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Girard's gender neutrality and faithful feminism

Summary: When René Girard applied his discovery about the role of mimesis in human social life to analyse the origin of culture and religion, he tackled Freud and Lévi-Strauss for placing sexual relations rather than the sacrificial solution of rivalries at the centre. In so doing he ignored the role of gender in the sacrificial schemes by stressing that rivalries indiscriminately affect both genders. With the help of studies by Levinas and Kristeva, of some anthropological discoveries, and an alternative reading of the biblical trajectory from Genesis to the Book of Revelation, the article tries to show how Girard's mimetic theory can both uphold gender neutrality and advance a Christian feminist option.

Keywords: apocalypse, feminism, incest, hominisation, maternal role, mimesis, original sin, retardation, scapegoating.

Introduction

In these pages I wish to address René Girard's controversial option to ignore gender issues in developing his mimetic theory. Moving from literary criticism to anthropology, so as to apply his discovery of mimetic desiring to the study of human culture as such, he deliberately chose to ignore gender conflicts. Against Freud and Lévi-Strauss, both of whom saw male conquest of females as culture's driving force, either due to a restless libido or in a structured pursuit of order through marital exchanges, Girard rather focused on the sacrificial religion as check of mimetic rivalries and ignored sexual issues, because mimetic desires and scapegoating work irrespective of gender divides¹. Nonetheless, feminists have tackled him for being as male-centred as his opponents or other great visionaries, from Kant and Hegel to Nietzsche and Heidegger or Sartre. Moreover, his turn to Catholicism and insistence that the Bible unravels all cultural scapegoating sharpened this critique, since that faith is the prime foil of many feminist struggles. Can his theory be redeemed from such criticism? I will

¹ René Girard's move to anthropology starts with his *La Violence et le Sacré*, Paris 1972. Throughout his career he will return regularly to his disagreement (and partial agreement) with Freud and Lévi-Strauss.

assess this issue not just via his own perspectives, but also by comparing them to those of Julia Kristeva and Emmanuel Levinas, who prove to be closer to him than it may seem. As this opens a wide range of subjects, let me stress that only the beginning of an answer may be expected here.

Kristeva and Levinas may seem unlikely allies, as they are wide apart and in an apparent opposition to Girard through their stress on feminine particularity and atheist inclinations. Although differing widely on those two points, they do cut through some fixed positions in a way that makes a rapprochement unexpectedly plausible. We note in passing that Levinas figures in the bibliography of most recent theologians, and Kristeva openly praises Catholicism in a number of texts and has recently been invited by the Vatican, as the only woman speaker, to represent atheist humanism at Assisi, at the 5th lustrum of the 2008 prayer meeting convoked by pope John-Paul II. But applause for her view that “humanism is feminism” does not make her a natural interlocutor to the mimetic theory yet². She had declined Girard’s invitation to come and teach in the US in 1966 and refers to him ever more rarely, despite a basic approval of his theory on sacrificial violence as the origin of culture. As for Levinas, his view of the other’s infinite call for respect, too, seems alien to Girard’s focus on mimetic forces leading to scapegoating. But our three authors, in spite of their different appreciation of Christianity and of gender issues, bear a fruitful comparison that can help advance our theme.

1. The woman as the anthropological Other

Girard’s refusal to make the gender divide a prime issue in rivalries and in the sacrificial solution of the run-away conflict has been challenged quite early by Lucien Scubla and the structuralist anthropology, claiming that sacrificial traditions are male dominated all over and clearly support the religious base of male control over women, leading to the marriage exchange schemes as analysed by Levi-Strauss³. Scubla firstly notes that even classifying schemes often

² Kristeva’s speech, *Penser la liberté en temps de détresse*, can be found on her website, http://www.kristeva.fr/assisi2011_en.html. Her invitation, (together with three other humanists) had also been motivated by her search for truth expressed in *This Incredible Need to Believe*, New York 2009, and her meditation on suffering during Lent in the Parisian Notre Dame, where she spoke as the President of the Society for the Handicapped. Her constructive criticism of Catholicism – in union with her husband Philippe Sollers, editor of the quarterly *L’Infini* – and her approval of recent Popes have undoubtedly contributed to that choice. An extensive comparison of Girard and Kristeva can be found in M. Reineke, *Sacrificed Lives, Kristeva on Women and Violence*, Bloomington 1997.

³ Cf. L. Scubla, *Contribution à la théorie du sacrifice*, in: René Girard et le problème du mal, Paris 1982. The classification of reality in binary oppositions with different values shows a remarkable consistency in grouping the female with negative values even though other elements, such as even and odd numbers, shift places.

use a binary code in which the sexual divide is basic, with males ranking above women. Anthropological reports from round the globe show how sacrificial blood tends to endorse and strengthen this superior position of males. Why women have always acquiesced and supported this scheme's religious contents is the enigma I shall try and answer later. Let us remark, for now, that Girard has generally ignored this challenge insisting that these facts do not affect the gender equality in matters of mimesis, even if they may lead to hugely different roles in cultural respect. True as this may be, we can learn from Julia Kristeva who remained close to Girard while regretting his silence on this score.

A cultural exile, like Girard himself, the Bulgarian Julia Kristeva was all but his soul mate when he met her in Paris in 1966 at her presentation of Bakhtin's theory of poetic language in the seminar of Roland Barthes, where her view of the special role of the maternal appeared in embryonic stage. With reference to structural linguistics and its distinction between speech and language, she showed how a speaking person uses a fixed system of signifiers (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) pervading it with pulses of her own. Bakhtin had studied how Dostoyevsky's poetics relied on a constant *carnavalesque* challenge to the linguistic code. Both the system and the pulse alternate mutual sacrificial violence. Without fully accepting the notion of a dichotomy between a male (or: phallic) code being challenged by 'female' pulses, she started to articulate the beginnings of her maternal studies. Girard saw the potential of her sacrificial parameters and invited her to come and teach in America. But she declined the invitation⁴.

In 1973 Kristeva ran a seminar of her own about the tension between the code of linguistic signifiers and the pulses that traverse it in human utterances. Her opening address describes the 'sacrificial' involved in all cultural activity and her terms sound close to Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* that had just dropped in Parisian circles. But she still follows the 1889 Mauss and Hubert's sacrificial theory, which Girard was to upset⁵. In her vision, the State, family, and religion are institutions that commit sacrificial violence (p.12) to establish their code over the pulses that do not let off to question it. She largely follows the Freudian view of identifying the code with the 'father', but stresses that

⁴ Later she stressed that her dislike of American imperialism made her decline; but her link with Philippe Sollers and the *Tel Quel* group, who were planning a tour of Mao's China in search of acceptable forms of socialism, as well as her love of French language must have played a major role. Nonetheless, it cannot be excluded that the two discovered a different view on gender, given that Kristeva focused on internal pulses in Freudian sense and Girard on the mimetic rivalry.

⁵ Cf. J. Kristeva *Pratique signifiante et Mode de Production*, in: *La traversée des signes*, Paris 1975, collection *Tel Quel* p. 11-30. This paper, read in 1973, links State, family, and religion as institutions that commit a 'sacrificial murder' (p. 12) to establish their code over the pulses that upset it constantly. She refers to the study by Hubert and Mauss from 1889 on the nature and function of the sacrifice, which Girard criticised, yet her view is largely in line with his theory, which she will back up later, even though she remains faithful to the Freudian approach (in: *Pouvoirs de l'Horreur* Paris 1980, English translation: *Powers of Horror*, New York 1982, chapter 3).

Christianity, by focusing on the Son-Word, opens a road for recovering the primal pulse and later she will back up Girard's reading of Christ's innovating work to found a society resisting sacrificial evil⁶. Her focus, though, shifts to the position that women hold in the drama of sin – guilt – desire – deliverance. After stating (in 1973, p.24) that humans come to words and sonorous signifiers only through a move of love, she now must address the enigma of vilifying comments and rules against the female emotional bonding, fruit of the maternal drive. The biblical account of the Fall in Eden is often read in these terms: “did not sin and death come through a woman?” (see Sir 25:24). Having noted that gospel accounts portray Jesus in specific communication with allegedly sinful women, she slowly turns away from what Girard calls the mimetic desire, in which persons react to their model or obstacle, and focalizes elementary drives that precede any mimesis and in which she sees a specific role for women's maternal calling.

While Kristeva and Girard seem to drift apart on this gender issue, it may be helpful to consider the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, holding elements from both sides. In line with Girard, Levinas sees the confrontation with the Other as the key issue of human cultural life, but with Kristeva he stresses the unique position of the woman in this respect. So the question arises what can be meant by his statement that the other is *la Femme*, the Woman⁷. Does it boost Kristeva's position and should Girard's mimetic theory be revised in the light of this basic statement? By defining Buber's I-Thou relation as a pointer to the feminine alterity (TI p. 129), Levinas risked being accused of relapsing into idealism, since the feminine looks separated from the phenomenological, as an ideal and a pure representation. To grasp his goal we may situate him within the ongoing struggle against subjectivism that has prevailed since the Renaissance, dominating philosophy from Descartes and Kant via Heidegger to the present.

Since the breakdown of the scholastic realism – with its Platonic and Aristotelian variants – the threat of subjectivism has haunted Western thought. The divine assurance of a correspondence between the human ratio and the objective world had been undermined by nominalist claims that languages prove to be so different in relating concepts and words that every vision of a realist

⁶ In *Pouvoirs de l'Horreur*, she ends chapter 4 on the semiotics of biblical abominations with this reference to Girard, which is followed by chapter 5, with the Latin title ... *qui tollis peccata mundi*. In Girard's style, she uses a biblical quote as a title, but again, without referring to him. Despite her quote from Nietzsche's *Antichrist* at the chapter's head, that could be read as snub to Girard, she stays close to his vision, giving it a more psychoanalytic twist.

⁷ “Et l'Autre, dont la présence est discrètement une absence et ... le champ de l'intimité, est la Femme. La femme est la condition ... de l'intériorité de la Maison et de l'habitation”. E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, The Hague 1965, p. 128. This image of a man coming to himself in his own home through the woman has been criticised as male-centred and bourgeois, inspired by the fact that in French (as in English) *homme* (man) means both male and human. But it is hard to imagine that a philosopher of his stature missed such an obvious point.

identity between word and concept had to be discarded. Words express ideas that are mental constructs with semantic differences according to any given language and only these semantic contents are worth considering. Amidst this uncertainty, Descartes turned to the self and formulated his *cogito ergo sum* (thinking implies being) as a reply to the systematic doubt. But thereby the threat of subjectivism became a prime concern. Descartes' own appeal to the love of a Creator God to ensure our mental order appeared too voluntaristic in Spinoza's eyes. Even the ingenuous conciliation by Leibniz of the former's scepticism and the latter's pantheist view that identified God with the empirical reality left too much leeway to absolute idealism, in Kant's view. Leibniz' notion of monads was too close to Plato's Ideas to which humans might get access in principle. Kant rejected any cognitive access to objective ideas (*noumena*), while also denying that loose sense perceptions form our only certainty. He postulated a common mental framework for human communication about sense perceptions using a shared raster of categories that allow representations. Phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger feared that this framework was itself turning into an observable structure, giving ever more weight to empirical science and technical know-how, which might ignore each person's responsibility for the being that all beings have in common⁸.

While sharing the phenomenologists' worry, Levinas discards Heidegger's and Husserl's idea of intentionality, by which we represent the non-Self preceding any true *Dasein*, understood as a being-with the non-Self. His own central notion of 'enjoyment of being' (*jouissance*) is akin to Kristeva's. Before any representation, man's being with reality means being 'filled-in' or determined by it. This receptivity, however, must be such that an absolute demand is perceived to forestall that in the encounter the Other be killed and/or reduced to the Self. This crucial point pivots on Levinas' identification of the Other with the receptivity of the Self, which renders existence (enjoyment, openness) possible. To reduce the Other to the Self is a killing of the Self's own tender receptivity, openness to enjoyment. This receptivity, which clearly is inherent in any human, irrespective of one's gender, is what Levinas calls Woman and is identified with the 'receptive home' that allows enjoyment of being. The love of that homely dimension is described in terms of *Eros*, in which the demand not to kill forms the central value and may be read as a translation of the Kantian struggle against subjectivism. It implies that the latter's *Kritik* must be carried beyond the three domains he defined as truly ego-oriented (asking what the 'I' can know, should do, may expect).

⁸ Note how this distrust of the positivist trend in Western culture is common in the phenomenological tradition after Edmund Husserl and the alarm he raised in 1935. Cf. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, American translation, Evanston 1970. Jan Patočka was instrumental in having Husserl present his misgivings about the European rational and spiritual crises in Prague and later gave an elaborate lecture on it in Warsaw, 1971. Another outspoken phenomenological critique can be found in M. Henry, *La Barbarie*, Paris 1987.

Leaving the history of thought here, we note that the Other identified as the Woman appears at the core of Levinas' struggle against the self-centred subjectivism surfacing in its two well-known forms of narcissistic selfishness and the empiricist materialism, where receptivity for the call of the Other is smothered. He thus follows Kant's concern, which has preoccupied all thinkers ever since the collapse of what Heidegger has called the ontotheological construct, in which being was defined as a conglomerate of beings headed by a divine Absolute. The demise of this metaphysical scheme has left humans to rely on the inner self as sole certainty. Against this Levinas and Girard raise a similar protest. While Girard tackles, what he calls, the romantic lie of the self-centred actor, that ignores the fact of mimesis which makes that all our desires are inspired from the outside, Levinas shows that even the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger remain captured within the Self, when they deal with representation as product of our intentionality. Thus, both spell out the need to acknowledge 'receptivity' as life's basic dimension. By identifying this with the Woman, Levinas is not speaking about a difference between genders, but refers to a common trait. It is worth noting that this philosophical insight is akin to the dimension which Kristeva mentioned in her linguistic and psychoanalytic studies, referring to an energy that she links to the processes at work in the maternal domain and in birthing. Let us briefly examine this connection.

2. The uterine mystique

As mentioned above, Girard dislikes the Freudian focus on sexual libido, and Kristeva's insistence on psychoanalytic studies may not help their rapprochement. But Girard's worry about the ideal of an (male) individual finding his energy in libidinal drives is shared by Kristeva, since her focus is rather on the maternal, uterine processes. Let me insert a small personal note to get this topic in focus, which links Girard, Levinas and Kristeva, with respect to the feminist issue for gender equality and justice. By using the concept of uterine mystique, I do not refer to some hazy mystic fantasies, but to a very concrete concern.

Before moving to Paris, where Kristeva was developing her intriguing link between linguistic and psychoanalytic studies (with Barthes and Lacan), while Girard was working on his reading of the sacrificial origin of religion and culture, I was at UBC Vancouver, doing anthropology with the structuralists Pierre Maranda and Elly Köngas who spent much time on the gender divide at the heart of religious customs in Oceania and Asia. India in particular was of interest, with its huge variety of female images. In this context, we were to do a term paper on the structuralist reading of the feminist notion of a uterine orgasm. While most American feminists at the time followed Simone de Beauvoir's struggle for total equality, arguing that the gender divide is just a mental construct, there was a small group that rather zoomed in on the female specificity.

Among others, they questioned women's dependence on males to reach orgasm by clitoral stimulation, and argued that a woman's true enjoyment is located deep in the region of the uterus. It was thanks to the journalist Lisa Hobbs⁹, going around to discuss her own book on liberation that I could gather data, which I later found largely confirmed in the work of Kristeva. Women's focus on the birth-related processes need to be taken as a core event in human life, which is to be defined as an enjoyable oscillation between receiving and giving, of holding on and letting go. In fact, some of the women interviewed, at the time, opined that the male-focused Freudian libido was a travesty of a more original feminine reality and that they should, therefore, surpass the focus on clitoral stimulation in favour of uterine joys. Pursuing this line of research in the Central African Republic, I was struck by the remarkable linguistic fact that the Banda call the owner or master of any property, be it a house, a workplace or a dog: *eyine*, its 'mother'. Again, when there are big and small, fertile and infertile variants of something, the big or fertile is called *eyine*, while the small and useless is 'male' or 'husband'. A study of these words revealed that *eyi* (mother, female) was related to the verb *yi*, to link or connect, while the word for male (small, husband) seemed to be linked to the verb *ko*, meaning to cut or disconnect. This was all the more striking, as the Banda form a patrilineal society¹⁰.

Within this semantic ambit, we may now return to Levinas and Kristeva. The latter has written profusely on her discoveries, linking the linguistic theory of intertextuality to the psychological concept of abjection, using two striking images, namely Plato's notion of *chora* and the maternal bonding with the offspring. Remaining close to the Lacanian conviction of a male-dominated (phallic) code, she shows that this is incessantly shot through by pulses, which originate beyond the code in the sources of life itself. Her doctoral work *Revolution in Poetic Language* borrowed Plato's term of *chora* to refer to a provisional realm of semantic links that precede any conceptual representation, as an uterine space where the concepts are in a preverbal stage and musical elements, like sound and rhythm, help shape the poet's linguistic utterance¹¹. From this linguistic concept, Kristeva moved to the psychoanalytic studies with Jacques Lacan on the relation between the male-dominated code and the maternal themes of mother-child bonding, in which she stressed the mutual attraction

⁹ See L. Hobbs, *Love and Liberation*, New York 1970.

¹⁰ See W. Eggen, *Peuple d'Autrui, Une approche anthropologique de l'œuvre pastorale en milieu Centrafricain*, Brussels 1976. I remarked this curious feature when the big drum with its deep sonorous sound was called the female (*eyine*), while the small high-pitched drum was called 'male'. The male drummers kept up their ideology by explaining that the high-pitched drum clearly dominated everything. The big one was called female because "its sound made one's intestines reverberate, giving the sensation of life inside!"

¹¹ See J. Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique*, Paris 1974, p. 22ff. (Eng. tr. New York 1984). Already in her linguistic work with Roland Barthes, Kristeva moved to a reflection on the psyche and even biology of the female identity. However, it is important to note that in both aspects her thinking transcends the focus on the female gender.

and repulsion, using the concept of abjection. Birth is a matter of holding on and letting go from both sides, which results in an enduring bipolar process. The nine-month gestation leaves a mixture of two-directional pulses with their emotions, which women experience more deeply than men.

When Levinas speaks of an infinite hospitality and responsibility of the Self for the Other and relates this openness and receptivity to the Woman, he refers to 'mercy' and uses the image of the uterus, since the Jewish term for uterus *Rekhem* resonates with the term for mercy in most Semitic languages: *Rakhmana*, *Rachamin* etc¹². It is the bonding that humans know from their uterine connection. Evidently, this is not restricted to women, and in this sense Girard is right to claim that both mimetic rivalry and merciful bonding transcend gender divides. Kristeva, on her part, takes this uterine connection as the prime psychoanalytic reality and explores its ambivalent workings throughout life, but also within the cultural and aesthetic developments.

It bears noting that neither Levinas nor Kristeva are referring to the matrimonial subservience of the wife to the husband. Kristeva worked with the linguist Emille Benveniste, stressing that the woman's maternal position in matrimony is etymologically to be distinguished from marital regulations¹³. From this we retain that both Levinas and Kristeva place the maternal receptivity, rather than marriage exchanges, at the core of their deliberations and that Girard's mimetic theory also pleads for this openness, even if it pays more attention to the negative side of rivalry and to the sacrificial response, in which Kristeva also takes great interest.

3. Rejoining the expelled Other

If the basic process in Kristeva's psychoanalysis is thus connected to the biological event of reproduction, the male gender might seem secondary if not excluded from basic processes, and the mimetic attraction to a model might get a totally different meaning. Will this not put Girard's theory on a new footing, posing a particular challenge to his claim of gender neutrality? The question is how males could be similarly attracted to a model, since their experience knows

¹² Cf. E. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, English translation: Bloomington 1990, p. 183, quoted by Ann Astell, 'Maternal Compassion in the Thought of René Girard, Emil Fackenheim, and Emmanuel Levinas' in *Contagion* 2004, 11, p. 15-25. Astell refers to a study by C. E. Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca*, Bloomington 2003.

¹³ See E. Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-Européenne* Paris 1969, vol. 1, p. 239-53. The maternal association seems to have been lost in most European languages, where the contractual side of the matrimonial bond prevails, as is the case in the Polish *małżeństwo*. But if its etymological link with the Germanic *mahal* is correct, it must be noted that the latter also refers to the meal sealing the contract. The German and Dutch word *gemaal* (for husband) is linked to the notion of eating food: *maal* or *meal*. The maternal role of feeding seems to be returning in these terms.

the maternal connectivity in a totally different way? To find the commonality between the genders' emotional landscape, we need to go one step further in the study of this expulsion and attraction. Indeed, the real question concerns the awareness of the other as other, and the possibility of both mimesis and rivalry or, say: the sacrificial scapegoating.

Levinas, like other phenomenologists, stresses the basic principle of enjoyment: life is the love of life¹⁴. Living organisms are marked by a homeostasis, a capacity to sustain their – often very complex – integrity by absorbing nutrients from around. Animals (as well as some plants) are biologically constructed around a mouth. The senses serve the catching of prey, while digestion sustains the entire organism. Sense perception of the prey may be enormously sophisticated, but anthropomorphic fantasy apart, this cannot be defined as the recognition of the other. The recent discovery of mirror neurons – neural organs in the birds' and mammals' brains that makes the animal imitate attractive behaviour of others – provoked some musings about recognising otherness. Birds imitating each other's songs or other sounds are clearly doing more than chasing a next meal. But even if this fact and the refusal to hunt or kill members of the same species can be seen as embryonic forms of knowing the other as other – either model or obstacle – the true root of this awareness must be sought elsewhere.

Intra-specious relations are proper to life, even though various forces like gravity or inner-atomic attraction also allow a metaphorical use of the term 'relation'¹⁵. In the biological realm, the other appears primarily in conditions of reproduction in its simplest form: in cell division. Organisms that reproduce by division, however, do not produce a parent – offspring relation. In fact, they embody 'eternal life', since the two new organisms are identical to the original one. In a bacterial growth there is no way of telling offspring from parents; they are self-cloning *ad infinitum*. But a true quality jump occurs when sexual reproduction appears¹⁶. While numerous species combine the two methods, the arrival of sexual differences clearly entails a radical innovation. In effect, species that rely on the sexual method alone, whatever its form, are now faced

¹⁴ *Totalité et Infini*, p. 84. After the first part about the metaphysics of the infinite appeal confronting us in the face of the Other, Levinas advocates a focus on the Self's position in life. This recalls the even more rigorous opinion of Michel Henry that the starting point has to be the Self. See his *L'Essence de la Manifestation*, Paris 1963, Engl. tr. *The Essence of Manifestation*, The Hague 1973.

¹⁵ Crystallised structures as well as fractals in mathematics suggest that all matter is basic interaction. Coexisting entities need to 'take note' of the others. But this is no more than the precondition of recognising each other.

¹⁶ The evolution from bacteria through the many stages of vegetal and zoological forms to beings with a central neural system still holds myriads of secrets, not to mention the transition from inanimate to animate reality. The question of interrelation and primal forms of species recognition is still puzzling to biologists. We only focus on the final stage when parent – child bonding arises due to the sexual differentiation.

with a novel fact: individuals being unable to prolong themselves into eternity as they need another individual, while the offspring is no longer the Self. From now on the Self is exposed to death. Birth and death arise as realities that constitute a challenge. A dividing cell splits whenever the time is 'ripe'. With sexual reproduction things take a radical and complicated turn.

Methods of fertilisation differ hugely across the species. Just as senses developed to assist the feeding track, the sexual organs too need a supporting apparatus, notably in the neural department. As penetration, normally speaking, is a hostile act, it had to be turned into a desirable event. This is worth noting, for the ontogenetic process of a person, in becoming an individual self, largely repeats the phylogenetic development of the species (as can be observed in the process of an embryo's growth). In humans, as in most mammals, birds and even reptiles, males produce millions of spermatozoa that are delivered in an instant, whereas females produce few ova (often one at the time), in which much has been invested and that may often stay inside the body during gestation as a sequence of the ovulation. It is hard to exaggerate this sexual difference, which is engrained in the chromosomes of every cell¹⁷.

Coming back to the role of gender difference in relating to the other as other, it imports to stress that the male ejaculation of sperm and the female expulsion of the full-grown child are variants of the same process of procreating the Self. That means that the ambiguous process Kristeva associates with childbirth is also part of the males' existence. While men and women share this dependence on the other, the exposure to death, and the attraction to the expelled 'part of oneself', the differences are manifest. So, before tackling the question of equality and respectful feminism, we need first to study how this huge difference translates into the gender hierarchy.

4. The sacred and judicious finger

The other as other starts to emerge when my package of species-proper DNA-information is no longer sufficient for self-perpetuation, so that I become dependent on a co-member of the species. But dependence also means subordination. While mutual dependence should, in principle, even out any inequality or subordination, we know that this evening out of the hierarchy is defective in many cases. We call it hierarchy, because in human society the traditions of submission tend to be considered as holy (*hieros*) and imposed, from the

¹⁷ Gender equality as a lofty ideal, according to Kristeva, must never ignore these huge differences and their evolutionary roots. Homosexuality is a contradiction in term, since *homo* in Greek means 'the same', whereas sexuality refers to the division and its radical consequences. That same sex individuals can arouse one another is part of the complex evolution, and in a society that starts depreciating fertility for fear of over-population this alternative erotic enjoyment gets ever more appeal.

beginning, by some transcendent instance. Although the awareness of mutual giving and receiving shows up in many circumstances – e.g. when a client pays the prostitute for ‘her services’ – the linguistic and social traditions portray the female as the receiving one. Even when kinship studies speak of ‘exchange systems’, the woman is no player, but usually just a pawn in the deals between male elders, with her fertility being the value that is exchanged¹⁸.

There is little need to quote the myriads of feminist studies showing religious motives being invoked to stress the subservient and ‘dangerously unholily’ nature of women. While most of these studies deal with the Christianised West, anthropologists have found parallels the world over. Above I have quoted Scubla showing how sacrificial religion is a factor in this female condition. He challenged Girard’s mimetic theory to account for this ‘sacrificing of the woman’ by the sacrificial religions. Without taking up this challenge, Girard did acknowledge the data, but only countered some anti-Christian allegations by showing that biblical passages undermined many male claims of superiority over women¹⁹. While recognising that the biblical tradition and the church’s practices allowed harsh injustices to prevail, he called for a new analysis.

Many of the misogynist atrocities have been motivated by a religiously inspired disdain of the female that allegedly caused evil and temptation for men. The story of the Fall in Gen 3 has played a substantial role, since it seemed to justify the verdict of Sir 25:24 that dubs women the source of all sin. The psychic factor that weighs heavily, and to which many myths refer, is the fact that a man is dependent on a woman to take care of his sperm for procreation. In his reading of the Fall Girard sidesteps this topic and stresses that later traditions formally focus on Adam’s fault, which is interpreted as rivalry with God²⁰. This corrective is valuable, but in Girardian circles too the curious idea prevails that God Himself sought this confrontation so as to show the true order between the Creator and creature. This leads to confusion. In fact, Girard stresses that the snake’s reading of the interdict is a travesty of God’s original intention. In the light of the biblical message about God’s fight against the mimetic rivalry and its disastrous effects, we need to take the end of the story literally and see the gender tensions as the core and subject of the narrative.

In terms of Girard’s theory, God’s ruling is to be taken as an act of gracious love rather than a nasty feat of jealousy, as the snake has it. In the story, the

¹⁸ The majority of the kinship systems in the world are patrilineal or bilinear with a paternal leaning. But even in the numerous African groups that are matrilineal, the woman’s offspring resort under a social-political setting that is largely male-dominated, headed by the ancestress’ brother.

¹⁹ A point in case is the double narrative in Mk 4:21–43. Two signs (miracles) interwoven share the message on Jesus’ saving untouchable women by touching them. The hemorrhagic is healed by contact with a man who should have stayed clear from her, and who revives a youngster at the start of her puberty by taking her hand.

²⁰ Some feminist authors have indeed protested this revisionist attitude for robbing women even of their last title of fame, namely the revolt against the divine injustice of arbitrarily forbidding a tree at random.

forbidden tree's name holds the clue, for it implies that God wants to spare mankind the 'knowledge of good and evil'. The reason is that this knowledge is the tool of discrimination and scapegoating. Girard admits that Adam aspiring at divine grandeur has transgressed God's ruling. But in the Bible's terms it is the snake's fraud that makes it a case of rivalry. Eve induced Adam into that frame of mind, but the text reveals immediately what the issue was, in God's eyes, and why the fruit was withheld. Indeed, Adam, after covering and marking his sexual decorum, turns against Eve and disgraces her before God. And Eve follows suit by blaming the snake. The world will henceforth be the dreary domain of discriminatory finger pointing, since they ate of what God had wanted to spare them. The so-called gender specific punishment that follows is not what God inflicted on them, but rather what they brought upon themselves by allowing themselves to be driven into desire and rivalry. Girard rightly takes this as a gender neutral indulging in the original fault. But the text leaves little doubt that the gender hierarchy and male lordship over women stems directly from this lapse, which means that the redeemer's intervention will have to take it as its prime target²¹.

5. The Lamb and his maternal bride

In presenting Christ as the saviour who exposes and redresses the evils of mimetic rivalry and sacrificial violence, Girard seems to ignore the gender divide. But the fact that Jesus, notably in the Fourth Gospel, dealt with women in revolutionary ways has not escaped his attention. His healing of women, even hemorrhagic, by a physical touch, and revealing his Messianic identity first to a Samaritan woman of debatable marital standing (John 4) was clearly controversial. In this and many other cases, his confrontation with Israel's religious leadership has unmistakable gender overtones, as the incident in the women's

²¹ See my *The Gender of the Crucified*, Bonn 1997 in "Verbum SVD" 38-3, 1997, p. 267-87. The gender rivalry is usually viewed as a derivative of breach with God. In Girardian circles the issue of original sin is commonly addressed and defined as man making himself God's rival, and sometime it is even worded as if God started the rivalry. Presenting the Girardian organisation *Imitatio; Integrating the Human Sciences* in 2009 at Stratford University, the late Chair of the Advisory Board, Robert Hamerton-Kelly, related Girard's primary discovery of mimetic desire to this Eden story, and explained God's interdiction of the one fruit as follows: "God is infinitely generous. He withholds one tree for one purpose only, to preserve the difference between the creator and the creature." See his *Reason and Violence in Girard's Mimetic Theory: The Anthropology of the Cross*, http://www.hamerton-kelly.com/talks/Anthropology_of_the_Cross.html (accessed March 18, 2013). This brief summary of the author's substantive study in *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross*, Minneapolis 1992, leaves the impression that God himself initiates the conflict. But the fact that creatures revolted against the Creator, in hubris, does not imply that the latter forbade the fruit to mark his superior position as Creator. We note that Girard refuses to define the original sin, when he describes the Christ event as a restart of what was upset by sin. See R. Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront* Paris 1994, p. 61.

court of the temple shows (see John 8:1-11). Girard refers to this confrontation over the accused woman several times, while focusing on Jesus' action to prevent her lynching. But in this incident, as also in the anointing of his feet (in Lk 7 and Jn 12), Jesus' confrontation with the male guardians of the moral order is a prominent theme that gets a special accent in his subsequent imitation of what caused the controversy. Indeed, the host criticised him for letting a woman wipe his feet by her tears and hair, whereas he had failed to offer the customary water. Shortly after this incident Jesus imitates the woman, by washing his disciples' feet²². The interconnection of these texts, especially in John's Gospel, deserves close attention.

In John's Gospel, Jesus starts his miraculous signs at a wedding, where his mother Mary is instrumental in making it a symbol of the apocalyptic wedding with new wine. The Johannine symbolism of the wedding of the Lamb and the eschatological meal has fascinated exegetes at all times. The imagery was well known, and not just in John's circles, as appears from Paul's comparison of a Christian marriage to the wedding of Christ to his Church (Eph 5). Many have recognised it as a reference to the prophetic texts about God taking his people as his bride and notably to the amorous Song of Songs. But in relation to Girard's mimetic theory there are three aspects to be given a special note. Firstly, it seems plausible that this wedding theme counterbalances the Eden-story: this symbol of the apocalyptic fulfilment inverts what went wrong with the first Adam. Whereas Adam inculpated Eve and disconnected the bond after having covered his maleness, Jesus forgives the bride-church that deserted him and put him naked on the cross; he washes her clothes in his blood and takes as his partner the very one who murdered him. Next, we note that the two encounters at the ending of John's Gospel and the Apocalypse get a special importance in this context. After his resurrection Jesus meets Magdalene, whom he makes his prime messenger and he tells her to remain aloof till the final wedding of the apocalyptic Lamb. Thirdly, we note that, if the Fall in Gen 3 was actually to do with rivalries and gender tensions, these Johannine-texts are most significant and suggestive.

Another line of thought, however, also calls for attention. If the revolutionary action of Jesus to tackle the male-dominated order complies with the anti-sacrificial line of Girard's scheme, and if mending the Adamic male-female divide and restoring the prelapsarian harmony is a real theme, there is also the evangelic call to remain unmarried for the kingdom. The history of Christianity has known anti-sexual asceticism from the beginning, often due to influences of mystery cults that spread from the East²³. The role of celibates in the history

²² Exegetes argue that the women portrayed in Lk 7 and Lk 10 (and also Jn 12) are different persons and the incidents were later associated with one alleged sinner, Mary Magdalene, who got her sins forgiven. This is not to blind us, though, for the intertextual parallels and semantic links that bear witness to how Jesus challenged the women's repression by the authorities.

²³ These mainly Indo-European influences have affected Jewish traditions ever more strongly since the exile in Mesopotamia. This intermingling calls for in-depth research. Even the linguistic

of Christianity, and their rise to economic and political influence demand that we return to the Gospel texts that advocate staying 'free for the kingdom'. It is not enough to stress the apocalyptic context of Lk 20:35 and Mt 19:12 among others. It says that the end time shall just be as Noah's days (Lk 17:26), with marrying going on as usual. But God's kingdom demands a certain detachment, which Paul catches in his 'as if not' -formula. Noting Girard's critique of the structuralist theory that puts culture's origin in the marriage exchanges, it seems plausible to relate the 'as if not' formula to his reading of Christ's breach with the sacrificial order. Lk 17:26-27 refers to this exchange pattern, in which persons are pawns in a social system. But the thrust of Christ's innovation arguably lies in his fight against this subordination and its social-religious implications. Given the Bible's lofty use of the wedding metaphor and the constant plea for marital faithfulness, a Girardian reading of the advice to remain unmarried seems to be that it primarily tackles the sacrificial implications of the common marital exchanges. The giving-out-into-marriage is to be replaced by the free gift of self to God's fight against a set-up that thrives on rivalry and scapegoating. This Girardian reading also helps decode Paul's seemingly misogynist quote of Sir 25:24 in 2 Cor 11:3, saying that sin came due to Eve giving in to the snake. Paul reminds believers, men and women, that they are the bride of the murdered Christ and devoted to his course. Attending sacrificial cults, he says, is like Eve accepting the snake's proposal. A total adherence to Christ's fight implies even inverting the basic role pattern of men and women, which is the marital exchange.

The finest expression of this evangelic insight in gender renewal can be found in Cracow's basilica and its world-famous altarpiece, depicting the heavenly coronation of Mary. The huge and magnificently restored 15th century sculpture by Veit Stoss contains a unique expression of apocalyptic faith. Between the scene of Mary's dormition at the bottom and her coronation at the top, there is what may be dubbed an 'inverted pieta'. At the time when lamenting the dead Christ lying on Mary's lap was a central theme of religious aesthetics, Stoss converted this theme in a daring manner to express the apocalyptic faith by placing Mary on the lap of her son, who leads her up to her coronation. Thus upsetting the very base of all marital exchange systems, namely the law against incest, and undoing all Oedipal obsessions, Stoss portrays Mary as the apocalyptic bride and embodiment of the 'body faithful'. The congregation, both men and women, is thus identified maternally in a form of gender neutrality that renders understandable Girard's refusal to make mimetic violence and the biblical response to it gender related. As we recall Kristeva's focus on the maternal event, in which both parent and offspring are struggling with their ambiguous attachment, we may try and draw a final conclusion from this evangelic perspective in anthropological terms.

curiosity in Hebrew splitting up the Semitic root *bsr into 'flesh' and 'message of salvation', allegedly unrelated, deserves questioning. When did the idea of good news (*eu-aggelion*) get separated from the ideal of a blessed household and offspring?

6. Man's maternal calling

We started with Scubla's question, why Girard ignored the negative bias against women in sacrificial traditions. Neither of them, nor any Girardian I know of, would claim that the first (human) sacrifice was a woman or that the originary chaos and murder must have been over a woman. The issue refers to a deeper anthropological level. Ultimately, it raises the question why women of all ages have accepted the use of religious ways to bolster male symbolic superiority, even though men's envy of the women's fertility is all but palpable in traditions the world over²⁴. What stake did women have in a male-dominated religion with a misogynist bias? Unless we were to believe in a collective female masochism resulting from the punishment in Eden (Gen 3:16), this question needs an answer.

Recent studies in primatology and physical anthropology offer a proposal that may fruitfully be combined with the Girardian insight in religion's sacrificial violence. In 1918, the anatomist Louis Bolk, revamping Saint-Hilaire's 1836 observation, noted immaturity in human babies. Compared to other mammals, he argued, the growing brain size made a pre-mature birth of babies necessary. His much criticised, evolutionist reading of that fact as a sign of retardation holds a basic truth. The growth of human brains was clearly due to increasing communication and the need of prolonged education, resulting in elaborate cultural patterns, which in turn incited the brains to grow. Although his evolutionist theory may be debatable, it correctly signals the huge pedagogic investments and prolonged chores of human mothers. However, the complex cultural shell of protective support required by this mother-child unit became more and more a male affair or, in psychoanalytical terms (Freudian, Lacanian), the motor of a phallic cultural code with its symbolic order. Regarding this order, though, Girard has been adamant that the religious curbing of mimetic violence, rather than libidinal pulses, steered its development. His reluctance to consider gender issues in his theory of the sacrifice may now find a justification in the curious, and yet obvious reason why women have always 'supported' (in the double sense of the word) the phallic set-up. The reason is a practical one, which recent anthropology has unearthed²⁵.

The prolonged educational dependence of the human infant, learning the complex cultural patterns, puts a huge strain on the mother²⁶. As for the primates

²⁴ The most remarkable and curious expression is the widespread male *couvade* of men faking childbirth.

²⁵ Bolk's theory on immature birth of human babies, also called *neoteny* or even infantisation, gave rise to many studies both in psychology and biology. Although Julia Kristeva largely ignores the *neoteny* theory, her focus on the early phases of the mother-child unit places her in that ambit.

²⁶ Note that the Latin word *infans* implies 'not speaking'. In fact, as Kristeva stresses, the mother has to use the pre-symbolic sound combinations to bring the baby to the cultural language. Some anthropologists have insisted that the mother-child relation should be the prime focus of the studies on evolution, as in the controversial wet-ape theory of Elaine Morgan.

closest to humans (chimps and bonobos), indeed, they show a striking egalitarian tendency, moving away from the alpha-male dominated horde-pattern that marks the gorilla society. This results in males being much more active in the actual education of youngsters²⁷. What this suggests is a beginning of paternity, for which the females have to give something in return, as they solicit the male's pedagogical 'help'. For why should a male invest in that chore unless the physical paternity gets a form of recognition? The dominance of the gorilla alpha-male had to be curbed and ritualised – say: domesticated – as paternal responsibility in the growing 'symbolic communication'. Paternity became a priority for males, but basically because of the female concerns. The maternal chore was the central issue leading to a cultural growth with a variety of male controlled sacrificial rites. This symbolism of male dominance, however, was the camouflage of the involvement of domesticated males in the maternal responsibilities. The biblical account of Gen 3 describes this condition, but also the tension that its development caused, which in Girard's vision is to be redressed by Christ. Rehabilitation takes the form of Christ marrying the congregation, symbolised by his mother, thereby undoing the old male-dominated rules, rites, and exchange patterns.

This mother-centred view now allows us to return to Girard's gender neutrality. Both Levinas and Kristeva showed the pivotal role of the feminine in human conditions. The latter has focussed her practical and theoretical work on 'vulnerability' as a fundamental human aspect, which should bring both genders to their psychic self. As the President of the French Society for the Handicapped and as a psychoanalyst facing basic struggles, she pleads for a sense of shared vulnerability, which refers humans back to the prime processes around birth and the uterine connections²⁸. Since male and female fertility derives from the same process of cell division and expulsion of the 'other self', males should be able to relate to that fundamental sense of vulnerability that marks the maternal condition. It is here, to end this short study, that I may refer to a remarkable observation by Girard. When realising that he had dismissed too hastily the

²⁷ See M. Godelier, *Métamorphoses de la parenté*, Paris 2004, esp. p. 463-509. The French word *parenté* contains a direct reference to the role of parenting or say, identifying with the vulnerability of the infant, *in-fans*, the one still lacking access to human communication. Unlike reproduction by cell splitting, sexual procreation means for both male and female giving up one's perpetuity. I note that the Banda rites of *ganza* initiation ends the period in which the child counted as part of the ancestral world, which it could represent ritually at great occasions. At the initiation, the male prepuce and female clitoris are cut, to remove what rests of the other sex, so that the child can enter adulthood and play a (re)productive role.

²⁸ See J. Kristeva, *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité et ... Vulnérabilité*, in: *La Haine et le Pardon*, Paris 2005, p. 95-118 and *Penser la liberté en temps de détresse*, op. cit, p. 15-27. The latter is a speech at reception of the first Holberg-prize for human sciences in May 2005. In it she greatly praised Pope John-Paul II, which could not but be pleasing to René Girard who, at the exact same period, succeeded a Catholic priest as a member of the Académie Française, stressing the role of Catholic faith in the present globalising society.

notion of Christ's self-sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews, he returned to Heb 10 and compared Jesus' offering of himself in God's service to the devoted mother in the famous story of Solomon's judgment. When the King announced his cruel verdict to cut the child in half by the sword, the mother risked her whole self by challenging the King, so that the child live²⁹. Girard compares this faithful maternal compassion, challenging even the king's authority, to Christ's self-denying act, which should be imitated in a positive mimesis by his partner, the Church, men as well as women. In this respect, Girard and Kristeva seem still as close as at the onset in dealing with the sacrificial implications of the human processes. With a reference to Levinas' precious remark about the etymological link between compassion and the mother's womb, it may now be inferred that Girard's gender neutrality, far from being an oversight, contains a crucial insight that makes an alliance with Kristeva more than plausible. Could it point to the shared struggle of both sexes to deal with the deadly loss that came with the fading control of one's perpetuity through the novelty of sexual reproduction? The prime mimesis appears not to be in what the mirror neurons instigate, or even in the acquisitive urge of external objects, but in the drive to hold on to that fading self. Women have an advantage in this domain; and when men were solicited to share the pedagogical burden, the latter's envy turned into a hostile dominance via religious ways. But, in Girard's understanding, the biblical revelation and action of Christ unravelled the basis of their violent scheme. What was described at the end of the Eden story, was to be inverted into gender solidarity, in which men and women alike join the Lamb in his project of restoring the eternal life through the divine *agape*. Recalling the key role Levinas and Kristeva give to the feminine, this prospect may be termed 'faithful feminism', where both genders, in line with Girard's understanding of the apocalyptic calling, enter into the eternal union with 'the Lamb' in his fight against the evil of bad mimesis and scapegoating.

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Neutralność Girarda wobec płci i wierny feminizm

Streszczenie

Aplikując odkrycie roli *mimesis* w życiu społecznym ludzi do analizy początków kultury i religii, Girard skrytykował Freuda i Lévi-Straussa za to, że przedmiotem swoich rozważań uczynili relacje seksualne, a nie ofiarnicze rozwiązanie rywalizacji. Tym samym Girard zignorował rolę płci w strukturach ofiarniczych, podkreślając, że rywalizacja w jednakowy sposób wywiera wpływ na obie płcie. Dzięki badaniom Levinasa i Kristewy, niektórym antropologicznym odkryciom, i alternatywnemu odczytaniu biblijnej trajektorii, począwszy od Księgi Rodzaju do Apokalipsy, artykuł stara się wykazać, że mimetyczna teoria Girarda może zarówno podtrzymać neutralność płci jak i wspierać chrześcijańską opcję feministyczną.

Słowa kluczowe: apokalipsa, feminizm, grzech pierworodny, hominizacja, kazirodtwo, macierzyńska rola, mimesis, opóźnienie, prześladowanie.