



What are our Values Worth?¹

René Girard, Laurent d'Ersu, Robert Miglierini

La Croix: *La Croix* has sought to inquire into values, especially by asking in the wake of 9/11 whether universal values exist. What would your answer to such a question be?

René Girard: The word bothers me because when we say “value” we are speaking of something purely conceptual, something we recognize. Yet, there are many values we are unable to formulate, values that remain enormously important to us, some of which are due to the recent condition of our societies. Take egalitarian values, so strong in France. Many would not recognize them as values *per se* but as irreducible features of human existence. To answer your question about 9/11, I note that terrorism is perceived by many as an inevitability, as a way of fighting against values that differ from one’s own. This leads me to believe that “universal values” are indeed highly jeopardized.

La Croix: How is the value of equality linked to the violence that erupted on 9/11?

René Girard: We live in a world that is very egalitarian and competitive at the same time, a world where everyone aspires to the same kind of success. Democratic existence is very difficult. And it is obvious we live in a world where there are winners and losers, a world filled with resentment and humiliation. If you read Bin Laden’s statements, you notice he puts nations and individuals on the same level. In one statement, he refers to Hiroshima: he situates himself within modern globalism and makes claims on a planetary scale. Therefore, he really is a modern man influenced by Western values. There are indeed only Western values, all the rest is folklore.

La Croix: Nevertheless, Al-Qaeda uses a suicidal modus operandi which is unknown to the West...

René Girard: The phenomenon is quite unprecedented in the West and, thus, not easily understood. Notwithstanding this, it could be related to what Nietzsche calls “ressentiment”, or what Dostoyevsky calls the “underground”. One of the major features of “ressentiment” is that one prefers to lose provided the other loses as well. In the case of the

¹ René Girard, Laurent d'Ersu, Robert Miglierini, « Que valent nos valeurs ? Interview: René Girard », *La Croix*, December 13, 2002. The original French version of the interview is accessible via the following link : https://www.la-croix.com/Archives/2002-12-13/Que-valent-nos-valeurs-Interview-Rene-Girard-_NP_-2002-12-13-171969 (accessed September 28, 2017).

kamikaze, this is pushed to the extreme. Islam is not, however, quite the same thing. We are therefore witnessing something quite extraordinary.

La Croix: One might have expected the United States to wonder in the aftermath of 9/11 just what it was that provoked such hatred against it. Has this happened?

René Girard: If terrorists had blown up the Eiffel Tower, would it have provoked an examination of conscience? I do not think so. In the United States, as in France, there is an imperturbable and total moral self-confidence. Today, we see extremely entrenched attitudes, vital reactions in short. The American of the Midwest says: “I defend myself when I am attacked.” What needs to be said to Americans is not: “You are savages”, but rather: “You may be committing the biggest strategic mistake ever.” An imperial discourse never held before is now being held in the United States, notably in the intellectual milieu surrounding President Bush. Yet, many Americans do not believe an American empire is possible. The comparison sometimes made between the United States and the Roman Empire is, by the way, quite false. In the period of the Roman Empire, the populations concerned lived in a tribal context. Thus, to be protected by the Roman Empire or by another...

La Croix: Was the West wrong to let itself become as baffled as it is today?

René Girard: Let us recall the last pages of Victor Hugo’s *The Legend of the Ages* which feature aviation bringing peace to the world. This trick was recently repeated when we were told that computers defeated the Soviets and communism. Facing Bin-Laden, the opposite is true: we are confronted by people who settle in America, who become sufficiently American to function in the context of American life and who then, all of a sudden, start crashing airplanes into towers. Technology turns against an America that so believed in the goodness of man!

La Croix: Might the Christian message be rediscovered in a context such as this?

René Girard: The world would not be what it is today without Christianity. Regarding values, many people don’t know what they owe Judeo-Christianity and the Bible. We have betrayed Christianity by using it for materialistic and consumerist ends. As soon as one speaks of violence, people rebel: “And what has religion done for us, religion that promised us universal peace?” My answer to them is that the Gospels do not promise universal peace. Christianity says: “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” [Matthew 10: 34 NASB]. You take Christianity for a gadget that causes violence to recoil on your neighbor’s head. You imagine that you can use Christianity as a political instrument at the lowest level, that you can enslave it. But Christianity speaks truths about mankind. Far from exhausted, it might well return like a clap of thunder. People do not want to be reassured. They want Christians to provide them with meaning and significance, the very things the global economy cannot provide.

La Croix: You paint a very bleak picture of our time. What solution would you propose?

René Girard: The solution is in sharing: raw materials, research, medical resources... This is what might save us, sharing on the economic level. Let us recall the Marshall Plan, which succeeded in every respect. I am concerned about the lack of seriousness and unity among those who govern us, about their obliviousness to the extraordinary psychological predicament of our world. This is nothing new. I have lived in a world in disarray since 1937. But we fail to realize that the period following the war, from Khrushchev to the present, has made us more complacent [than we would otherwise be].

La Croix: Because your thought was built on the theme of violence, you were perceived as a “bird of ill omen”. Today, your work is being reread in a different light. What are your thoughts on this?

René Girard: What I said was not taken seriously because philosophy has dismissed violence for the last fifty years. Philosophy and theology have treated eschatological and apocalyptic texts like a pleasant farce. But that’s not it at all! Their presence in the Gospels poses serious problems. When men are deprived of their sacrificial safeguards, they can reconcile – this is what Christianity calls the kingdom of God. To attain the kingdom of God, it’s not sufficient to renounce the idea of violence: what the Gospels advocate is the universal renunciation of violence [as such]. Here is a value that could be universal but that is not universal yet!

Translated by Andreas Wilmes & David Dawson



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