Violence and the Sacred in the Ancient Near East

Girardian Conversation at Çatalhöyük

Edited By
IAN HODDER
Stanford University
**Contents**

**PART III THE DIALECTICS OF MIMESES**

7  Mimetic Theory, the Wall Paintings, and the Domestication, De-domestication, and Sacrifice of Cattle at Çatalhöyük  
   *William A. Johnson*  
   153

8  The Ordeal of the Town: Rites and Symbols at Çatalhöyük  
   *Benoit Chantre*  
   165

9  Stretching Girard's Hypothesis: Road Marks for a Long-Term Perspective  
   *James Alison*  
   188

10  Girard's Anthropology vs. Cognitive Archaeology  
    *Jean-Pierre Dupuy*  
    209

**PART IV CONCLUSION**

11  Religion as a Factor in the Development of Settled Life  
    *Ian Hodder*  
    235

**Index**  
   249

**Figures**

1.1 Overview of the contemporary excavations in the south area of Çatalhöyük  
   page 6

1.2 The role of violent imagery in social and religious processes at Çatalhöyük  
   7

4.1 Prone and 'hog-tied' male from Epipalaeolithic Wadi Mataha, Jordan  
   65

4.2 A healed blunt force traumatic injury of the frontal bone in Sk. 17485, Neolithic Çatalhöyük  
   74

4.3 Postcranial view of a healed penetrating traumatic injury in Sk. 16513, Neolithic Çatalhöyük  
   75

4.4 Close-up of the endocranial surface of the penetrating injury of Sk. 16513, Neolithic Çatalhöyük  
   76

4.5 Cranial vault injuries at Neolithic Çatalhöyük  
   77

4.6 Sk. 3368 in its burial context, Neolithic Çatalhöyük  
   82

4.7 Clay balls, Neolithic Çatalhöyük  
   84

4.8 Groundstone mace-head, burial Sk. 30007, Neolithic Çatalhöyük  
   84

5.1 The location of Göbekli Tepe in relation to other Neolithic sites in northern Mesopotamia  
   98

5.2 Map of excavated areas at Göbekli Tepe  
   107

5.3 Sculpture from Göbekli Tepe of a bird perched upon a human head  
   108

5.4 Reconstruction of the final EPPNB phase (layer II) at Göbekli Tepe  
   110

5.5 Thoryphallic depictions from Göbekli Tepe  
   111
Introduction to the Thought of René Girard

William A. Johnsen

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, taking his cue from Charles Darwin, offers a “big history” version for the biological evolution of the modern human self, beginning from single cells that seem to move purposefully under the microscope, to modern consciousness emerging in humans, where mind has come to brain, and “self comes to mind” (Damasio 2010). His evolutionary premise is that cells are disposed to agglomerate, and over immense biological time, some of these agglomerations successfully cohere into larger and more complex multiple-celled beings, and over still more time, these more complex beings further aggregate, scaling up eventually to our current biological population. Every evolutionary advance in complexity is maintained, governed, and protected by some disposition to self-mindedness, some version of attention to the integrity of the whole being which culminates in increasingly complex brains, minds and consciousness.

Similarly, René Girard’s ambition is to provide a genetic and evolutionary interpretation of human culture. Girard lucidly builds out his hypothesis on the consequences of violence for any possible aggregating of mimetic proto-humans and what comes after (if they have any success in surviving), without of course having direct “evidence” to verify or falsify his model for these earliest stages. Darwin also built out human evolution in non-falsifiable terms; much of the evidence for evolution adduced afterwards had existed but was ignored until, as A. M. Hocart (1970) argues, researchers were able to recognize, for example, well after the publication of Origin of the Species in 1859, the significance of the first Gibraltar skulls discovered in 1848.

It was perhaps inevitable that Girard, who proposes a hypothesis to explain the origin and evolution of human culture up to modern times, would be drawn to consider the magnificent and startling agglomeration of the Neolithic proto-city Çatalhöyüğü, which sits on the threshold of so many important developments in human culture, such as the domestication of cattle and of sedentism itself (see Chantre, Chapter 8 this volume). Girard always insisted on the scientific nature of his research; he relished such opportunities to test his scapegoat hypothesis for the origin of religion, and what could be more enticing than the famous murals which seem to demonstrate the ritual killing of animals?

For Girard, the powerful effect of the culmination and resolution of spontaneous violence finalizing on one last opponent is the first non-institutional moment of group attention, a scaling up beyond the group attention to the leader in cohesion under dominance patterns. This moment of attention is then the point of origin for ritual, which tries to repeat it for the sake of its conclusion, hoping to appease whatever transcendent force causes violence and peace, but it is also the first moment of symbolic signification, the birth of the first sign emerging from a process of exception, “excepting” the last victim of a spontaneous violence finally unanimous from the rest who surround him. From later ritual emerges a replacement or substitute victim who is somewhat outside the group, less likely to set off a new stage of reprisal by potential allies or sympathizers, and therefore more pleasing to the gods or forces responsible. This moment when the taunted bull is perhaps dying, according to many who study the wall paintings, would be the very moment of this emergent sign of the sacred (see Clare et al., Chapter 5 this volume).

Thus humans are saved from their own violence by not recognizing it as theirs, expelling it by blaming it on everyone else, even the gods, everyone except themselves. This action for securing the favor of whatever transcendent force determines events is their religion. Misunderstanding is necessary; to understand would be to lose the efficacy of ritual. “Functionalism” would be irreligious, an impiety, although one that sometimes occurs in religion, that a certain behavior or ritual will guarantee a resulting action or outcome. Such méconnaissance (Girard’s term) is inherently unstable, but instability is more likely to produce a new misunderstanding in an opposite direction than comprehending the truth of human violence. Yet Girard views the evolutionary dynamic of religion historically as the gradual unveiling of myth and ritual’s veiling of human violence as the sole responsibility of humankind. The axial age which stands between us and
Çatalhöyük marks for Girard the crucial breakthrough to the truth, and the filling in of this long history of human culture can be seen as leading up to the crisis for the practice of violence expelling violence, and the difficult consequences following the disarming of the only tool we have ever had for peace. Our post-religious, secular age (it is currently Charles Taylor's term) is produced by the axial age, for Girard pre-eminently through the agency of the Judeo-Christian writings, but his model for religion as a human institution is secular and scientific (see James Alison, Chapter 9 and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Chapter 10, this volume).

So much for the attraction of Çatalhöyük for mimetic theorists. But why send along yet another group following yet another theory such as Girard's mimetic theory to a research site such as Çatalhöyük, already awash under wave after wave of visiting theorists — theologians, anthropologists, social scientists, Gaiaists? Seemingly, every visitor to Anatolia without a trowel has a theory. Girard is himself known as "the last hedgehog," notorious for his all-encompassing scapegoat hypothesis, so to disable in advance whatever prejudices that exist on the ground against "off the shelf theory" (a somewhat misleading term), I will explain mimetic theory as carefully as I can, as plain as dirt (in the American expression), carefully distinguishing Girard's inside and the outside view of sacrifice.

Following Girard's Approach to a Theory of Religion

Girard began his work (Deceit, Desire and the Novel [1963; Girard 1965]) by recognizing an uncommon understanding of desire common to the great novelists: Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Proust. Great writers recognize that humans are mimetic creatures, they copy each other, so that when we copy the beliefs and desires of someone else, we can easily enter rivalry with our neighboring models, whenever our desires converge on to some treasure which cannot be shared. The more the disciple and model compete, the more violent they become, until they become each other's model and each other's rival, and their rivalry becomes the new object of attention, victory over the other now having more value than the object itself. And their conflict inevitably entangles others. The judicial system specifically addresses this problem of breakaway rivalry with impartial law and overpowering enforcement to give the decisive last word of punitive violence that cannot be answered, but wherever it weakens or is underpowered, such as the international arena, breakaway violence can feed on itself.

Girard then asked himself in Violence and the Sacred (1972; Girard 1977) how earlier cultures survived the spread of violence without a judicial system to police, to terminate, such rivalries. His answer is violence itself, if it takes a certain but not inevitable path towards resolving a mêlée of antagonism into a finale of all against one. The "bad" violence which makes everyone an enemy of each other can become the "good" violence all visit on their common enemy. This miraculous transformation of violence is the basis, the model, for archaic religion, specifically, sacrifice powered by scapegoating.

The great synthesizing but undertheorized movement in anthropology (Frazer, Freud, and Durkheim) towards explaining the near universal dependence of archaic culture on religion and sacrifice challenged Girard to produce a better theory for religion than Frazer's version of scapegoating, Freud's version of the original victim, or Durkheim's "effervescence," to produce instead a generative model which describes a non-deterministic mechanism to account for these effects, to explain the origin, survival, and evolution of human culture in religion.

Girard's mimetic theory recognizes both the continuities and discontinuities between animal culture and human culture. At some point, perhaps because of increasing group size, brain size, or environmental factors, pre-human or almost human agglomerations can no longer survive rivalry and interspecies violence through the dominance patterns typical of animal culture. They must evolve a sustainable culture or die off. For Girard, the sustainability of all human culture begins in religion. The humans who survived, who left an appreciable record, are the children of religion.

How Does Girard Define Religion?

Religion is the crediting of some force greater than the human for humankind's survival, especially for its escape from killing itself off in a rampage of violence. Archaic religions across the world resemble each other because they more or less successfully address the same primary problem of intra-species violence, the capacity of humans to kill themselves off, with the same solution: a fortuitous but enabling misunderstanding of how to put down violence with violence by unanimous blaming and punishing one for the violence of all. This does not mean that humans inevitably, genetically, are violent and/or religious, nor does it mean that this solution is genetically guaranteed, as the neurological approach to archaic religious consciousness perhaps suggests. Girard proposes a non-deterministic mechanism, an outcome for raging human violence that is
possible but not at all inevitable. We may well suppose that the failures of religion as well as non-religious “social contracts” produced untold alternative social structures and strategies which did not survive long enough to produce a historical record for us to read. Unlike most other global theories, Girard’s mimetic hypothesis for the singular character of the foundation of human culture across the world in religion operates without the disabling crutch of unattested tribal migrations, a collective unconscious, or genetic/neural “hardwiring.” It is based rather in the indisputable and increasingly important researched subject of common human behavior as profoundly mimetic. Imitation as repetition, as learning, is vital to coevolution, but as rivalry can wipe out any agglomeration of proto- or modern humankind.

Girard proposes a generative mechanism to explain how humans have adapted for survival (or have not adapted) based in the consequences, both malevolent and benign, of their misunderstanding of their own mimetic behavior. Mimetic theory traces the evolution of social forms from an originary unanimous accusation of violence to apparently very different structures of sacred kingship or egalitarian judicial systems, to name just two apparently polarized eventualities.

Girard convincingly explains that prohibitions and ritual are both contrary and complementary to religion’s control of human violence. Prohibitions, which outlaw any behavior which could lead to conflict, are set aside, even mocked, in ritual. Rituals usually begin in general misuse, encouraging the very behavior ordinarily restricted by prohibitions, in order to invoke the only workable process which will stop it.

Girard’s generative mechanism thus accounts for similarity but also variation. It is not at all disproved by the seeming opposition between the behavior prohibition outlaws (incest, for example) and what ritual requires (incest, for example), or variation in ritual and prohibition within and across cultures (see Ansbach, Chapter 6 this volume). Scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith (1987) who question the explanatory value of such permanent terms as religion, ritual, and sacrifice (also see Farfone and Neiden 2012) by focusing on variation, and outlawing by fiat the internal motivating energy of theory to always increase its explanatory power, are, as Girard suggests, on a different path. Girard is unapologetic about the necessary and ambitious reductiveness of scientific theory which “must combine the maximum of actual uncertainty with the maximum of potential certainty” (Girard 1986, 98).

Ritual is an interpretation and recapitulation of the founding event, the seemingly miraculous peace that follows an outbreak of a mêlée which catches everyone but finally focuses down on one (the last) victim, who becomes retroactively responsible for all the violence and calamity. A community that survives this experience (by no means a given) may have learned that the only way to get back peace when it starts to fall apart again is to follow violence out to the end, to repeat the radical process of collectively discovering its single cause, stomping it out until no sign of violence is left.

If it survives such a radical practice, the group may learn for the next time to turn more quickly and efficiently, losing fewer members, to the end which brings peace. The conclusion of ritual delivers the sacred, the manifestation of the cause, but also the priceless end in peace. Thus the sacred is ambivalent, symbolizing everything that is wrong, but also everything that is right again. As interpretation, as religion, some communities will focus their ritual attention on the ultimate purgative all-against-one, on the last one as responsible for all the violence (s/he is the enemy of the people), minimizing any credit for peace going to the accused, but some will focus rather on the last one as the friend of the people, the last combatant before peace comes, as being the one who announces the arrival of peace, who delivered peace, on his or her own transcendent authority, in the name of another transcendent authority, or both. The former will evolve over immense periods of time into the judicial system which emphasizes accusation and punishment on the part of the whole community, innocent by comparison. The latter will ultimately emphasize the single quasi-divine figure who rules the community, whom they must worship and to whom they must render up offerings. This determines, in effect, the ritual distinction between the generally older and pre-existing form of sacrifice as cleansing the community of pollution as required by a higher power, and sacrifice as an immaculate and precious gift offering to a higher power.

How can we understand (from the outside view) the dynamic of their misunderstanding (from the inside view)? The anxious stomping out of a potential runaway fire is perhaps a good phenomenological analogy for acknowledging the urgent felt need to participate in preventing violence. We don’t rub out a fire with just the force it needs. We fear violence, so we attack it, we obliterate it, just to be sure. A snowball gathering immense force as it comes down a hill is a good image for recognizing the felt inevitability of violence horrifically accumulating everything to itself as it bears down on us. Neither example should suggest any “functionalist” approach in Girard’s hypothesis. Our excessive zeal in stomping out fires or our panicked belief that the descending snowball
is targeting us testifies rather to the lingering “religious” quality of our fears that transcendent malignant forces are massing against us. Yet we should nevertheless try to reason out as precisely as we can from the inside, but not simply describe sympathetically or “imagistically” (in both the common sense and the special sense Harvey Whitehouse gives it in *Modes of Religiosity* [Whitehouse 2004]) the founding of the ritual event in breakdown human violence.

### What, More Precisely, Is that Founding Event?

Humans are creatures more mimetic than others; they copy each other with greater effect. When they copy each other’s desires, they will become conflictual whenever the objects desired cannot be shared. Beyond a certain threshold, perhaps simply beyond a certain size population, hominid groups cannot restore peace through the dominance patterns which pacify animal and proto-human groups. Brute power and intimidation can only carry so far. As violence spreads, it creates a center of attention; “outliers” must address, match, copy, equalize this expanding violence at the center it creates or be engulfed as its (next) victim.

Violence proceeds from rivalry, the consequence of imitating another’s desire. Why is violence copied, how is violence “contagous”? Why does it “snowball,” why does it spread so fast, so fast, like wildfire? Girard does not give the quick (non-)answer, “because that is the way people are — violent, and that is the manner of violence, to be contagious.” He reasons out this sequence which recurs everywhere in the world, in the same pattern, that it recurs as a mechanism. And we should not short-circuit our own thinking by “ritually” depending on mythical shortcuts or agencies such as “contagion” or “polarization” which only depict the steps or algorithms a community invokes to speed up the process to its resolution. Girard begins with the universal claim of humans that they want peace from violence. It is as true now as it ever was: we all want peace, we never admit to being aggressive. It is all these others who seem to be aggressive, who want what we need, who want “our” things, and violence is the only way to retrieve the peace that they interrupted.

In the ensuing mêlée, everyone returns the violence against them. With interest, as Girard says, for we all love peace and hate violence, violently. As they contest with each other, combatants become more like each other. If mimetic violence makes all the same, then, as Girard reasons, it becomes easier for one person, ultimately, to be the same single enemy, to stand for everyone’s enemy. Easier, yes, but how could that happen?

In the spread of violent conflict, a third person or more no doubt takes one of the sides of the first two rivals to stop the violent “other” one, but perhaps also to hide themselves from becoming the potential next victim to the victor’s violence; as the attention of the victors expands to see if there is any more violence to be put down, this third person increases their group’s size when s/he imitates their collective violence on yet another person, inviting the group to copy its violence against another (which is of course itself a copy of the group’s violence) and, perhaps consciously, but perhaps not, deflecting the group’s violence away from itself.

How then does peace return from everyone imitating each other’s violence, from blow and counter-blow, when reciprocal violence engulfs everyone? A mêlée will exhaust the group’s limited resources, will wear down into a few left, into finishing off one last. Thus peace would return when the last antagonist or antagonists are vanquished by all who are left. The more lop-sided the final result is, the better it is for group survival; the best score for any iteration is all against one. Violence which spreads “contagiously,” engulfing all against all, in appearance and effect “polarizes,” finally, exhaustively, into all against (the last) one. Ritual sacrifice commemorates, formalizes this spontaneous outbreak and resolution of runaway violence, economizing it, but (mis-)attributing it to some causative force external to itself.

Where does the increasingly formalized ritual come from, as opposed to a runaway mechanism? It is as if the group asked itself, “what were we doing the last time peace arrived, or the last time the transcendent powers or forces that control everything gave us peace in the midst of everyone fighting?” They remember: all were united in opposition to the last antagonist. Again, for the survival of the group, the best, final score is all against one.

But how does that happen? How does endless reciprocity polarize? Lapidating as a collective act well-attested in the anthropological literature is especially susceptible to a mimetic reading, and Girard regards the great texts of sacred and “secular scripture” (Northrop Frye’s term [1976] for literature) as fellow theorists of human behavior, especially mimetic behavior. The anthropological lesson which Girard draws from the biblical story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11) is that throwing a stone is at once an accusation and a self-exculpation: the target is made responsible for contamination, the stone-thrower becomes an innocent trying to beat it down. Jesus’ analysis of scapegoating reveals its rivalrous spirit by not following the accusing crowd’s urging of him to accuse, to be the first stone-thrower. Instead he says, “Let anyone among
you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (Revised Standard Version). He makes them see exactly what they are proposing to do. Instead of each imitating, as quickly as possible, the first stone-thrower, to show they are as innocent as the first, as they usually do, here, in this case, the first stone-thrower, the first one to declare his innocence, would now (thanks to Jesus’ unwelcome critical introduction) have to pass the test of the group’s resentful gaze by declaring in their face that he is more innocent than they are, first among them, the most innocent of all, the least accusable.

The group is still mimetic but they imitate instead the retreat of the most likely first-stone thrower, not rampaging but presumably conscious, departing in birth order, oldest first. Jesus solemnly completes the pattern when he asks the woman if there are any accusers left, then seals her answer with his refusal to accuse, which came first and then last.

Lapidation is powered and organized by the dynamic embedded in the analogy of snowballing described earlier: the outlaw is warding off the approaching threat of becoming the next object of the group’s violence by deflecting and redirecting the accusation, by seducing the group to imitate her or his imitation of their own violence against someone else. And “seducing” may be too strong, too calculating, or functionalist an explanation. Perhaps this outlaw facing a violence approaching her or him cannot really believe s/he is the problem, s/he cannot “stand it,” let us say, to see her/himself as the cause of violence; it has to be someone else.

In particular, we must be careful not to cheat this relentlessly logical and ordinary explanation of runaway violence by turning “polarization” or “contagion” into magic processes which without further explanation “cause” these emergent patterns of all-against-one. We cannot “accuse” them; they are but descriptions, formalizations of the consequent patterns of human mimetic behavior. Contagion does not explain mimesis; mimesis explains social contagion, perhaps even the biological process of contagion.

Cultural Processes and Rites

Çatalhöyük is crucial to understanding the relation of the emerging institution of the city to evolving Neolithic death and burial practices: if violence is “the heart and soul of the sacred” (Girard 1977 [1972]), then religion’s attention to death begins not in some abstract idea of the afterlife, but in the pressing circumstances of the present. Where there is no transcendent mechanism such as police or army to take retribution out of the hands of the victims, every behavior must be moderated in favor of elaborate prohibitions lest it incite rivalry. Every death is a potential crisis because it is the tangible proof of an act of violence: “who killed this person who didn’t want to die?” To be safe, when someone dies, everyone living and dead must be pacified (see Palaver, Chapter 3 this volume). The processing of cadavers, like ritual sacrifice, relentlessly pushes through the disruptive process of decomposition and disincarnation to finally arrive at the purgative purity (and safety) of whitened bones (Girard 2000). Perhaps the process of firing some of the living units may have followed burial practice, to speed up the unit’s decomposition to avoid some threat of violence.

Girard argues that we frustrate our understanding of archaic society by arbitrarily distinguishing between cultural processes which appear successful, and thus pragmatic or functional (such as the domestication of cattle), and processes which are not successful as religious, mere superstitions (rainmaking, etc.). Is it logical to believe that archaic communities kept unruly beasts for untold generations in the hope that benefits would accrue to their future generations? Cattle domestication is the unforeseen and benign result of a religious sacrificial process (see Johnsen, Chapter 7 this volume), and Girard is bold enough to propose that cooking and fermentation also follow the process of order proceeding from breakdown and disintegration (Girard 2000).

Girard turned on its head Levi-Strauss’s famous but modest defense that all myth, no matter how unruly, always takes the so-called “biological facts” of the human origin of humans (conception) into account (Levi-Strauss 1962). It is likely, Girard reasoned, that humans could not discover the connection between sex and birth nine months later without some religious restriction on behavior to make such results visible (Girard 1977). The presence and absence of religious figurations of women is provocative to researchers of the Neolithic in general and Çatalhöyük in particular. That women give life is a fact; everything else is religion (Scubla 2016).

References