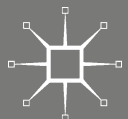# THE PALGRAVE HANDBOOK OF MIMETIC THEORY AND RELIGION

Edited by
James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver

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The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion

James Alison · Wolfgang Palaver
Editors

The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion

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Editors
James Alison
Independent Scholar
Madrid
Spain

Wolfgang Palaver
University of Innsbruck
Innsbruck
Austria

Executive Editor
Trevor Cribben Merrill
California Institute of Technology
Pasadena
USA

and

Managing Editor
Sheelah Treflé Hidden
Heythrop College
London
UK

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Girard's Works

Note: Throughout this volume, the original (French) publication date of Girard's principal works will be given along with the title in English: *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961). Below is a comprehensive, but not exhaustive, chronological annotated list of Girard's publications, with both original and English references.

Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque. Paris: Grasset, 1961; *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965.

> *Girard's groundbreaking analysis of five major European novelists—Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Proust—who described the workings of "triangular" (which Girard would later call "mimetic") desire, challenging the romantic claims of modern individualism.*

Dostoïevski, du double à l'unité. Paris: Plon, 1963; *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*. Translated by James G. Williams. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012.

> *Girard's study of the Russian novelist builds on the insights of* Deceit, Desire, and the Novel, *tracing Dostoevsky's spiritual and aesthetic journey from "underground" obsessions of pride and jealousy to a powerful religious vision.*

Critique dans un souterrain. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1976.

> *This volume includes the previously published essay on Dostoevsky and texts on Dante, Camus, and Victor Hugo, among others.*

La violence et le sacré. Paris: Grasset, 1972; *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Through readings of Greek tragedy—in particular the plays of Sophocles and Euripides—and modern anthropology, Girard, expanding on the insights of Freud, posits that crisis and its violent resolution through sacrifice is the underlying common denominator of all ancient cultures.

Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde. Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort. Paris: Grasset, 1978; *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Girard, in dialogue with psychiatrists Oughourlian and Lefort, argues that the Bible and especially the Christian gospels unveil the truth of scapegoating and correct the mendacious perspective of archaic myths, making possible both new understanding of the violent origins of humanity and the pathologies of the modern world.

To Double Business Bound»: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

This volume collects Girard's essays on Dante, Camus, Nietzsche, Wagner, Derrida, Lévi-Strauss, and other key figures in the development of his thought, and concludes with a wide-ranging interview.

Le bouc émissaire. Paris: Grasset, 1982; *The Scapegoat*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Like medieval texts of persecution, which historians read as distorted evidence of scapegoating, ancient myths and legends present their scapegoats as truly guilty, a charge the Bible rebuts through its accounts of John the Baptist's beheading and the denial of Peter. Many view The Scapegoat *as the most systematic presentation of Girard's ideas.*

La route antique des hommes pervers. Paris: Grasset, 1985; *Job: The Victim of His People*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Girard reads The Book of Job *as the account of an archaic show trial, and its protagonist as the victim of an arbitrary shift in public opinion for which his "friends" serve as the sinister mouthpieces, urging him to give up his vain professions of innocence, accuse himself, and join the unanimous chorus of voices united against him.*

A Theater of Envy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991; *Shakespeare, les feux de l'envie*. Translated by Bernard Vincent. Paris: Grasset, 1991.

In Girard's reading, for which he earned the Prix Médicis for best essay in France, Shakespeare shrewdly offered up villains for his audiences to hate while simultaneously pursuing a subtle and often covert meditation on mimetic desire, sacrifice, and the foundations of culture in such works as A Midsummer Night's Dream, Troilus and Cressida, *and* The Winter's Tale.

Quand ces choses commenceront. Entretiens avec Michel Treguer. Paris: Arléa, 1994; *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer.* Translated by Trevor Cribben Merrill. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014.

In this friendly yet combative series of conversations with Michel Treguer, Girard reflects on literature, God, freedom, and science while defending the main tenets of his mimetic theory.

The Girard Reader. Edited by James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad, 1996.

This volume includes key excerpts from major texts chosen, collected, and introduced by Girard's longtime friend, translator, and collaborator James Williams—one of the best introductions to the mimetic theory.

Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair. Paris: Grasset, 1999; *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Translated by James G. Williams. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001.

Girard's accessible and compact apology for Christianity suggests that the proteiform notion of "Satan" in the Gospels, often neglected today, can be read as a technical term encompassing the stages of the mimetic cycle, from mimetic desire and rivalry to accusation, murder, and misrecognition.

Celui par qui le scandale arrive: entretiens avec Maria-Stella Barberi. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001; *The One By Whom Scandal Comes*. Translated by Malcolm B. DeBevoise. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014.

In addition to conversations with interlocutor and editor Barberi, the volume includes three new essays by Girard on reciprocity and violence, cultural relativism and ethnocentrism, and mimetic theory and theology.

La Voix méconnue du réel: Une théorie des mythes archaïques et modernes. Paris: Grasset, 2002.

For this volume, available only in French, editor Bee Formentelli assembled several of the texts from To Double Business Bound, *including Girard's memorable theory of the comic, "A Perilous Balance," and his essay on innovation and repetition.*

Le sacrifice. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2003.

Girard's lectures on the powerful insights into sacrifice in the Hindu Brahmanas paved the way for scholars to explore the themes of mimetic desire, rivalry, and sacrifice in other world religions, including Islam and Buddhism.

Verità o fede debole. Dialogo su cristianesimo e relativismo. Toscana: Transeuropa Edizioni, 2006; *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*. Gianni

Vattimo and René Girard. Edited by Pierpaolo Antonello. Translated by William McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

> *A dialogue between philosopher Vattimo, known for his notion of "weak thought," and Girard on themes of secularization, relativism, faith, and the role of Christianity in the contemporary world.*

Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire. Edited by Mark Anspach. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

> *As this selection of Girard's writings on Oedipus shows, the legendary king is a central figure in Girard's work, serving as a bridge from his literary analyses to the anthropological reflections in* Violence and the Sacred, *and later as a point of comparison with Biblical narratives such as the story of Joseph and his brothers.*

Le Tragique et la Pitié: Discours de réception de René Girard à l'Académie française et réponse de Michel Serres. Paris: Editions le Pommier, 2007.

> *Girard's speech marking his reception into the French Academy eulogizes his predecessor, Father Ambroise-Marie Carré, whose work he interprets as an itinerary from fervent spiritual ambition to humility.*

De la violence à la divinité (Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque; **La violence et le Sacré; Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde; Le bouc émissaire**). Paris: Grasset, 2007.

> *This French volume gathers together lightly revised versions of Girard's four major works in a single omnibus publication, along with a general introduction.*

Achever Clausewitz: Entretiens avec Benoît Chantre. Paris: Carnets Nord, 2007; *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. Translated by Mary Baker. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010.

> *Girard's final major work, and the first since* Deceit, Desire, and the Novel *to apply mimetic theory to the contemporary world, these conversations with his French editor Benoît Chantre extend the insights of Prussian military strategist Clausewitz, who glimpsed the apocalyptic logic of modern history as an "escalation to extremes" in warfare and destructive technology.*

Girard, René, Pierpaolo Antonello, and João Cezar de Castro Rocha. **Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture**. London: Continuum, 2007.

> *These interviews with two former students give Girard the opportunity to discuss his work in the context of modern anthropology and contemporary critiques of his ideas, while revisiting milestones in his early life and career—another excellent introduction to mimetic theory.*

Anorexie et désir mimétique. Paris: L'Herne, 2008; *Anorexia and Mimetic Desire*.

Translated by Mark R. Anspach. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013.

> *Girard applies his notion of mimetic rivalry to the phenomenon of anorexia, which he sees as a contemporary form of competitive asceticism, driven by a culture of puritanical individualism that views a slender physique as worth pursuing at any cost.*

Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953–2005. Edited by Robert Doran. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

> *Editor Doran brStanford University Pressings together several of Girard's previously uncollected literary essays, including texts on Stendhal and Tocqueville, Chrétien de Troyes, Marivaux, and Racine.*

La Conversion de l'art. Paris: Flammarion, 2010.

> *A sort of French counterpart to* Mimesis and Theory, *with which it overlaps to some extent, this volume includes a previously unpublished lecture on Wagner and mimetic desire, as well as early texts on Malraux and Saint-John Perse.*

Girard, René, and Schwager, Raymund. *Correspondence 1974–1991*. Translated by Chris Fleming and Sheelah Treflé Hidden. Edited by Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, Joel Hodge, and Mathias Moosbrugger. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

> *Theologian Raymund Schwager was, after Girard himself, the most influential figure in the development of the mimetic theory, and this correspondence chronicles nearly two decades of exchanges between the two thinkers and shows the mutual influence exerted by their warm intellectual friendship.*

Contents

Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

James Alison is a priest, theologian and author. He has been working with Girard's thought since 1985 and has contributed to the field with a number of books, most recently the adult catechetical course "Jesus the Forgiving Victim."

Wolfgang Palaver is Professor of Catholic Social Thought at the University of Innsbruck. From 2007 to 2011, he was President of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. His recent publications include *René Girard's Mimetic Theory* (2013) and *The European Wars of Religion* (2016).

Sheelah Treflé Hidden is an associate of the Heythrop Institute for Religion and Society. She edited *Jewish, Christian and Islamic Mystical Perspectives on the Love of God* (2014), and co-edited *Mimesis and Atonement: René Girard and the Doctrine of Salvation* (2016).

Trevor Cribben Merrill is Lecturer in French at the California Institute of Technology. He writes a regular column for *L'Atelier du roman*, a French literary review, and authored *The Book of Imitation and Desire* (2013), a Girardian reading of Milan Kundera.

Contributors

Jeremiah Alberg is Professor at International Christian University in Tokyo. His research has concentrated on modern philosophy, especially concerning Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. He is currently President of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion.

Mark R. Anspach is an anthropologist affiliated with the Institut Marcel Mauss in Paris. He is the author of *Vengeance in Reverse* (2017) and the editor of an essay collection by René Girard, *Oedipus Unbound* (2004).

Emanuele Antonelli is the author of *La creatività degli eventi. René Girard e Jacques Derrida* (2011) and of *La mimesi e la traccia. Contributi per un'ontologia dell'attualità* (2013). He has published on post-structuralism, aesthetics, and hermeneutics in journals of philosophy and literature.

Pierpaolo Antonello is Reader in Italian Literature and Culture at the University of Cambridge, and Fellow of St. John's College. With René Girard and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, he published *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*.

Ann Astell is Professor of Theology (2007—) at the University of Notre Dame. Former President of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (2011–2015), she is the author of six books and the editor or co-editor of seven volumes.

Vanessa J. Avery is a Religious Studies Ph.D. and organizational consultant. Her research focuses on the cultivation of non-violence in scriptural interpretation and organizational culture. She is the author of several articles and a forthcoming book, *The End of Violence*.

Jean-Marc Bourdin has a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Paris 8 and is a member of the Association Recherches Mimétiques. He is the author of *Duchamp révélé: l'art contemporain à l'épreuve de la théorie mimétique* (2016).

Elisabetta Brighi is Lecturer in International Relations in the Department of Politics and IR at the University of Westminster. She works at the intersection of International Security and International Political Theory and has co-edited, most recently, *The Sacred and the Political*.

Warren S. Brown is Professor of Psychology and Director of the Travis Research Institute at the Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary. He has coauthored or edited four books, including *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* and *Neuroscience, Psychology and Religion*.

Paolo Diego Bubbio is Senior Lecturer at Western Sydney University. His research concerns the relationship of the post-Kantian tradition to later movements of European philosophy, including mimetic theory. He is the author, most recently, of *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition*.

David Cayley is a writer and broadcaster living in Toronto, Canada. In 2001, he presented a five-hour profile of René Girard on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's national network. He authored *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*.

Brian Collins is the Drs. Ram and Shushila Gawande Chair in Indian Religion and Philosophy at Ohio University and the author of *The Head Beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice*.

Scott Cowdell is an Anglican priest, theologian, and writer. He is Research Professor in Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University, Canberra, and Canon Theologian of the Canberra-Goulburn Diocese. His last book was *René Girard and Secular Modernity* (2013).

Robert J. Daly Professor Emeritus of Theology at Boston College, former editor of *Theological Studies,* and author of *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (2009), specializes in the biblical and patristic origins of liturgical theology and practice.

David Dawson teaches at the Universidad de Costa Rica in San José. His work includes a translation of René Girard's *Sacrifice* (2011) and a book, *Flesh Becomes Word: A Lexicography of the Scapegoat or, the History of an Idea* (2013).

Frederiek Depoortere is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven (Belgium) and author of "René Girard and *Christus Victor*: Solving the Problem of the Cross," in *Culture, Theory and Critique*.

Paul Dumouchel is Professor of Philosophy at the Graduate School of Core Ethics and Frontier Sciences, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan. He authored *The Ambivalence of Scarcity and Other Essays* (2014), *The Barren Sacrifice* (2015), and co-edited *Social Bonds as Freedom* (2015).

Jean-Pierre Dupuy is Professor Emeritus of Social and Political Philosophy, Ecole Polytechnique, Paris and Professor of Political Science, Stanford University. Among his publications: *The Mark of the Sacred* (2013) and *A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis* (2015).

John P. Edwards is Associate Director of Campus Ministry and Adjunct Professor of Theology at Villanova University. He completed his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology at Boston College in 2015. His work investigates the need for collaboration among theologians and ministers.

Rev. Adam Ericksen is the Education Director at the Raven Foundation, where he uses mimetic theory to analyze current events. He was the youth pastor at the First Congregational Church of Wilmette, Illinois. He lives with his family in Portland, Oregon.

Chris Fleming is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the School of Humanities at Western Sydney University. He has authored or edited six books, including *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (2004) and, most recently, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (2014).

Kathryn M. Frost teaches at St. Joseph's College—New York. Her research concerns the social psychology of individual and cultural identity. She co-authored "Psychology, Hermeneutic Philosophy, and Girardian Thought: Toward a Creative Mimesis," in *René Girard and Creative Reconciliation* (2014).

Eric Gans is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of French at UCLA. He inaugurated Generative Anthropology with *The Origin of Language* (California, 1981). Since 1995, he has edited the online journal *Anthropoetics* (www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu) and produced over 500 Chronicles of Love and Resentment.

Stephen Gardner is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA. Author of *Myths of Freedom: Equality, Modern Thought, and Philosophical Radicalism* (Greenwood, 1998), he has written numerous essays in political thought and the problems of modernity.

Scott Garrels is a clinical psychologist and Adjunct Professor in the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is editor of the volume *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion* (2011).

Bonnie Glencross is an Assistant Professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada. Her research is in bioarchaeology and human biology. She co-authored "Representing Neolithic Violence in the Near East," in *Traumatised Bodies: An Osteological History of Conflict from 8000BC to the Present.*

Sandor Goodhart ,Professor of English and Jewish Studies at Purdue University, author of *The Prophetic Law: Essays in Judaism, Girardianism, Literary Studies, and the Ethical* (2014), and *Sacrificing Commentary: Reading the End of Literature* (1996), was President of COV&R (2004–2007).

Wilhelm Guggenberger is Professor of Catholic Social Ethics at the University of Innsbruck. His research concerns Catholic social doctrine and the connection between behavior and social structures. Last published (with W. Palaver): *Eskalation zum Äußersten? Girards Clausewitz interdisziplinär kommentiert.*

Michael Hardin is the Executive Director of Preaching Peace, co-founder of Theology and Peace, and editor/author of eight books, including *The Jesus Driven Life*, *Stricken by God?* and *Walking with Grandfather.*

S. Mark Heim is Samuel Abbot Professor of Christian Theology at Andover Newton Theological School and author of *Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. An American Baptist minister, he writes widely about religious pluralism and Christian ecumenism.

Joel Hodge is Senior Lecturer in Theology at the Australian Catholic University. He is author of *Resisting Violence and Victimisation: Christian Faith and Solidarity in East Timor* (2012) and co-editor of the book series Violence, Desire, and the Sacred (Bloomsbury).

William A. Johnsen is Professor of English at Michigan State University. Author of *Violence and Modernism: Ibsen, Joyce and Woolf* (2003), he edited two book series at MSU Press and the journal *Contagion* for the Colloquium on Violence and Religion.

Grant Kaplan is a Professor in the Department of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University. He is the author of *Answering the Enlightenment* (2006) and *Unlikely Apologist: René Girard and Fundamental Theology* (2016).

Michael Kirwan is a Jesuit priest lecturing in Theology at Heythrop College, University of London. He works in political theology and theology and literature, and authored *Discovering Girard* (2004), *Political Theology: a New Introduction* (2008) and *Girard and Theology* (2009).

Christopher J. Knüsel is Professor of Biological Anthropology at the Université de Bordeaux, France. He serves as Co-Head, with Clark Spencer Larsen, of the Human Remains Team at the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük (Turkey) being excavated by Ian Hodder (Stanford University).

Nidesh Lawtoo is SNSF Visiting Scholar in The Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University. His research focuses on mimesis in literature and philosophy. He is the author of *The Phantom of the Ego* (2013) and *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory* (2016).

Andrew McKenna is Professor Emeritus, French Language and Literature, at Loyola University Chicago. He was Editor-in-Chief of *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* (1996–2006) and the author of *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (1992).

Mathias Moosbrugger is Coordinator of the "Raymund Schwager: Dramatic Theology" research project at the University of Innsbruck. He is the author of *Die Rehabilitierung des Opfers* (2014) and co-editor of several volumes of the *Collected Works* of Raymund Schwager (2014–17).

Duncan Morrow is a lecturer in Politics and Director of Community Engagement at Ulster University. He has written on themes of conflict and peace (including issues of faith, politics, and voluntary action) and is a member of the Corrymeela Community.

Cyril O'Regan is Huisking Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. He works at the intersection of theology and continental philosophy. His most recent book is *Anatomy of Misremembering: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Philosophical Modernity. Volume 1: Hegel* (2014).

Bernard Perret has pursued a double career as a civil servant (currently at the French Ministry of Ecology) and as an essayist. He is the author of a dozen books on various subjects, including economics, social anthropology, and religion.

John Ranieri is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the University Honors Program at Seton Hall University. He is interested in political philosophy and its relationship to biblical thought.

Vern Neufeld Redekop, Professor of Conflict Studies at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, has belonged to the Colloquium on Violence and Religion since 1992. He recently co-edited (with Thomas Ryba) *René Girard and Creative Mimesis* and *René Girard and Creative Reconciliation.*

Martha J. Reineke is Professor of Religion at the University of Northern Iowa. She is the author of *Sacrificed Lives: Kristeva on Women and Violence* (1997) and *Intimate Domain: Desire, Trauma, and Mimetic Theory* (2014).

Kris Rocke is the founding director of Street Psalms and co-author of *Geography of Grace: Doing Theology from Below* and *Meal From Below.* He is an ordained member of the Street Psalms Community and swears he heard God laugh once.

Dominican friar Miguel Rolland (Ph.D. Anthropology/Arizona State University) researched conflict among the Maya Tsotsil of Chiapas, Mexico and publishes articles exploring mimetic theory's relationship to ethnography and ethnohistory. He currently pastors a large mission parish in Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico.

Phil Rose is President of the Media Ecology Association. His research concerns communications media and human behavior. He is the author of *Roger Waters and Pink Floyd: The Concept Albums* (2015) and *Radiohead and the Global Movement for Change: 'Pragmatism Not Idealism'* (2016).

Thomas Ryba UND Theologian-in-Residence at Aquinas Center/Purdue, has authored, edited, or co-edited six books and 60 articles on theology, religious studies, and cinema. He serves on editorial boards of several scholarly journals and of a Morcelliana series on A.-T. Tymieniecka.

Lucien Scubla is a French researcher working on the formal models of anthropology and the ritual foundations of human societies. He is the author of *Lire Lévi-Strauss* (1998) and *Giving Life, Giving Death* (2016).

Petra Steinmair-Pösel is a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Vienna. Her current research concerns the relationship between mystical experience and sociopolitical commitment, as well as social ethical questions concerning gender issues, ecology, and sustainability.

Stefano Tomelleri is Professor of Sociology at University of Bergamo in Italy. His research concerns the application of mimetic theory in the social sciences. He is the author of *Ressentiment: Reflections on Mimetic Desire and Society (2015).*

Sheelah Treflé Hidden is an associate of the Heythrop Institute for Religion and Society. She edited *Jewish, Christian and Islamic Mystical Perspectives on the Love of God* (2014) and co-edited *Mimesis and Atonement: René Girard and the Doctrine of Salvation* (2016).

Nikolaus Wandinger is Associate Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. He is engaged in further developing Raymund Schwager's notion of dramatic theology and uses it and mimetic theory for the analysis of popular culture.

Bruce K. Ward is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Thorneloe University College, Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario. He is the author of *Redeeming the Enlightenment: Christianity and the Liberal Virtues* (2010) and (with P. Travis Kroeker) *Remembering the End: Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (2000).

James G. Williams Professor Emeritus of Religion, Syracuse University, is the author of *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* and editor of *The Girard Reader*, among other writings. He was the initial organizer of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion in 1990.

General Introduction

James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver

René Girard's mimetic theory is widely discussed and recognized as an anthropological apologia for Christianity. Its anthropological starting point, however, allows it to be applied far wider than to topics traditionally assumed to be the special preserve of Christian faith.

In this general introduction, you will find a brief description of what is meant by "mimetic theory" and some remarks concerning its place in the reassessment of the understanding of religion that is taking place throughout the world in these first decades of the twenty-first century.

Mimetic Theory, or, an Insight Made Rigorous

Mimetic theory is the name most typically given to the insight concerning the imitative or borrowed nature of desire which René Girard (1923–2015) developed into a rigorous hypothesis. Girard himself, pointing to the presence of the insight in the works, for instance, of Dostoyevsky, Proust, Cervantes, and Shakespeare, always insisted that he was not the first to discover mimetic phenomena. His claim was to have been the first rigorously to thematize and theorize an insight at which others have arrived. These others typically found their way to a hard-won, and often dangerous, wisdom gained through their own involvement in the issues of desire and violence which the insight describes.

Because the insight is one concerning personal and social self-criticism, there are any number of ways to unpack mimetic theory, and Girard himself con-

J. Alison (✉)
Madrid, Spain

W. Palaver
University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

stantly wrestled with new and better approaches to presenting it, never satisfied with how he had done so in this or that text.

Nevertheless, a tripartite model is often used for setting out Girard's thought, and its three parts are as follows: the mimetic nature of desire; the mechanism of the surrogate victim (commonly called "the scapegoat mechanism"); and the subversion from within of the world created by the first two, coming into operation through the prophetic critique of sacrifice.

Mimetic Desire

Girard became aware, through his own interaction with literature, that *we desire according to the desire of the other*. Humans do not desire starting from themselves, but others induce in them, starting from earliest infancy, the gestures, sounds, and desires which will allow them to become who they are to be. It is our models who induce in us the desirability of objects. Who we are and what we want is no longer simply determined by instinct but is borrowed from the different elements of the social "other" that surrounds us. This social "other" reproduces itself effectively in us as highly malleable participants. Our freedom (which is real) depends both on our depending peacefully on what is other than us and precedes us, and on a certain forgetfulness of what has made us to be. That which makes it possible for the social "other" to reproduce itself *in and as* us is the enormously more effective imitative capacity which this particular ape has developed over the millennia by comparison with our nearest simian relatives.

Imitation among simians clearly contributes to group cohesion and certainly makes much faster learning possible. But this very same positive dimension of imitation is always poised to turn into a negative one: Imitation can, and very easily does, flip into rivalry. Thus, as a group becomes better and better at imitation, so also does the risk grow that the potential for rivalry implicit in ever-better imitation is able to overcome whatever instinctual braking mechanisms and dominance patterns the group has. And, this can quickly threaten the group's survival. The question then arises: What was it, or is it, that prevents the growing equality among ever more efficient imitators from leading them to destroy one other? Between the "all together" of imitation and the "all against all" of rivalry, the merest nothing can suffice to flick the switch.

The "Scapegoat" Mechanism

Girard's answer to this question is well known: *the movement from all against all to all against one*, commonly referred to as the scapegoat mechanism. Groups with very high levels of imitation (and therefore potential for rivalry), and diminished, or inexistent, instinctual, hierarchical, or outside control mechanisms, do run a great risk of self-destruction (and many have probably destroyed themselves, leaving no trace). Yet it can happen, in the midst of the growing (and terrifying) frenzy of the all against all that, without anyone being aware of how or why, attention comes to be drawn toward one or other member of the

group. This happens in such a way that the group begins to coalesce round that member, who is thrown out, most probably killed. In finding themselves caught up in this together, those involved are also brought together to a place of sudden unanimity, and therefore of shared peace, in the presence of a cadaver. This is a unique and new form of shared attention in which the now absent one, present as cadaver, comes to acquire an importance as having apparently produced the peace which the group is now enjoying. Eventually, this can lead to the victim being deified. For it is perceived as having caused, as only a "god" could, both the violence that led to its murder, and the peace which befell the group thereafter. Girard's thesis is that "the peoples of the world do not invent their gods. They deify their victims."[1]

The astounding thing is that those groups that have the pure, contingent good luck to stumble into this mechanism survive and may even learn enough to survive future frenzies by repeating the same thing. It is not that, by repeating the founding murder, they have "invented" something cognitively. Rather, it is the case that they have stumbled unawares into a mechanism that will thereafter structure their sociality. As they repeat it, this mechanism will invent them as humans, going so far, eventually, as to structure their cognition.

As the mechanism becomes operative among highly imitative animals, who now have both something new to imitate (the founding murder) and a new sense of togetherness in their imitation, it is quite easy to follow Girard's claim that repeated imitation of this scenario gives rise to ritual, and eventually myth (as and when language comes into play), and alongside both of these, prohibitions (which work to prevent the kind of behavior leading to the terror of the original frenzy, but are often systematically infringed when it comes time for the group to re-enact the ritualized elements of the frenzy and its resolution).

The Subversion from Within of the Sacrifical Mechanism

Fundamental to the working of the scapegoat mechanism is a certain sort of ignorance or miscognition (called by Girard, in French, "*méconnaissance*"). For, naturally enough, where there is doubt, and thus dissent in the group concerning whether or not the right one has been "got," then unanimity and peace are never reached. Where unanimity and peace are reached, these are themselves sufficient, from the surviving participants' perspective, to indicate that the right one was expelled. But what would be intolerable is the suggestion that the selection of the expelled one was in fact arbitrary, the result of a mechanism. For in that way, no decision could be settled, no order could be secure.

Girard studied an enormous number of myths and rituals from all over the world, finding elements of the scapegoat mechanism present in very large numbers of those texts, but always as *structure*, never as theme. By this, he meant that different moments in the originary scenario are described—the imitative build up to frenzy, the loss of order, the ganging together against one, the resulting peace and fruitfulness of what followed, the gradual breakdown of the same scenario (which he refers to as the "sacrificial crisis"), and the starting

up of the mechanism again. But the accounts are always muddled: Different moments are attributed to different agencies, responsibilities are shared with improbably anthropomorphic figures, and so on. In other words, the narrative given by the survivors is a mendacious version of just such scapegoating scenarios.

The one thing you do not see in these accounts is the scapegoat mechanism as *theme*, that is to say, described as such. For the more clearly there is seen what had really happened in the particular variant of the originary scenario lived by this particular group, the more impossible would have been living with the knowledge derived therefrom: that their order and stability depended on a random murder (and not on a god to whom they sacrifice in order to obtain protection), and that all that they considered to be good, just, fair, and so on rested on a guilty secret.

What Girard noted, emerging in the axial period (from about the eighth until the third century BCE), is the possibility that what had previously only been available as *structure*, driving its participants to behave according to its dictates unawares, starts to become available as *theme*. The most sustained evidence of this is to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures, where time and again, stories from far more ancient times are to be found, but with their elements of the scapegoat mechanism brought more and more clearly into focus, depicted with ever more straightforward, we might say, anthropological clarity. The cast-out one begins to be given a voice as the one who has told the truth, by comparison with the mendacity of those whose fake peace and unanimity would be constructed through his murder. This is accompanied, of course, by the prophetic critique of sacrifice as being not far removed from murder, as somehow involved in cover-up and fake goodness, as something that is ineffective, and does not have anything to do with God.

Girard sees the most complete culmination of the process of the subversion from within of the scapegoat mechanism in the accounts of Christ's Passion from the four canonical Gospels. Each insists that what Jesus was doing in going to his death was of fundamental anthropological significance, that the murdered one was innocent, and that in light of these events, archaic sacrifice would hereafter be put into question and becomes impossible to carry out in good conscience. Along with this, any cultural structure that depends on some sort of unanimous "we" over against a wicked "they" would start to crumble, since its justifications would lose credibility.

Girard lays particular emphasis on the work of the Biblical *texts* as having brought the intolerable knowledge of what structured the "*méconnaissance*" into the open. He claims that modern western history, exposed at length to the instantiated possibility that our victim is innocent, has been culturally marked at depth by the loss of confidence that scapegoating is effective in healing social strife. The loss of sacred mechanisms for controlling desire has lead, on the one hand, to the potential for both freedom and responsibility, and on the other, to an ever increasing imitative desire being unleashed without any divine sanction or other external means to check our potential for rivalry.

Some Consequences

As you can imagine, given the above, mimetic theory opens up discussion in a wide variety of fields, and those who work with it find its insight close to the center of many discussions in which it is not formally involved. So, for instance, the first dimension of the insight, the mimetic nature of desire, has a significant knock-on effect in discussions of personal and social psychology, the relationship between self and other in modernity, the relational nature of human cognition, to name but a few. The second dimension, that concerning the scapegoat mechanism, leads straight to the heart of many modern discussions concerning our process of hominization, primatology, brain development, the role of ritual in domestication of animals and the invention of agriculture, the relationship of revenge to the development of debt, and thus of economic exchange, again to name but a few. The third dimension, concerning the work of the Biblical texts around the innocence of the victim, has a straightforward impact on Biblical hermeneutics, as also on the hermeneutics of literary texts in general, and those of religious traditions other than ones depending upon Jewish and Christian scriptures. This dimension then leads straight into discussions concerning the process of secularization in the West, and the relationship between religious knowledge and the invention of the scientific method. From these matters, it is but a short step to debates concerning the modern capacity to structure societies with a shifting relationship between war, terrorism, nation-states, and human potential for self-destruction. All of these issues, and many more, are touched on to a greater or lesser extent in the articles which comprise this handbook.

Toward a New Approach to "Religion"

What we editors were asked for, specifically, by our editors at Palgrave Macmillan—initially Burke Gerstenschlager, and subsequently Phil Getz—was to provide a handbook concerning mimetic theory *and religion*. In other words, of the many different paths that a handbook of mimetic theory might have taken, it was in particular its impact in the sphere of the understanding of religion that was sought out as being helpful for modern students wishing for insights into the reality of the world in which they are learning to become adult protagonists. The need for this has only grown during the time it has taken for us to put together this handbook. It has become increasingly clear that the old Voltairean Enlightenment narrative concerning religion has fallen on hard times. A vision in which religion was seen as the obscurantist trickery of knavish priests conspiring against the intelligence of innocent and naturally secular people who could, by means of reason, become free to know, understand, and thus govern their world. A vision, therefore, in which "religion" was the sphere of the weak-minded, while reasonable people had clearer and more distinct ideas concerning human behavior.

That intellectual world, then, is left in some disarray; we can no longer view religion simplistically as a more or less unfortunate epiphenomenon to be treated with contempt, while the "real" structural forces at work (economic, climatic, geographical, and political) are to be mined as all that is necessary for understanding how the world works. For there are many signs of different forms of "fundamentalism," whether formally religious or not, being on the rise. Our societies appear simultaneously both much more secular and much closer to archaic religion than would have seemed imaginable 50 years ago. You do not need to be a genius to see that the relationship between ISIS/Daesh and modernity, or that between "God" and guns in US political culture, one theoretically governed by an Enlightenment-era constitutional document, do not fit easily into currently available intellectual constructs.

The presence then, of a view of being human in which "religion" is the matrix out of which have been born all forms of human living together, so that the other forms of institutional life—economic, political, educational, and so forth—all bear within them, ineluctably, the traces of their birth in archaic religious practice, yields quite a different approach to all the modern questions for which our current paradigms are obviously ill-suited. This approach scarcely disputes the Enlightenment suspicion of obscurantism and mendacity as deeply at work in what we call "religion." On the contrary, it suggests that it is by means of a certain form of mendacity that we have been able to contain our violence violently, and that our access to reason is inseparable from the long historical process of our dealing with the mendacity which has enabled there to be a human culture at all. We need, then, a different narrative of the relationship between mendacity, culture, its formally religious elements, and our capacity for reason than one to which we have become accustomed.

The Indian essayist and novelist, Pankaj Mishra, has pointed out, in the wake of various of the terrorist attacks with which we have become familiar, that we need a new Enlightenment. The disdain for religion that went along with the previous one is no longer a viable option for the twenty-first century. He indicates, in a January 2015 article in *The Guardian,* that "We may have to retrieve the Enlightenment, as much as religion, from its fundamentalists." And certainly, one of the features of mimetic theory, working as it does as a self-critical insight into human desire and violence, is that it makes possible a much more empathetic account of humanity's struggles to cope with our own violence, both in the distant past and in the present, than others which are currently available.

This handbook is, then, offered in the hopes of fostering a more sympathetic, but no less critical, relationship to religion, one that will genuinely open up new avenues for peaceful ways of living together, rather than simply dressing up forms of archaic violence with the self-deceptions of fake innocence or pretended neutrality.

We could not but end with a word of thanks to all the contributors who, with astounding generosity, promptitude, and forbearance, have shared their intellectual excitement to make this volume what it is. But special thanks must go to