people.

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SCAPEGOAT MECHANISM AND BIBLICAL DEMISTIFICATION

Summary

This article provides an overview of René Girard's concept of mimetic desire, scapegoat mechanism and biblical demystification. It also attempts to explain the basic notions of his anthropology and to contextualize them in relation to the conceptions of philosophers like Freud, Durkheim and Nietzsche. The paper starts with an introduction to the widely discussed problem of mimetic desire. It sees Girard's mimetic theory as a theory of conflict. Then, it analyzes how violence emerges

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[27] See M. Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, Cowley Publications, London 2004, p. 9.

through mimetic rivalry. From that point, the essay moves to discuss the scapegoat mechanism and the relation between violence and the sacred in archaic societies. Finally, it examines the conception of Judeo-Christian demystification of mimesis and surrogate victim.

Keywords: Girard, mimesis, violence, scapegoat, religion, Christianity

PRAGNIENIE MIMETYCZNE, MECHANIZM KOZŁA OFIARNEGO
I BIBLIJNA DEMISTYFIKACJA W MYŚLI RENÉ GIRARDA

Abstrakt

Artykuł przedstawia koncepcję pragnienia mimetycznego, przemocy i religii w ujęciu René Girarda. Stanowi również próbę wyjaśnienia podstawowych pojęć jego antropologii (mimesis, mechanizm kozła ofiarnego czy biblijna demistyfikacja) oraz umieszczenia ich w kontekście prac innych filozofów takich jak Hobbes, Freud, Durkheim czy Nietzsche. Praca zaczyna się od wprowadzenia do szeroko dyskutowanego problemu pragnienia mimetycznego. Ukazuje teorię mimetyczną Girarda jako teorię konfliktu. Następnie analizuje, jak w mimetycznej rywalizacji rodzi się przemoc. W ten sposób artykuł zmierza w kierunku omówienia mechanizmu kozła ofiarnego oraz relacji, jaka zachodzi pomiędzy przemocą a sacrum w społeczeństwach pierwotnych. Następnie rozpatruje ideę biblijnej demistyfikacji mimesis i ofiary zastępczej.

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Słowa kluczowe: Girard, mimesis, przemoc, kozioł ofiarny, religia, chrześcijaństwo