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*Anthony Ekpunobi***Creative Renunciation of the Will to Violence**

*Abstract:* The Creative renunciation of the will to violence proves to be a solution to mimetic violence, according to René Girard. This principle works on the fact that violence is not denied but diverted. Creative renunciation recognizes that every passion feeds on the obstacles placed in its way and dies in their absence. The works of René Girard and Simone Weil portray the creative renunciation of the will to violence informed by the Christian tradition. Unfortunately, the reality of the unconscious mimetic process that largely controls all human actions is parallel with creative renunciation. Girard states the obvious fact that we are unconscious of the rivalry which we are part, but can discuss about that which we are not part. How do we arrive at creative renunciation within the mimetic crisis? In this article, I attempt to describe the nature of violence and creative renunciation as a reflective process.

*Key words:* creative renunciation, violence, mimetic desire, reflection, vengeance, consciousness

***Povzetek:* Ustvarjalna odpoved volje nasilju**

V skladu z Renéjem Girardom ustvarjalna odpoved volje nasilju dokazuje, da je to rešitev pred mimetičnim nasiljem. To načelo deluje pod pogojem, da nasilje ni zanikano, temveč spodkopano od znotraj. Ustvarjalna odpoved priznava, da se vsakršna želja hrani z ovirami na njeni poti in umre ob njihovi odsotnosti. Dela Renéja Girarda in Simone Weil prikazujejo ustvarjalno odpoved volje nasilju, ki jo oblikuje krščansko izročilo. Na žalost resničnost nezavednega mimetičnega procesa, ki večinoma obvladuje človeška dejanja, poteka vzporedno z ustvarjalno odpovedjo. Girard izpostavlja očitno dejstvo, da se ne zavedamo rivalstva, katerega del smo, lahko pa razpravljamo o rivalstvu, katerega del nismo. Kako lahko znotraj mimetične krize pridemo do ustvarjalne odpovedi? V članku poskušam opisati naravo nasilja in ustvarjalne odpovedi kot refleksivnega procesa.

*Gljučne besede:* ustvarjalna odpoved, nasilje, mimetična želja, refleksija, maščevanje, zavest

## 1. Violence and Unconsciousness

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Violence is the greatest threat to peace. The nature of violence is such that it threatens humans from whom it emanates. Violence is human violence. Violence, from the Latin *violentia*, translates as vehemence, impetuosity. It is the strength of emotion forced at or toward another. Human violence according to René Girard has its roots in the mimetic desire that hold sway of all human actions. Mimesis is a human natural form of exchange. Mimesis is a mechanism that generates patterns of action and interaction, personality formation, beliefs, attitudes, symbolic forms, and cultural practices and institutions. (Livingston 1992, xii) Human desire is mimetic. We do not know what to desire, thus we must imitate another's desire. For Jean-Michel Oughourlian, »desire is mimetic; it is copied from the other's desire« (2016, 4). Violence erupts when human desires converge on the same object leading to rivalry. The mimetic nature of desire accounts for the fragility of human relation. (Girard 2001, 10) Desire has the tendency to conflict when it collides with another's desire.

Violence is understood from the point of view of the conflictual mimetic desire. Mimetic rivalries can become so intense that the rivals denigrate each other, steal the other's possessions, seduce the other's spouse, and finally, even go as far as murder. (11) The entanglement is a vicious circle of violence. Rivals are unconscious of the illusion of the object of desire. The object's value is dependent on desire. Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, the subject desires the object because the rival desires it. In desiring an object, the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires. (1979, 145) The rivals are in constant denial of the entire process as each claims ownership of the desired object in contention. The paradox is that the resistance itself brings about the reenactment. (2001, 20) Rivalry therefore only aggravates mediation; it increases the mediator's prestige and strengthens the bond, which links the object to the mediator by forcing him to affirm openly his right or desire of possession (1976, 13). Blinded by the illusion of the object of desire, which has long disappeared, they go for each other's jugular.

The violence is meted out in the form of vengeance. The desire to commit an act of violence on those near us cannot be suppressed without a conflict. (13) Vengeance, according to Girard, is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process (14). The somewhat eclipse of reason plunges the rivals into reprisal conflict. The entire process is controlled by mimesis. Mimetic desire then, is the unconscious, involuntary, uncontrollable and the driving force of the events. (Grande 2009, 56) The focus of René Girard in his study of nature of violence is on the unconscious and desirous nature of mimesis. This is the cause of disagreement in violence. Who will blink first between the rivals is not possible as long as the veil of unconsciousness is effective.

The illusionary object of desire is far beyond the gaze of the rivals. The value conferred on the object by desire, presents it, as the only one available, hence mimetic desire is a desire to be another. The object is simply a means to the

mediator's being. According to Oughourlian, »mimetic desire, beyond the object, bears on the very being of the mediator, or model. The illusion consists in believing that it is the possession of such and such an object that gives the model this extra quotient of being that fascinates us and that we covet.« (2016, 6) Not knowing initially what to desire, consciously presents a »lack of being« in us, but the mimetic process, the »borrowed desire« unconsciously promises to complete our being through acquisition of the other's being.

Once our basic needs are satisfied, intense desire awakens in us, without actually knowing what to desire. Girard gives the reason thus:

»Man desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being. It is not through words, therefore, but by the example of his own desire that the model conveys to the subject the supreme desirability of the object.« (1979, 146)

The mimetic process depends on this illusion to exist. Thus, it conceals the illusion through resentment. Resentment comes in the form of jealousy, envy, hatred and rivalry. Girard observes that »there would be no envy, in the strong sense of the word, if the envious person's imagination did not transform into concerted opposition the passive obstacle which the possessor puts in his way by the mere fact of possession«. (1976, 13)

Violence has a social character in the sense that it is contagious. The rivalry between two persons is capable of escalation, involving the whole community into a war of all-against-all. For Girard, this is the destruction of human culture. »Men are powerless when confronted with the eclipse of culture.« (1989, 14) On this social level, the stereotype of persecution builds also on an illusion similar to rivalry. According to Girard, »the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole society« (15). The Holocaust is a genocide to remember. Bojan Žalec in his work about genocide, totalitarianism and multiculturalism, expressed the horror of genocide. According to him, the destruction of groups, which is the aim of genocide, therefore does not mean only killing, but also the destruction of the life conditions of factors of the group on economic, political, territorial, cultural and other levels or areas. (2015, 21)

## 2. Reflection and violence

Reflection is what will uncover the illusion that motivates violent rivalry. Vengeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every reprisal calls for another reprisal. (Girard 1979, 14) Reflection exposes the illusion that the acquisition of the

mediator's object will confer on the subject same status as the mediator. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998, no. 3) recalled that it is an innate property of human reason to ask why things are as they are, even though the answers which gradually emerge are set within a horizon which reveals how the different human cultures are complementary. What becomes of this innate property of the human being within the mimetic process is understandable, but how to recall it remains a mystery. The reflective character of renunciation is apparent; its divergence with the mimetic process understood.

According to Girard, violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into (1979, 4). The human tendency propelled by mimetic desire is to feed violence through reprisal – vengeance. He further states that the nature of violence requires a third party, a substitution, in order to divert its fury. (12) The real source of victim substitution is the appetite for violence that awakens in people when anger seizes them and when the true object of their anger is untouchable. The range of objects capable of satisfying the appetite for violence enlarges proportionally to the intensity of the anger. (2001, 156) The aim of reflection is to expose and divert through substitution. How can the unconscious mimetic human mind stumble at reflection?

The primitive society tamed violence through the scapegoat mechanism of accusation, while modern judiciary makes a rational confrontation of violence backed by a strong political will. Scapegoat mechanism unites the rivals at the expense of an innocent surrogate victim, while modern judiciary confronts the guilty party with a strong political will to prevent further reprisal. According to Robert Petkovšek, the scapegoat mechanism indicates an innocent, powerless victim by proclaiming him/her guilty of the chaos and the crowd – unaware that this conviction is delusive – unanimously sacrifices the victim as a scapegoat (2015; 2016a; 2016b; 2018). The aim of scapegoat mechanism is prevention of violent escalations, hence the substitution with a third party, the innocent victim. Modern judiciary, although an efficient solution to violence – accuses the guilty party – is weak in relation to the human mimetic tendencies. Unfortunately, like all modern technological advances, it is a two-edged sword, which can be used to oppress as well as to liberate. (Girard 1979, 23) The scapegoat mechanism is nothing but sacred murder, while modern judiciary promotes further escalation of vengeance. The quest is for a reflective solution that will expose the illusion and prevent violence.

### 3. Renunciation of the will to violence

It is not surprising to notice that the solutions proffered by René Girard and Simone Weil is rooted in religion, the Christian religion. This relates with Girard's view that »violence and religion are inseparable«. (19) Raymond Grew, believes that religion provides a consonant between community and true individualism (1997, 25). The aim of renunciation is to save the society from the escalation of violence. Wolfgang Palaver notes that,

»comparing Girard with Weil we also realize some differences between these two eminent spiritual thinkers. Whereas Weil reached out broadly to other religions, even beginning to build a bridge to the East, Girard has tended to confine himself until recently to the Judeo-Christian tradition, or even to Christianity alone.« (2011, 142)

The recourse to religion in engaging violence follows a simple mechanism that is found in the very nature of violence – it is not denied but diverted.

### 3.1 Renunciation in Simone Weil – detachment

Simone Weil speaks of a reflective mechanism known as »creative renunciation«. It is a theological mechanism derived from God's love for creation. She expounded this theme in her works: *Gravity And Grace* (1947) and *Waiting For God* (1951). Her understanding of creative love of God inspired in her a deep desire to reciprocate God's love. The reciprocation of God's creative renunciation will keep mimetic desire in check. In *Waiting For God*, she wrote:

»God causes this universe to exist, but he consents not to command it, although he has the power to do so. Instead, he leaves two other forces to rule in his place. On the one hand, there is the blind necessity attaching to matter, including the psychic matter of the soul, and on the other the autonomy essential to thinking persons.« (1951, 157)

This attitude of God towards creation is the paradigm of love. She calls it creative renunciation. In a sense, God renounces being everything. We should renounce being something. That is our only good. (1947, 33) She speaks of decreation, i.e. to jettison judgement in order to get to the real. »The past and the future hinder the wholesome effect of affliction by providing an unlimited field for imaginary elevation. That is why the renunciation of past and future is the first of all renunciations.« (1947, 19) Thus when we give up the natural impulse to judgement of things, we gain in return the reality of things. The aim of decreation is to restore what she calls balance. She makes a comparison of the exchange between the weak and the strong. She compares thus:

»The sympathy of the weak for the strong is natural, for the weak in putting himself into the place of the other acquires an imaginary strength. The sympathy of the strong for the weak, being in the opposite direction, is against nature. That is why the sympathy of the weak for the strong is pure only if its sole object is the sympathy received from the other, when the other is truly generous. This is supernatural gratitude, which means gladness to be the recipient of supernatural compassion. It leaves self-respect absolutely intact.« (1951, 148)

This attitude to reality will keep mimetic desire in constant check. According to Weil, material goods would scarcely be dangerous if they were seen in isolation, and not bound up with spiritual advantage. (13) As mimetic rivalry is reinforced

by prohibition, it makes sense to renounce rivalry in order to put an end to violence. »To detach our desire from all good things and to wait. Experience proves that this waiting is satisfied. It is then we touch the absolute good.« (13)

It is not difficult to read a substitution in the creative renunciation of Simone Weil. Her illustration of the Catholic Holy Communion is explicate:

»Catholic communion. God did not only make himself flesh for us once, every day he makes himself matter in order to give himself to man and to be consumed by him. Reciprocally, by fatigue, affliction and death, man is made matter and is consumed by God. How can we refuse this reciprocity?« (1947, 34)

Renunciation is rewarded with a good that is of a higher value. We participate in the creation of the world by decreasing ourselves. We only possess what we renounce; what we do not renounce escapes from us. (33–34) The substitution as explained earlier follows the law of vengeance: violence is not destroyed but diverted. By detaching from things, one takes in the violence on oneself, in order to regain what one renounced. Thus:

»Renunciation demands that we should pass through anguish equivalent to that which would be caused in reality by the loss of all loved beings and all possession, including our faculties and attainments in the order of intelligence and character, our opinions, beliefs concerning what is good, what is stable, etc. /... / In order that the love of God may penetrate as far down as that, nature has to undergo the ultimate violence. Job, the cross.« (38)

The renunciation proposed by Weil demands great responsibility and courage.

### 3.2 Renunciation in René Girard – conversion

René Girard agreed with Simone Weil in the adoption of Creative Renunciation as an antidote to violent mimetic rivalry. Palaver observes that Girard does not mention Weil in his first book, but an interview with Christian de Maussion from 1987 tells us that he read Weil during the time he was working on this book. If we read Weil's *Waiting for God* – the book in which we find the expression creative renunciation – we discover important parallels between Weil and Girard. (Palaver 2011, 145–146) When Girard speaks of creative renunciation, he has in mind »conversion« from mimetic rivalry. Conversion from mimetic rivalry determines a true novelist. In *The Girard's Reader*, he argues; this victory over a self-centeredness, which is other-centered, this renunciation of fascination and hatred, is the crowning moment of novelistic creation. Therefore, it can be found in all the great novelists. (1996, 50) The realization ones involvement in the rivalry marks for Girard the beginning of conversion. How does one get to this realization? This is not clear, but the realization works in dealing a blow to reprisal violence. Reprisal violence is irresistible owing to the mimetic desire that controls it. He further argues that »even if persons cannot resist it, they can convert away from it«. (62)

Girard saw in the event of the cross a perfect paradigm of renunciation of the will to reprisal violence – vengeance. The cross represents for Girard »the moment when a thousand mimetic conflicts, a thousand scandals that crash violently into one another during the crisis, converge against Jesus alone« (2001, 21) Jesus Christ gave in to the crucifixion plot without self-defense. Caiaphas the high priest had suggested to the Jews, that it was expedient that one man should die for the people. (John 18, 14) Thus Caiaphas ignited the fire of the single victim mechanism. By giving in to the plot, the single victim mechanism, the illusion of restoring peace via murder comes to the fore. By so doing, Jesus Christ offered no resistance, something that can be interpreted as suicidal. A sacrificial understanding of his actions gives us a clue to the self-donation as opposed to a surrogate victim of the single victim mechanism. Self-donation like Weil's detachment requires both courage and responsibility.

Girard did not perceive the renunciation of the will as the renunciation of desire, rather, a move towards the positive mimesis. He upholds the indispensable mimetic desire. Through the event of the cross, Girard understood that:

»Not the renunciation of mimetic desire itself, because what Jesus advocates is mimetic desire. Imitate me, and imitate the father through me, he says, so it's twice mimetic. Jesus seems to say that the only way to avoid violence is to imitate me, and imitate the Father. So the idea that mimetic desire itself is bad makes no sense. It is true, however, that occasionally I say ›mimetic desire‹ when I really mean only the type of mimetic desire that generates mimetic rivalry and, in turn, is generated by it.« (1996, 63)

Girard found in the life of Jesus Christ a good mimesis. Imitating the desires of Christ, will not lead to any clash of interest or rivalry. Wolfgang Palaver, to whom Girard owes the theological shaping of his mimetic theory, further explains Girardian renunciation by stating that:

»Creative renunciation /... / shows that he sees the solution to mimetic rivalry not in a renunciation of life, as such, but rather of the death resulting from man's arrogant attempt at self-empowerment, which obstructs the way to the biblical God and creator. Girard distances himself in later writings explicitly from interpretations of renunciation as any kind of oriental escapism, in order to make clear that a Christian existence does not denote an extinguishing of desire, but rather a redirecting of desire towards an end free of violence and rivalry.« (2013, 221)

The idea of conversion that characterize creative renunciation above depicts the responsibility and the prior reflection within. Neither Girard nor Weil made a rational demonstration of how an individual arrives at the reflective ability to renounce violence.

## 4. Conclusion

Creative Renunciation in the form of conversion (Girard) or detachment (Weil) promises to put an end to violence. Both agree to aforementioned fact that violence is not denied but diverted. The diversions in the form of conversion or detachment, toll the part of the single victim mechanism of scapegoating, but differs greatly on the nature of substitution. While scapegoating sacrifices the innocent, conversion or detachment diverts the fury of violence to the self. Thus making creative renunciation a self-sacrifice. For Girard, the latter is a movement toward freedom from mimesis as potentially rivalrous acquisition and rivalry (1996, 271). For Weil, it is »to give up our imaginary position as the center, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence« (1951, 159). Creative renunciation of the will suffocate the reprisal that feeds rivalry. It is a self-imposed diversion of violence to kill violence. Creative Renunciation recognizes that every passion feeds on the obstacles placed in its way and dies in their absence. (Girard 1976, 177) Renunciation will divert the fury of violence and reveal the illusion of the object of desire.

Unfortunately, creative renunciation is not spontaneous but reflective. The mimetic process for the most part is unconscious. According to Girard, we are not aware of the rivalry in which we are part, but can only discuss that which we are not part of. Conversion or detachment as Sebastian Moore puts it begins when we become conscious (Alison 1998, x). How can we gain consciousness within the unconscious mimetic process? For now, it does not feature in the mimetic theory.

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