



“I would like to be your age...”<sup>1</sup>

René Girard, Pierre Farge

**Pierre Farge:** You gladly define yourself as an “apocalyptic thinker”: you state that “to understand the world is to understand the threat, the apocalyptic atmosphere.” But, for a Christian, the Apocalypse is something else; it is the fulfilment of the good news of the Gospel, the revelation, the advent of God’s kingdom. You should therefore be happy to be part of the world that you are living in, should you not?

**René Girard:** You are right. This text is far more contemporary than we believe. The atmosphere is more and more apocalyptic: globalisation ensures the triumph of mimetic desire which is at the source of rivalry, chaos, conflict, and therefore of violence.

**Pierre Farge:** Could you be more specific?

**René Girard:** First of all, violence prevails because technology, which was once the monopoly of the West, is spreading, in accordance with the mechanism of mimetic desire. Everyone wants the same thing as his neighbour.

We are witnessing a nuclear proliferation, an escalation to extremes as I say. Countries want to acquire nuclear weapons, not in the way of a deterrence strategy as during the Cold War, but in order to actually use them. The established bipolarisation of our era is not meant to last permanently. This is what I call mimetic rivalry on a planetary scale.

Another example of the apocalyptic atmosphere is 9/11: for the first time, men have turned technology against themselves.

These examples show that for the first time in history man has reached the possibility of self-annihilation, of Apocalypse, do they not?

**Pierre Farge:** But, after all, was it not Jesus who said: “knock and the door will be opened for you”?

**René Girard:** It is a way of seeing things.

**Pierre Farge:** You have deciphered the founding mechanisms of violence. How do you explain the accelerated escalation to extremes that began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

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<sup>1</sup> René Girard, “Je serais curieux d’avoir votre âge”, *Contrepoints* (November 11, 2015). The original French version of the text established by Pierre Farge is accessible via the following link: <https://www.contrepoints.org/2015/11/11/228619-je-serais-curieux-davoir-votre-age-rene-girard#fnref-228619-1> (accessed August 29, 2017).

**René Girard:** Through globalisation which accentuates mimetic desire, and through the decline of Christianity which accentuates it even more.

In the Bible, mimetic desire is denounced several times. The Book of Genesis gives a series of examples:

- The story of Adam and Eve with the apple is an obvious mimetic thread.
- Similarly, the issue of envy in the murder of Abel by Cain is a founding event because, immediately after it occurs, the law against murder is established: "[*Therefore*] *whoever kills [Cain], vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold.*" [Genesis 4:15 NASB]. This law represents the foundation of culture, capital punishment, the self-replication of the original murder: everyone takes part, and no one is responsible.
- Finally, the last of the Ten Commandments: "*You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field or his male servant or his female servant, his ox or his donkey [or anything that belongs to your neighbor.]*" [Deuteronomy 5: 21 NASB]. This Commandment lists all the objects that we must not desire, but stops at some point because it is impossible to list everything. To omit nothing, it suffices to name the common denominator: the neighbour. Thenceforth, mimetic desire is forbidden. Jesus urges us to imitate him rather than the neighbour so as to avoid mimetic rivalries which are the only source of violence.

At the same time, the decline of religion fosters violence. As I said, human relations are necessarily competitive. Consequently, religion alone keeps society going by sacrificial means. Religion appeases. Any religion is based on a scapegoat. The Aztec wars, for example, were conducted to take prisoners for the purpose of making sacrificial victims of them. The wars were therefore directly related to religion although they were not understood as such by the group. Christianity will denounce this mechanism for the first time because, before "Jesus as consenting scapegoat" (an innocent victim who consents to be sacrificed), war was essential to maintaining stable relations within society.

The scapegoat is sacralized because it has reconciled the community. But this mechanism works only if it is not understood, only if it is not theorized as it is today. Thus, Christianity is at the same time everything and its opposite.

**Pierre Farge:** So, from your perspective, the good news of the kingdom of God is that if we want to escape this escalation into the abyss, it is sufficient to go back to the biblical message which proposes that we choose between desire (leading nowhere but violence) and love. According to you, only God can save. This is extremely simple. It is enough to believe in God. But what is your advice to those who have lost their faith? Is there another alternative?

**René Girard:** It is complicated, isn't it? I cannot not give you an answer. It was through my work that I arrived at the truth of Christianity; through a discovery of the fundamental opposition between [mythical and] biblical texts (where Christ denounces the scapegoat mechanism for the first time, the sacrificial origin of the world, and the myths which endorse it). My conversion was more nearly intellectual than spiritual.

**Pierre Farge:** The last sentences of *Battling to the End* sound like your motto. You write that “we have to wake up our sleeping consciences. Seeking to comfort is always to contribute to the worst.” What would be your answer to those who criticize the complete lack of proof in your reasoning, the lack of scientific references?

**René Girard:** The truth of the biblical text is not a matter of referentiality/non-referentiality. The Bible does not need to be referential in order to be true. The Bible is true to the extent that it is the negation of myths which are, on the contrary, lies; because, as I said, they always endorse the scapegoat mechanism, violence.

The truth of the Bible is illustrated in the story of Joseph who goes against this mythical spirit which is the source of lies and betrayal. Joseph is always saved and never put to death. See in particular the theme of forgiveness granted those who [made him] a scapegoat. See also that Christ is a willing victim. This illustrates well the end of the sacrificial order, the denunciation of the scapegoat system.

**Pierre Farge:** Is this the keystone of your reasoning?

**René Girard:** I have devoted my career to the study of the relationship between violence and the sacred and I hope to have transformed archaic religion into a decipherable enigma.

As for the biblical religion, Christianity brings about a unique revolution in the universal history of mankind. By suppressing the role of the scapegoat, by saving the lapidated, by proclaiming the value of innocence and forgiveness, the Christian faith abruptly deprives ancient societies of their customary sacrificial victims. Evil can no longer be expelled by seizing on a designated culprit whose death brings only a false peace. On the contrary, one takes the side of the victim by refusing vengeance, by accepting forgiveness for offenses. This presupposes that each one watches the other with respect to fundamental principles, and that each monitors himself. Yet, at first, there is a great state of confusion.

**Pierre Farge:** Let us return to your last book. According to Clausewitz, “War is the continuation of politics by other means.” Nowadays, war does not have the same meaning it had during the time of the Prussian general: you previously mentioned the rebirth of terrorism starting with 9/11. Are Clausewitz’s ideas outdated?

**René Girard:** Indeed, the destruction of the World Trade Center signals the change of an era.

We have moved from the era of international wars to the era of terrorism. While international wars are decided and, in a certain way, controlled by politics, terrorism is completely outside political control. Hence, this inevitable escalation to extremes. We are powerlessly witnessing this explosion of violence through terrorism.

Getting back to mimetism and the suicide bombers of 9/11: in their effectiveness, in their knowledge of the United States, their training conditions, they were a bit American...

**Pierre Farge:** To sum it up, without Christianity we are witnessing the Apocalypse because there is no possible recourse to sacrificial safeguards?

*"I would like to be your age..."* (2008)

**René Girard:** This is precisely the apocalyptic principle. As soon as there is no longer any possibility of the slightest recourse, there is violence. A Christian who lives by his religion feels this. Therefore, even if he is mistaken, he always reckons the end is near, and his experience becomes apocalyptic.

Are you aware of what has been happening in the U.S. Congress over the past few days? Republicans are refusing to consent to Henry Paulson's plan of bailing out the banks by buying up to 700 billion dollars' worth of American toxic assets. If this is not apocalyptic...

**Pierre Farge:** You have said that you would like to be a young man nowadays. What advice could you give me?

**René Girard:** I would like to be your age and have this awareness of the future. You are lucky, aren't you?

*Translated by Andreas Wilmes & David Dawson*



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