

flage. In his Foreword, historian Raymond Carr calls the book a "mine" to be "worked over" by subsequent historians. Except for a subsequent chronicler's covering some omissions of the kind mentioned above, I cannot imagine anyone but a writer of history as literature carrying the story any further.

Reviewed by ANTHONY KERRIGAN

Psychologists and Mythologues

La violence et le sacré, by René Girard,
Paris: Grasset, Collection Pluriel, 1980.
534 pp.

EVERY HALF-A-DECADE or so there appears in the intellectual-literary circles of Paris a man—scholar, politician, writer, artist—who draws all the attention to himself. The esprit-machine then starts functioning, the name is on all lips, literary juries perk up their ears, and foreign universities send in Ph.D. candidates to explore what is happening. The new star's publisher earns a lot of money....

Sartre was, of course, such a super-star after the Second World War, to be unseated by Claude Levi-Strauss, himself conceding pride of place to Michel Foucault. Ivan Illich shone for a few years, only to yield to Maurice Clavel who died two years ago. The man of the moment is now René Girard, a professor in America but little known here. His reputation is Paris-centered, and it is spreading wherever the French word penetrates.

Like Levi-Strauss and Foucault, M. Girard is a serious scholar. I remember a conversation with Jean-Marie Domenach, then director of *Esprit*, in which he expressed enthusiastic admiration for Girard's work whose fortunes had just begun to rise. Enthusiasm may be too

much; in Girard's case, however, we have an interesting representative of the new race of "mythologues": a student of myth, but, according to modern requirements, also of ethnology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, symbolism, etc.

Girard's rising fame is accompanied by a certain malaise in Freudian circles because he criticizes the Viennese master, and also because he is supposed to "save the face" of the Christian religion. How he does the latter, we may judge from a passage of his most recent and voluminous *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, where he writes that historical Christianity should be liquidated so that the true gospel text may shine again. This is, naturally, the kind of "de-mythization" to which the Protestant School, mainly Rudolf Bultmann, has accustomed us; but Girard's approach is, from another angle, even more radical.

The thesis is simple, or perhaps simplistic, and in spite of attacks on Freud, it is not essentially different from psychoanalysis. Every human community, Girard argues, from tribe to state, is based on group solidarity, achieved only when the members no longer engage in violence against one another. For this, violence must be expelled from the community by one single act of violence, murder, which thus becomes the founding sacrifice. The victim is an outstanding member of the community, perhaps a king or a hero. The sacrificial rite is then periodically repeated, reminding all how important social cohesion is. The subsequent sacrificial victims are marginal members of the community: child, conquered slave (in the Tupinamba tribe in northeastern Brazil), or an animal. The act cleanses the community for another period, until in the end the memory of the initial sacrifice has faded, and intra-group violence starts out again. A new cycle begins, but the old society has disintegrated.

This not too complicated thesis is expounded in heavy volumes of 400 to 600 pages, the *locus classicus* being *Violence and the Sacred*, the starting point of Girard's celebrity. The scholarly apparatus

is certainly impressive, but the central hypothesis is too weak to need it—and to support it. Like all simplifiers and reductionists, Girard is so enamored of his theory that he finds in it the explanation not only of all religions but also of most institutions of civilization and culture. Not only does he explain the passage from puberty to manhood in archaic tribes with the help of the thesis violence/expulsion of violence, he also reinterprets the Greek tragedies. He concludes that Oedipus was a sacrificial victim, on whose head all the Theban troubles were heaped, and who was then expelled, leaving behind a purified community, no longer violent. Yet, Girard ignores other famous sacrifices, notably Abraham's readiness to kill Isaac. Did it also serve communal peace?

Another point is the similarity of Girard's thesis to Freud's by now discredited one. The latter believed that the psychic drama of neuroses was originated in one pre-historic episode when the sons killed the father so as to find sexual access to the mothers and sisters. The whole psychoanalytic hypothesis centers on this parricide and this incest. It is, of course, rather venturesome to derive the history of psychic disturbances from *one* episode; such an explanation is itself mythical, not scientific. Thus the question is legitimate: What had happened before? Before parricide, before the "first" violence?

Girard's theory of the violence is just as vulnerable as Freud's and, indeed, as Rousseau's social contract theory before which human beings are supposed to have been so radically different. If society is incoherent, anarchic, and self-destructive at the time of the hypothetical beginning, by what means do its members suddenly establish enough peace for an agreement to organize the sacrifice and choose the victim? Would it not be more logical to assume that one faction (but how did *its* members assemble without a sacrificial violence of *their* own—and so on, regressing *ad infinitum*?) attacked and captured a member of the other faction, and sacrificed *him*? Then, however, one cannot speak of violence expelled, as Girard does,

since the damaged faction swears revenge and a vendetta ensues, or one faction subdues and enslaves the other. Anyway, the result is not social peace as Girard claims.

All this has nothing to do with religion, not even with credible sociology. If Girard were not blinded by the exclusiveness of his theory, he would give the needed attention to the multiple aspects of religious rites: thanksgiving, adoration, repentance for individual sin, etc. It is simply not tenable to view religion as merely the commemoration of expelled violence; as, ultimately, the self-protection of the community against its own self-destruction.

This point leads to the assertion of Aristotle, Cicero, and other great political thinkers that man is a political being who congregates in groups not because he fears danger but mainly because he needs the company of his fellows. Otherwise one would have to say with Girard (and Thomas Hobbes) that man is man's natural enemy and that the price of social cooperation is intra-social murder.

In spite of his present prominence, Girard is only one among modern scholars exploring the relationship between religion and myth, and calling upon half-a-dozen, partly new disciplines, like linguistics, the study of symbols, of tribal customs, etc. Girard himself digs deep in the meaning of Greek tragedies and the figures of Oedipus and Dionysus. These studies have a direct bearing on the religious formulations of our time, and their effects on the man-in-the-street will be measurable within a decade or two.

The positive effect is that religion is leaving the intellectual dungeon where it was held for decades by materialistic presuppositions. The negative effect is the danger of dissolving religion in myth. But as Martin Buber once wrote to C. G. Jung, the psychologists and the mythologues may only judge the always imperfect images that men make of God but they are incompetent to judge the reality of the God about whom men make those images and in whom they believe.

Reviewed by THOMAS MOLNAR