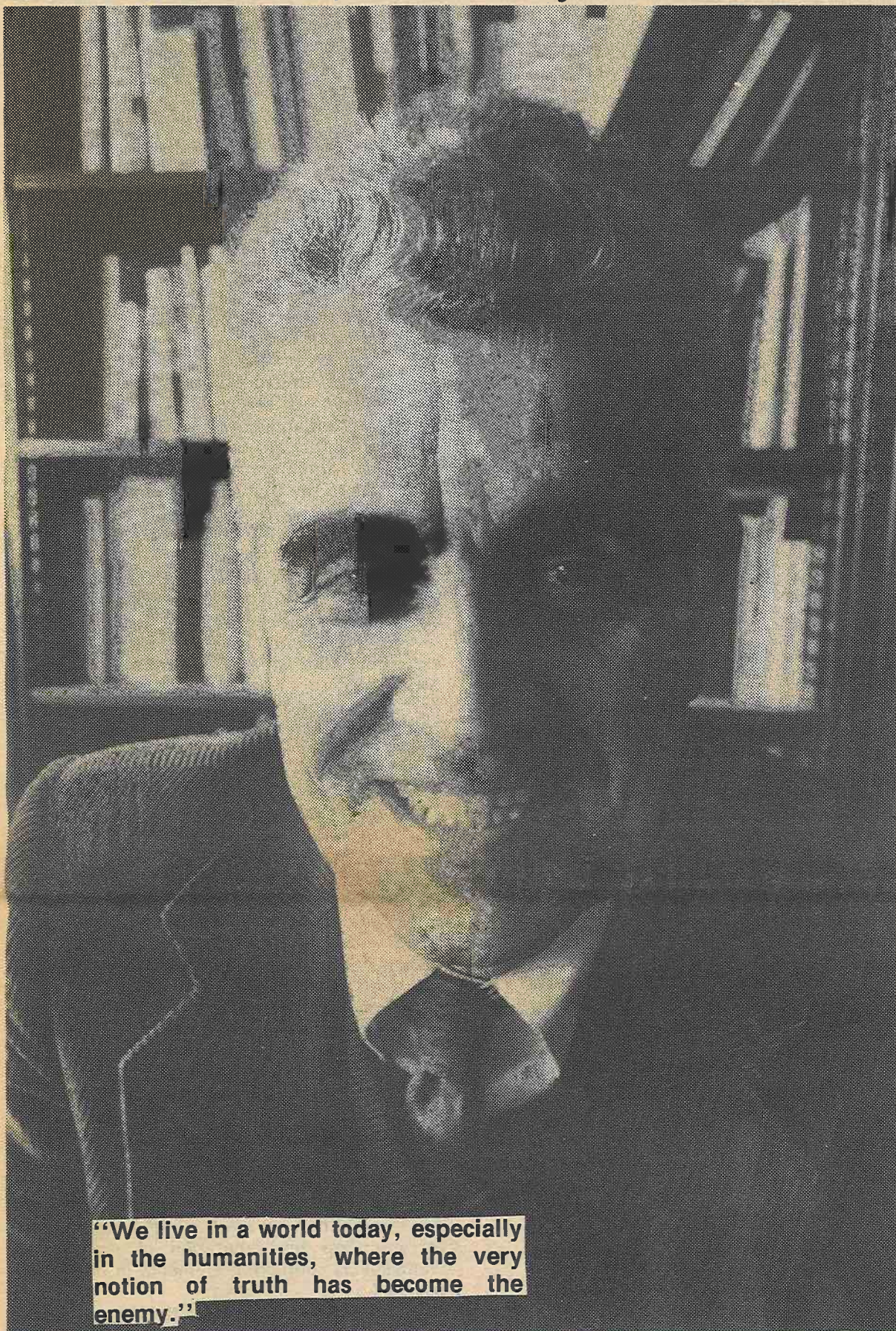


René Girard: Interview by Scott Walter



"We live in a world today, especially in the humanities, where the very notion of truth has become the enemy."

Photos by Adam Paal

Birth of Tragedy staff editor Scott Walter met with René Girard early in March to discuss topics ranging from the state of the modern world, to ancient sacred ritual, touching along the way the thoughts of Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault and Derrida. In a two hour interview at his Stanford office, Girard spoke of a struggle for power, where the forces of good battle the violence inherent in man.

For the unbriefed, René Girard is a popular critic in France, known for his unusual Christian viewpoint. Though born in Avignon (in 1923) and educated at the Sorbonne, Girard has lived and worked largely in the U.S. Since 1974 he has been Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language, Literature and Civilization at Stanford University.

A key concept to understand in Girard's work is that of mimetic desire. In order for mimetic desire to operate there must be a subject, an object, and a rival to the subject. When the subject desires the object because the rival

desires it, mimetic desire is taking place. Girard sees this desire as a primary drive in man, one which would certainly lead to violent conflict if social mechanisms did not intervene.

Violence and the Sacred is a work that examines mimetic desire in primitive societies. The action of mimetic desire creates a form of anarchy Girard terms the "sacrificial crisis." Order in the community is maintained through sacred ritual, which is a remnant of some great collective murder of a sacrificial victim in the forgotten past.

BOT In *Violence and the Sacred* you wrote that modern society is an anticulture, would you say that we are in a sacrificial crisis?

RG That's right, yes. You know people make fun of those people who say well, the modern world is in shambles or is chaos, and so on. People have been saying that since the 16th century. But in a way it is always true, I would say, instead of being always false. It's always true, in the sense that every new form of art breaks down distinctions that, before, were the rule.

And our world, I think, can take it better than any other world could, so, in a way, it's power. It's power of innovation. You see what I mean, that it is no longer, it [modern society] no longer encounters the barriers to thinking that the primitive society would. The interaction of the old primitive world is collapsing more and more, and the Judaic and the Christian—which are fundamentally anti-sacrificial to me, you see, the Judaic and the Christian never really triumph in our world. They are always shunted back, even by the people who claim they represent it. Do you see what I mean? But at the same time they have a deep influence on the world.

To talk about that, I always talk about what happened at the beginning of the modern world, when the witch hunt trials stopped. A society which doesn't burn witches is the exception. In order to invent science, in my view, you have to stop burning witches first. You don't stop burning witches because you have invented science. No. It's for religious reasons you stop burning witches.

These religious reasons may look like anti-religious reasons. Some people rebel against sacrificial interpretations of Christianity. But theirs is still a Christian inspiration. Our world, I think, is essentially a conflict between this Judeo-Christian inspiration and more primitive forces which are closer to something we might call "human nature." To such a world you cannot simply apply the principles of analysis outlined in *Violence and the Sacred*. In my opinion, this book has no direct relevance to our modern society.

BOT And yet you mention modern society many times...

RG Yes, symbolically...if you want. Why is Greek literature still significant in our world? I think it's because the "sacrificial" remnants in our society, the leftover sacrificial rules, are always breaking down and symbolically, our relations often resemble those of Greek Tragedy. But we rarely kill one another.

BOT These remnants are like Nietzsche's "shadows of god"?

RG The shadows, yes, if you want. Complex forces shape our world, and we cannot talk about it as neatly as we can talk about primitive institutions. I wish we could—I'm a highly systematic individual you see, and I'm quite different from many of my colleagues. We live in a world today, especially in the humanities, where the very notion of truth has become the enemy. The idea is you must have plurality. So, today, the interest of plurality takes precedence over the search for truth. You have to say ahead of time that you don't believe in truth. In most of the circles in which I move decency is equated with a skepticism verging on nihilism. Engineers know there are solutions that work and solutions that don't work. Well, in the humanities, we are also looking feverishly for solutions but we are not supposed to find any. In intellectual life today, there is a sort of paralysis, because people are so afraid of not being nice enough to each other—you know, offending the opinion of the next fellow, that they've given up the search for truth very often. Or they regard it as evil in itself, which I think is wrong. Do you see what I mean? It's going too far the other way. They are so afraid of dogmatism that they prefer to reject all possible beliefs. The number one imperative is the avoidance of conflict. We can only succeed through sterility.

BOT You mentioned that today we have a power that ancient societies did not have. Were you referring to technological power?

RG Yes, I mean undoubtedly the power of technology, because I think that a sacrificial society has built-in safeguards against excessive innovation. It is not true, of course, that all primitive people "respected" nature. Some of them burned an entire forest to grow one bushel of corn or something. But, nevertheless, in most primitive societies people were afraid of tampering with nature—even cutting off trees

to open a plot of cultivable ground, because they feared there were geniuses and gods there. So they were terribly scared because of the world itself was sacred, the water, the trees, the mountains, and so forth. This is no longer true in our world. The pagan gods were destroyed by monotheism and collective victimage has lost its magical power of deterrence. The result is a world in which natural forces are manipulated without religious inhibitions and technological progress becomes possible with all its beneficial consequences, and also its dangers, of course, if the beneficiaries do not abide by the golden rule. People will acquire power, more and more power.

BOT The power that used to be in the sacred rituals?

RC That's right. It will become the property of man, you know, usable energy. The question is what are the people going to do with this power? If they keep using it against each other, someday they are going to reach a point of no return, where it becomes non-usable, because the power is so great that you cannot hurt your neighbor without hurting yourself. Which is the case today with the nuclear winter, etc.

BOT Reciprocity at the international level has always been a fact, even if unperceived, now and in the distant past.

RC The thing which is interesting I think in our world is that an awareness of human vengeance as the supreme danger is back with us. Because if you go back to the great literature of the past, the Bible, Greek Tragedy, you see it's all dominated by the problem of revenge. In a world without judicial institutions, very small peasant communities, revenge, unleashed revenge, can destroy an entire community. Now, critics in the 19th and 20th century didn't recognize that at all. They themselves, I think, were living in a world which was too protected. They had judicial systems. Revenge was under control, inside the community and war was still remote. Curiously our situation which is very different from that of small primitive societies in other respects, is very similar in respect to vengeance. We are a world community, which is like a primitive village because the means of destruction today, in proportion to the world as a whole, are similar to what they were in the tragic world described by Aeschylus. Certain realities about human reciprocity are coming back to the fore.

BOT Such as the reality that the whole community is in danger?

RC The whole community is in danger, yes. And that there are no possibilities of sacrifice to ward off the threat.

BOT You have written that there is a lack of law in Western society. Would you care to explain that?

RC First there is a lack of international law. But today mutual deterrence is a *de facto* international law that can be transgressed only at the cost of terrifying destruction, complete annihilation perhaps. This law has forced itself upon us as a result of our inability to entirely give up vengeance and violence in a world deprived of sacrificial protection. We love the increased power provided by the Judeo-Christian demystification of primitive religion but we failed in regard to the increased ethical responsibility that goes with it. We owe our increased power to an abandonment of magical thought that is rooted in our religion, ultimately. If we assume this power in a spirit of arrogant superiority, as the West has done, if we believe rationality alone can solve all problems, it doesn't seem to work, and suddenly people find themselves back into vengeance. So, there is a great danger of regression. Nevertheless, I think that our evolution is always in the direction of less vengeance, because we understand more and more the horror of it. At the same time, the danger I repeat is greater than ever, because of the enormous means we have. We live in a world where a great deal more is demanded of communities and of each individual in terms of self mastery. But at the same time, very often

our world is one which abandons ethics, which abandons any ideal of self mastery. We surrender to a philosophy of self gratification that ends up in pure consumerism. It is a disturbing sign.

BOT What similarities and differences exist between your thought and Nietzsche's concept of the master-slave relationship, outlined in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and his later writings?

RC Well, I have been thinking about this recently, and I think that Nietzsche shared a great insight with his entire period, the great insight of modern anthropology which remains valid today in my opinion. He realized that all religions, including Christianity, are centered upon the same type of collective victimage.

He wrote several times that the "martyrdom" of Dionysus (collectively killed and devoured by the Titans) and the martyrdom of Jesus, the Christian Passion, are similar. The anthropologists also perceived that similarity and they concluded that all religions are more or less similar, including the biblical and Christian religions.

These anthropologists were positivists. They believed that the meaning must be the same if the facts are the same. They believed that a fact is inseparable from its meaning. They could see more or less the same fact everywhere and they believed that the meaning had to be more or less the same everywhere.

Not so with Nietzsche, who was no positivist. He could see that the same collective murder can mean two entirely different things if it is interpreted from the standpoint of the victimizers—the so-called masters—and from the standpoint of the victims—the so-called slaves. Nietzsche realized that victimage is everywhere interpreted from the standpoint of the victimizers except in Judeo-Christianity which views it, as a rule, from the standpoint of an *innocent* victim, especially in the Passion. This standpoint casts doubts, inevitably, on the justice of pagan "sacrifices." That is the reason Nietzsche accuses Christianity of slandering and of discrediting paganism. He reproaches Christianity for making human sacrifice "impossible."

"Curiously, our situation which is very different from that of small primitive societies in other respects, is very similar in respect to vengeance."

This is the same Judeo-Christian difference I mentioned earlier. I think this difference is truly essential and my views could be defined as some kind of Nietzscheism in reverse. Nietzsche was terribly wrong to choose the deceptive violence of mythology over the biblical revelation of this same violence as deceptive victimage.

As a result of this dreadful choice which he pursued with an intellectual consistency worth of a better cause, Nietzsche, in his last years, forced himself to become an apologist for the worst forms of cultural violence. In *Twilight of the Idols*, for instance, he glorified the cruel treatment of the Untouchables in the Indian caste system as something absolutely necessary to the production of a true elite, a genuine aristocracy. It is correct to assert that such positions anticipate Nazism and this kind of text was frequently quoted by the theoreticians of National-Socialism.

Personally, Nietzsche was a kind and humane individual. The reason he made such a terrible choice, which finally drove him to madness, or was already a symptom of his madness, lies with some of the secondary consequences of Christianity, such as he observed them in his own world.

A religion of the *innocent* victim, a religion that goes against the immemorial tradition of sacrifice in human culture, will produce a lot of hypocrisy, a lot of false compassion, a lot of *ressentiment* as Nietzsche says, as soon as it is imperfectly embraced. Given the imperfection of real human beings, it is more or less certain

that Christianity will be imperfectly embraced.

The terrible error of Nietzsche was to see these faults in our world not merely as the illegitimate child but as the father and creator spirit of the biblical religions. You cannot have a parody of the victim's truth before the genuine article has first appeared into the world. This truth appears nowhere in mythology, it appears only in the gospels and "prophetic" texts of the Bible.

Nietzsche correctly saw that the Christian world had weakened and interiorized revenge rather than given it up entirely, as recommended by the gospels. The medicine he proposed was worse than the disease. It was to go back to real revenge, which is a little bit like blowing yourself up because you have a mosquito biting you, or something like that. I think that resentment, hypocrisy, negative feelings in our society can be very dangerous, but they are nothing compared with the potential of destruction with real revenge. And now we can see it. In other words, what Nietzsche said about the superman is completely outmoded today, outmoded by the nuclear weapons. I think that even though it's fair for Nietzsche to say that the Nazis misinterpreted him, in a way there are many things in the later Nietzsche that can be misinterpreted.

BOT Nietzsche's taking the side of the "masters" was not an aspect of Perspectivism?

RC Perspectivism was all over the place in the days of Nietzsche. He didn't invent that. But, on Christianity and the Judaic, I repeat, he was extremely original. He saw the truth. But, he was hostile to it, which had something to do perhaps with his being the son of a Protestant minister, reacting against his family. I think that there was something childish about his reaction. I don't say he was a Nazi, you understand. I say he wrote in a manner that could provide an alibi for the worst excesses of the Nazis. It is the same thing with Sartre. Sartre was misinterpreted of course, but he spoke such a violent language that he influenced the people in Cambodia who perpetrated the genocide of their own people. I would not say you shouldn't read Sartre because of that, but if you read Sartre, and if you read him literally, you will see that he preaches violence. If you read Nietzsche literally, you cannot deny that he preached violence. There will always be people to interpret modern thinkers literally. I really think the ideologists in our world, the Marx, the Engels, the Lenin, the Nietzsche, or the Sartre, if you deny their responsibility, you deny the seriousness of their ideas. Nietzsche is both very great and very dreadful.

BOT Moving even farther back in Nietzschean thought now, to the *Birth of Tragedy*, how do you view his separation of Apollo and Dionysus as conflicting elements in the Greek psyche?

RC I think Nietzsche used the names of two different gods in order to describe two phases inside the same violent process that is the process of all mythology and ritual. If you observe the Apollo the first two plays in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, you will see that he is not "Apollonian" in the Nietzschean sense at all. He is a dreadful god of revenge. But in the third play, *The Eumenides*, he looks much more peaceful and serene, he becomes Apollonian in the Nietzschean sense, because the time has come for the cultural re-ordering that is really a product of victimage. In the Aeschylus tragedy, the successful victimage is the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by Orestes.

Dionysus, in the scheme of Nietzsche, embodies the most violent aspects of pagan and primitive divinity. The embrace of these violent aspects, divorced from the reconciliation that follows, I must see as another sign of Nietzsche's irresponsibility or incipient madness. I believe it would have been interpreted that way by the ancient Greeks. The idea of embracing Dionysus "in the raw" would never have occurred to anyone in his right mind. It could only occur to a very blase 19th century

esthete who was tired of the secure world in which he lived and wanted to conjure up the "dionysiac" forces that had been imprisoned by Western civilization.

If Nietzsche were back among us, he might be able to come back to his senses and rectify his thinking in accordance with later historical developments. But the ideas of some of his disciples are not too encouraging.

BOT I think later on he recognized that Dionysus was life as well as death.

RG That's right. It's very interesting to relate it to the Wagner of the "Ring" more than people have done. People read Nietzsche, and if they read Nietzsche they are philosophers and so forth, and Wagner is the villain. If they read Wagner they are musicians and Nietzsche is the villain, who did not understand Bayreuth. It's a very important moment in European culture, when that breakdown of Western ideals—of classical order [took place]. Before, they had Romanticism, Romanticism was still tame compared to Wagner and Nietzsche. Nietzsche and Wagner, I think, are the immediate forerunners of the collapse of Europe. From a cultural point of view it's great because it happens there and it takes form there. It takes the form of works of art. At the same time it's a very negative moment. I don't think you can take it as an ideal, or as a guide. You can take it as a symptom, or as an example, or as a lesson for other things. But I think it is dangerous to see it as an ideal for youth, for instance, or as the title of your magazine, it's kind of scary. (laughter) Except, the history of American intellectual life, if you want, is different from Europe because America has suffered from passivity and intellectual—I wouldn't say stagnation—but in philosophy, and these things... I don't think it has the same meaning here. I think here it can have a good meaning.

BOT What is your opinion on the influence of French thought in the U.S.?

RG Last year they had the articles about French novels in the Wall Street Journal that infuriated the French. They say there hasn't been a French novel and so forth. In a way, in the humanities and the social sciences, French influence has never been as great as it is today, with French critics like Foucault and Derrida and that sort of thing. But they are all post-Nietzschean nihilists. In a way, they transmit Nietzschean nihilism to the American body politic. (laughs) I'm not sure it's very good. I'm sure it's undergoing a process of transfiguration when it reaches this country. I don't want to say they are sole Nietzschean. They represent something on their own which is weird, but... The active groups in the humanities and the social sciences are influenced by these French views, which I do not share, even though some people feel I am very much a part of it. (laughs)

BOT What do you view as the sacred. What is the sacred?

RG When I use the word sacred, myself, I use it as a translation of the Latin. It's a Latin word, sacer, which means cursed and blessed simultaneously. It means extreme violence and peace. It's really this ambivalence, and I really think it's a process through which human violence is transfigured. Primitive societies and their religions exist, in my view, as a result of this transfiguration, and human violence finally absorbs itself through these victimage mechanisms that I'm talking about. The sacred is that process. I see it basically as a human process, which today we can understand. The paradox is that this demystification comes from the Bible. The holy in the Bible, or if you want to use the word sacred in the Bible, especially as you get to the greater books of the Bible—it means something which has nothing to do with violence and which reveals the other sacred as what it is, as bad. For me there would be two forms of religion, and modern rationalism and atheism are sandwiched in between. That would be the paradoxical aspect of my view. So, personally, I am a Christian, I am a believer. I am a believer, but I think there are aspects of

rationality in the Judaic-Christian scriptures that inform us about certain aspects of our world, and that do so independently of religious belief. This reversal of the viewpoint of the persecutors who believe in their victim, to the viewpoint of the victim, can be expressed in purely rational terms. So, I don't think you have to be a believer to understand and accept certain of the things I say. But it makes it impossible to have a very naive view of the Bible as superstition, like the 18th century had. Does that make sense?

BOT The Bible is ignored, and as you said before, it has become another form of sacrifice.

RG Yes, that's right, expulsion of the text. It's especially true in universities. Or, the text is sometimes regarded in a very fetishistic way. Some of the old-style believers don't dare touch it and say every letter is true, period. Regard it as some kind of absolute... Intellectuals don't want to touch it either.

"Sartre was misinterpreted of course, but he spoke such a violent language that he influenced the people in Cambodia who perpetrated the genocide of their own people."

BOT So things aren't really sacred today?

RG No, I think that the sacred in the sense of primitive religion is still present in our lives. For instance, when people are overly impressed by something, by power, there are aspects of the sacred. It's a mixture of fear and veneration that influences their behavior. You see that very much in totalitarian societies. Totalitarian societies are regressive in their very effort to get rid of the sacred through violent means. They tend to damage seriously the independent judicial institutions. They need scapegoats much more than we do. The trials in which the victim is forced to confess publicly are extremely significant. Their purpose is to restore the unity of the community through a unanimous condemnation of the victim, which is the very essence of "scapegoating."

BOT That's an incredible phenomenon.

RG It's a Job phenomenon. I think it's a sign of regression to primitive phenomena. It's very scary.

BOT How does mimetic desire affect modern society?

RG It affects society both in a negative and positive way, through fads and fashions, through sterile rivalries, and also through productive rivalries. When people talk about an economy of incentives, they rely on the channeling of mimetic desire into economic life. It's interesting in relationship with the socialistic world, which wants to do away with mimetic desire for ethical reasons, and ends up depriving economic life of all incentive. In their optimism, the socialists believed that, in a world where there would be no conflicts, no social conflicts, people would work with pleasure, in order to create for the good of the community. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to be happening. They have deprived economic life of its most powerful engine and it's becoming so obvious today, that Russian style socialism is losing its attractiveness even to many third world countries such as China. In order to become economically productive (as it is in the Western world) mimetic desire must be both very intense and severely constrained by strict rules, which I would define as elaborate post-sacrificial devices. If you transgress the rules of this mimetic competition, for instance, if you shoot your competitor when he beats you at your own game, you will be arrested. It's a very complex world, where there still are prohibitions, but one's much less constraining than those in ancient societies.

BOT Violence and the Sacred is concerned mainly with Western and primitive concepts of religion. What is your view of Buddhism?

RG I think it's all methods, recipes, working on oneself, in order to get rid of mimetic desire. Or the idea of the wheel of existence and so forth is very tied up with that. The purpose is to obtain complete peace of mind. This

non-involvement is a very general trend in the great mystical religions of the East. There is some of this in the mysticism of medieval and early modern monasticism but, as a whole, it is not characteristic of the West because it is not characteristic of Judeo-Christianity. Buddhism sees that desire immediately involves you with other people. The endless process of rivalries and frustration they see very well. The difference with the biblical world is that they leave the world to itself. They know that not everybody will be a Buddhist monk. They know that there will be victimage. The Bible wants to go the bottom of the social process, and uncover past victims. The Bible has an ideal of non-desire inside society, rather than by leaving society.

BOT Well, supposedly the end point of meditation, Zen meditation, is merging with the Buddha.

RG That's right. Not with the Buddha personally because in Buddhism, Nirvana is an impersonal state and most people would say that pure Buddhism should not be defined as a religion. There is no concept of a divinity or it is unessential.

BOT It's all around us.

RG It's all around us, yes, that's it. But it's certainly cutting off whatever ties you down to the present situation.

BOT In conquering mimetic desire, it seems you need to add the fourth element, which is time. Instead of everything occurring at once, our desires converging on the object while time disappears—if you sit back and let time pass, as Hamlet tried to do, you may break the circle of desire.

RG You mean the conquest, the recovery of the time dimension, being contemplation, yes, that's true. I think there are aspects of contemplation in the East and West that are very similar to each other. But Western religions tend to want to act upon the world rather than withdraw from it.

BOT And we have.

RG And we have, yes, for better and for worse.

BOT

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