

René Girard's apocalyptic modernity

ROBERT DORAN *

By progressively eliminating sacrifice, Christian revelation has accelerated an escalation to extremes. What will have been the error of the West is its refusal to understand the advent of Christianity as a liberating maturity, an anti-sacrificial education.

RENÉ GIRARD¹

In an interview I conducted with René Girard in 2007 (and which appears in this volume for the first time in Portuguese), he mused:

I think that if I had written *Violence and the Sacred* after 9/11, I would have most probably included 9/11 in this book. This is the event that makes possible an understanding of the modern event, for it renders the archaic more intelligible. 9/11 represents a strange return of the archaic within the secularism of our time. Not too long ago people would have had a Christian reaction to 9/11. Now they have an archaic reaction, which does not bode well for the future.²

The idea of the irruption of the archaic in the modern is at the heart of Girard's latest book *Achever Clausewitz* (literally: *Completing Clausewitz*), which examines the insights of the Prussian military theorist in light of the devastating conflicts of the past two centuries. What attracts Girard to Clausewitz's classic but unfinished tome, *On War*, is Clausewitz's deep understanding of a transitional moment in the history of warfare: the shift from an aristocratic concept of war

* Assistant professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Rochester.

that is inherently limited – war between warriors – to what has become known as “total war,” that is, war between entire societies that is in principle limitless in scope and potential for destruction.³ Thus despite Clausewitz’s predilection for rationalizing war, according to his famous assertion that war is under the control of politics, that war is “politics by other means,” his thesis is necessarily overwhelmed, in Girard’s view, by the very irrationality of the “escalation to extremes” (*Steigerung bis zum Äußersten*) that Clausewitz sees as war’s implacable reality. More urgently, from Girard’s perspective, Clausewitz allows us to understand this new era in the history of warfare in terms of apocalyptic thought, that is, as imparting to the apocalyptic texts a more concrete and specifically historical meaning that should arouse our concern. This is what *Achever Clausewitz* aims to accomplish: to “complete” Clausewitz’s *On War* by revealing its essentially apocalyptic dimension.⁴

In his book, Girard treats Clausewitz as kind of a secular theorist of the apocalypse. Given that Girard himself has been considered a secularizer of sorts (particularly at the time of his *Violence and the Sacred*), one can easily see how Girard’s project of demystification would find in the author of *On War* a useful ally. Indeed, the often uncanny proximity between many of Clausewitz’s formulations and Girard’s own insights provides fertile ground for Girard’s reinterpretation of the apocalyptic texts.⁵

Achever Clausewitz can be said to represent a “fourth” phase of Girardian thinking, which could be termed “apocalyptic.”⁶ It develops Girard’s previously elaborated argument that Christianity, in demystifying the scapegoat mechanism (by showing that the victim of collective violence is innocent), has also deprived humanity of the primordial way of managing its violence, namely, through the safety valve of sacrifice, thereby placing it before a stark choice: eventual self-destruction or the renunciation of violence.⁷ According to Girard, our apocalyptic future, instead of being immediate as many early Christians had expected, has instead been the work of many centuries; the development of a system of justice has largely controlled intra-communal violence; but on the level of inter-communal violence, namely war, we have, during the past few centuries, witnessed an incredible escalation, culminating in the world wars of the twentieth century and the global terrorism of the twenty first. Our capacity to deny or ignore this apocalyptic reality, whether under the aegis of Enlightenment notions of “progress” or twentieth-century theories of “containment,” puts us in ever greater danger. Unlike the fundamentalist doomsayers, Girard sees the apocalyptic threat to humanity not as an external menace, a manifestation of divine violence,⁸ but as an immanent logic of history, stemming from the failure of humanity to deal with

the implications of the secularization of violence (see Dupuy, 2004). However, our apocalyptic future is not, for Girard, a fate to be accepted, but the beginning of hope; for “hope is only possible if we dare to think the perils of our time” (Girard, 2007: 16). Humanity is free and is therefore responsible for its own violence. This Sartrean or “existentialist” dimension of Girard’s thought, though generally suppressed in his writings, becomes more apparent in *Achever Clausewitz*.

An Anti-Sacrificial Education

In his introduction to *Achever Clausewitz*, Girard summarizes his life’s work on the anthropology of religion:

My work has often been presented as an investigation of archaic religion, through the methodology of comparative anthropology. This approach aimed at elucidating what has been called the process of hominisation, this fascinating shift from animality to humanity that occurred so many thousands of years ago. My hypothesis is mimetic: it is because humans imitate each other more than animals that they had to find a way of overcoming a contagious similitude, prone to causing the complete annihilation of their society. This mechanism – which reintroduces difference at the very moment when everyone becomes similar to one another – is sacrifice. Man is born of sacrifice and is thus a child of religion. What I call, following Freud, the foundational murder – namely, the killing of a sacrificial victim, responsible for both the disorder and the restoration of order – has constantly been reenacted in rites and rituals, which are at the origin of our institutions. Millions of innocent victims have thus been sacrificed since the dawn of humanity to allow their fellow men to live together or, more precisely, to not destroy themselves. Such is the implacable logic of the sacred, which the myths dissimulate less and less as man becomes more self-aware. The decisive moment of this evolution is Christian revelation, a sort of divine expiation in which God in the person of his Son will ask man for forgiveness for having waited so long to reveal to him the mechanisms of his violence. The rites had slowly educated him; now he was ready to do without them.

It is Christianity that demystifies religion, and this demystification, while good in the absolute, proved to be bad in the relative, for we were not prepared to receive it. We are not Christian enough. One can formulate this paradox in another manner and say that Christianity is the only religion that will have foreseen its own failure. This prescience is called the apocalypse. (Girard, 2007: 9-10, my translation)

In revealing the innocence of the victim of collective violence, the story of Christ demystifies the mythic apprehension of the victim as guilty and responsible; i.e., it demystifies the logic of the scapegoating, which, for Girard, was the

principal way in which human beings were able to contain and control violence within their communities. Violence is “inherent” to human communities because human beings are “mimetic.” According to Girard’s theory of “mimetic desire” (expounded in his first book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romesque*, 1961), we desire not the intrinsic qualities of an object but according to another person, who becomes a model and a rival for us (and for whom we can also be a model and a rival); this inevitably brings us into a relation of conflict, with the potential for physical violence. Without external constraints, such as those of a legal system, violence begets violence in cycles of increasingly uncontrollable vengeance (negative reciprocity) that eventually engulf the entire community.⁹ Thus archaic societies, lacking a public system of justice, were highly unstable. What accounts for their survival? Why did they not simply destroy themselves? Doubtless many of them did destroy themselves; but those that survived had discovered a unique way of dealing with their runaway violence. According to Girard, it was the scapegoat mechanism – which focuses all the animosity on a single individual who is seen as responsible for the crisis – that allows the community to transcend its violence. The peace resulting from the unanimity forged by the concentration on a single victim who is put to death or expelled institutes the sacred, in the assumption that the victim who brings about an end to the crisis, who converts disorder into order, thereby saving the community, possesses some transcendental power. Thus, in archaic societies, violence *is* the sacred; sacrifice is the (sacred, unifying) violence that ends violence. The ritualization of this scapegoating violence is the origin of religious and cultural institutions.

Christ also proposes to save the human community, but in a radically different way, a way that, as Girard argues, exposes humanity to new dangers. The fact that the story of the Crucifixion is told from the perspective of the victim – unlike myths, which are told from the perspective of the persecutors – makes all the difference; for the Gospels allow us to see scapegoating for what it really is: the putting to death of an *innocent* victim. Christianity is therefore only sacrificial in appearance; it is, in fact, the “sacrifice” that demystifies *sacrifice*.¹⁰

Christianity leads us out of archaic religion, but at the price of losing the fundamental check on violence that had preserved human communities.¹¹ For once, the truth of scapegoating is revealed, it ceases to function as such; it loses its potency as a unifying force. Scapegoating is based on a collective misrecognition or self-deception regarding its operation. For scapegoating to enable the calming of a mimetic crisis, the victim must be seen *as guilty, by all*, so that the fury of the entire community can be effectively directed toward him/her. To perceive the scapegoat qua scapegoat, to invoke the term “scapegoating” in

a given situation, is ipso facto to see the victim as victim.¹² In its revelation of the truth of scapegoating, Christianity inevitably becomes, in Girard's account, a source of disorder and instability.

But the Christian demystification is only partial. As Girard remarks in the above passage, we were not prepared to receive this truth. The presence of scapegoating in modern times can thus be seen as evidence of the continuing influence of the archaic mindset. Spontaneous lynchings in the American South as well as the calculated demonization and destruction of the Jews and other groups in Nazi Germany are prime examples of modern instances of scapegoating.¹³ But in a modern context, scapegoating inevitably fails to bring about peace; for it is a false sacred. "Violence, which produced the sacred, now produces only itself," Girard observes (Girard, 2007). Modern scapegoating functions not as a break on violence but, on the contrary, as an escalation – precisely the opposite of what Girard had observed in archaic societies. Because victimization fails to bring about the peace that scapegoating promises (by ridding the community of the "guilty" party), ever more victims are required to "purge" or "purify" the community, *ad infinitum*. Girard notes that "people forget that the model I proposed [in *Violence and the Sacred*] was meant only for archaic societies" (Girard, 2007: 244). Modern instances of scapegoating lack the complete misrecognition that enables the mechanism to work. A minimal recognition that the victim is innocent (the very calculated nature of Nazi propaganda shows that its inventors did not completely believe it) inflames the passions of the persecutors who thereby seek to validate themselves by seeking out more and more victims. (In some instances, such as purges of religious or political heretics, the victims are made to "confess" their "crimes," to create the aura of "guilt" and unanimous condemnation). When there are no more victims of the "guilty group" available, the population of victims is simply enlarged, thereby revealing the self-devouring nature of the process. The Terror of the French Revolution is a perfect example of scapegoating devouring the scapegoaters: Robespierre is led to the guillotine by the very forces that he himself set into motion.¹⁴

The development of a public system of justice generally coincides with the end of sacrifice as an institution within a given community. However, there is an inexpugnable sacrificial element in even the most modern system of justice: "our penal system operates according to principles of justice that are in no real conflict with the concept of revenge," writes Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*. This mixture of the archaic within the modern is usually dissimulated in the notion of "justice," a concept that is invoked as the opposite of vigilantism. But, Girard remarks,

the same principle is at work in all systems of violent retribution. Either the principle is just, and justice is therefore inherent in the idea of vengeance, or there is no justice to be found anywhere. He who exacts his own vengeance is said to “take the law into his own hands.” There is no difference in principle between public and private vengeance; but on the social level, the difference is enormous. Under the public system, an act of vengeance is no longer avenged; the process is terminated, the danger of escalation averted. (Girard, 1977: 16)

In other words, like sacrifice, the system of public justice puts an end to the cycle of violence by imitating the “all against one” (unanimity) condition of scapegoating. The entire community takes “revenge,” as it were, on the guilty one. The fact that the “guilty one” is so determined by a rational, organized process rather than a spontaneous, unorganized one does not in the least alter their formal resemblance.¹⁵

But this remedy – whether through sacrifice or the institution of the penal system – has of course no bearing on conflicts between sovereign or autonomous communities. It appears somewhat paradoxical that the mastery of violence on one level (the end of personal violence – revenge killings, duels, blood feuds, etc. – as an acceptable outlet for grievances, i.e., the monopolization of violence by the state) coincides with the exponential increase of violence on another: war between states or factions within states, and now, international terrorism such as the attacks of September 11, 2001. It is as if we have been moving forward and backward simultaneously. We feel more secure within our respective communities, and yet worry that the world will explode.¹⁶ The world wars of the twentieth century and the nuclear threat are usually cited as signs of this ultimate escalation, but its origins can be traced to the European conflicts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The Democratization of War and the Escalation to Extremes

The West’s current aversion to war (a “last resort”) often obscures the fact that for much of Western civilization war was a venerable, self-regulating institution, with its own rules, codes of conduct, conventions, etcetera. The institution of war, dominated by aristocratic concepts derived from chivalry, contained the violence of war within prescribed limits. With the dismantling of war as an institution, these limits are progressively removed, and violence tends more and more to follow its own logic. Girard observes that

this waning of an institution [war] that had as its goal to restrain and regulate violence, corroborates my central hypothesis, namely that we have been witnessing for over two centuries the disintegration of all rituals, all institutions. Through its codes and rules, war contributed to the general order by working toward new equilibriums... It ceased to play this role, generally speaking, since the end of the Second World War. (Girard, 2007: 26)

One can thus view the treaties of the Geneva Convention as a response to this collapse of war as an institution. These treaties attempted to regulate with legal restraints what had been the exclusive purview of tradition and culture. Whereas, for example, it had previously been considered unseemly or dishonorable to mistreat or kill prisoners of war, this was now a matter of international law. In effect, the Geneva Convention and, more recently, the International Criminal Court at The Hague, aspire to achieve on the international level what the establishment of a public system of justice had accomplished on the community level. But the former is infinitely weaker than the latter, for the obvious reason that there is no international sovereign.

While these manifestations of international consensus offer glimmers of hope, the advent of global terrorism has rendered such international agreements less and less relevant, opening up new possibilities for escalation. Instead of reinforcing or expanding international juridical institutions, the “war on terror” has in fact marked a retreat into national sovereignty. Girard remarks:

The disgrace of Guantanamo... is indicative of this contempt for the laws of war. Classic warfare, which consisted in respecting the right of prisoners, no longer exists. It still existed to some extent in the conflicts of the twentieth century. War was still minimally understood as a kind of contract. The persistence of the laws of war within the explosiveness of the wars of the past century shows that its origins go back very far, to feudalism, to a very old aristocracy. (Girard, 2007: 131)

Throughout *Achever Clausewitz*, Girard seeks to emphasize that the long transitional period that begins with the escalation of war in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period and culminates in the age of global terrorism has not been accompanied by any effective – juridical or cultural – counterbalance. Our apocalyptic future had been deferred, on the one hand, by the regulation of private violence in a system of justice,¹⁷ and, on the other, by the ritualization of war (originating in the Middle Ages and extending through the gentlemanly *guerres en dentelles* [“wars in lace”] of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries),¹⁸ which regulated public violence. The removal of curbs on warfare coupled with rapid

technological advances in weaponry has brought our apocalyptic future closer upon us. This is what Girard calls the “acceleration of history.”

We must, however, consider what appears to be a stunning paradox: that democratization has coincided with the escalation of war and international conflict (even if totalitarian regimes have been responsible for much of the escalation of the twentieth century). This fact is obscured by the commonplace that democracies are far less likely to engage in wars of aggression and actively seek to control violent factors that might affect them. The European Union (the disaster in the former Yugoslavia aside) would indeed appear to be a shining example of this principle.¹⁹ And yet, how to explain the obvious connection between the development of “total war” and democratization? Girard does not treat this question in any detail in *Achever Clausewitz*, though I think that it merits examination.

Total war makes its appearance during the French Revolution, with the mass conscription of citizens, thereby transforming a royal army that served the king into a citizens’ army that served the nation. Girard notes that “it is democracy that invented [mass conscription], the power to mobilize the population” (Girard, 2007: 241), a power that monarchies did not possess prior to that time. (In fact, European monarchies were quite resistant to conscription. They feared that the raising of “citizens’ armies” would upset their countries’ social organization, precipitating a de facto democratization that would incite demand for political reform—with the French Revolution as a terrifying model.) The mass mobilization of the citizenry is ipso facto an escalation of war, for other countries are inevitably obliged to do the same in order to maintain the equilibrium – as the Napoleonic wars amply demonstrated. In addition, in total war the distinction between civilian and military is blurred as war becomes an enterprise of the entire nation; civilian centers are increasingly seen as legitimate targets of military action.²⁰

The advantages of conscription were two-fold: a much larger army could be raised quickly, when needed, and, perhaps more importantly, the psychological effect of citizens who fought not for personal honor (the aristocratic ideal) or money (mercenaries), but for the nation (patriotism),²¹ gave soldiers a cohesiveness and sense of purpose that armies of aristocrats and mercenaries lacked. (However, when national passions are inflamed, patriotism can also be transformed into a negative attitude: hatred of the enemy – something that was foreign to the aristocratic concept.²² And an army that hates its adversary is of course more likely to commit atrocities.) The victories by the Revolutionary and Napoleonic armies over foes that were both more numerous and more experienced demonstrated the superiority of this manner of military organization, in addition, of course, to Napoleon’s undeniable strategic genius (but without conscription

Napoleon could not have done what he did). Fed by conscription, the armies and battles grew exponentially in size; some battles involved hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Napoleon, leading his aptly named *grande armée*, exploited the advantages of these military escalations, though in the end he was consumed by them. As historian David Bell insightfully observes, “it was the radical intensification of war that brought [Napoleon] to prominence and power, and in the end, he could not contain it. He was, in turn, the product, master, and victim of total war” (Bell, 2007: 8).

The one person in early eighteenth-century Europe who understood this dynamic was Carl von Clausewitz, an officer in the Prussian army. In 1812, he observed: “it is not [now] the king who wages war on the king, not an army against another army, but a people against another people” (quoted in Bell, 2007: 10). This idea figures prominently in his theory of war; for Clausewitz recognized the inherent potential for escalation in the democratization of warfare. Monarchies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fought each other with little effect on their home populations. Their armies were predictably small and were drawn from the ranks of professional soldiers. Clausewitz sees war between such armies as inherently limited: “the means [these monarchies] had available were fairly well defined, and each could gauge the other side’s potential in terms of both numbers and of time. War was thus deprived of its most dangerous feature – its tendency toward the extreme, and of the whole chain of possibilities which would follow” (Clausewitz, 1976: 589). Thus war between peoples that could mobilize an indeterminate number of soldiers – total war – is particularly prone to extreme escalations.

In the programmatic first chapter of his *On War*, Clausewitz describes three “extremes”:

War is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force. Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit; a reciprocal action is started which must lead in theory to extremes. This is the first case of interaction and the first “extreme” we meet with. [...] So long as I have not overthrown my opponent I am bound to fear he may overthrow me. Thus I am not in control: he dictates to me as much as I dictate to him. This is the second case of interaction, and it leads to the second “extreme.” [...] Assuming you arrive in this way at a reasonably accurate estimate of the enemy’s power of resistance, you can adjust your own efforts accordingly; that is, you can either increase them until they surpass the enemy’s or, if this is beyond your means, you can make your efforts as great as possible. But the enemy will do the same; competition will again result and, in pure theory, it must again force you to extremes. This is the third case of interaction and the third “extreme.” (Clausewitz, 1976: 77, original emphasis)²³

It is not quite clear why there should be “three” extremes, since all three describe the effects of “reciprocal” or “competitive” action. This is what Girard calls “mimetic rivalry”: each one imitates the other; each rival tries to outdo the other in series of one-upmanships of ever increasing intensity. When the rivals are two armies or two countries at war, the most extreme violence is not only possible but is inscribed in the very relation of mimetic rivalry or “reciprocal action” itself. Though Clausewitz never uses the word “imitation” to describe violent interaction, his proximity to Girardian thinking is difficult to deny.

However, Clausewitz attempts to evade the apocalyptic consequences of his theory by cloistering this logic of extremes within the realm of pure theory. Clausewitz argues that one must distinguish between the pure concept of war and its actual manifestation:

Warfare thus eludes the strict theoretical requirement that extremes of force be applied. [...] Once the antagonists have ceased to be mere figments of a theory and become actual states and governments, when war is no longer a theoretical affair but a series of actions obeying its own particular laws, reality supplies the data from which we can deduce the unknown that lies ahead. (Girard, 2007: 80)

Girard endeavors to deconstruct this opposition between the theoretical and the actual; for if Clausewitz’s theory of war is anthropological at bottom (and not the “war by algebra” that Clausewitz derides [Clausewitz, 1976: 76]) then no such absolute separation between theory and practice is possible. On Girard’s reading, Clausewitz is simply in bad faith when he seemingly dismisses the apocalyptic implications of this logic of extremes: “Clausewitz prefers to mask his intuitions in allowing his readers to believe that war is still what it was in the eighteenth century, and that politics could contain it. This is his Enlightenment side. But this mask can no longer be maintained; we already perceive why” (Girard, 2007: 81). Thus Girard sees Clausewitz’s famous declaration that “war is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means” (Clausewitz, 1976: 87), as a way of covering over the disturbing reality of his theory of extremes; for if war is under the control of politics, then war will always be restrained by a minimal rationality. But, for Girard, there is nothing “purely theoretical” about “reciprocal action”; this potential for negative reciprocity (the exchange of blows) is rooted in our mimetic nature. To see war as an “escalation to extremes” is to realize that it will always threaten to outstrip politics, to rage beyond the control of any rationality. To think war according to a logic of extremes is ipso facto to engage in apocalyptic thinking.

Nevertheless, there are moments in which Clausewitz appears to admit that the escalation to extremes is not merely theoretical, such as the following passage from the section entitled “Absolute War and Real War,” near the end of his book:

One might wonder whether there is any truth at all in our concept of the absolute character of war were it not for the fact that with our own eyes we have seen warfare achieve this state of absolute perfection. [...] War in [Napoleon's] hands, was waged without respite until the enemy succumbed, and the counterblows were struck with almost equal energy. Surely it is both natural and inescapable that this phenomenon should cause us to turn again to the pure concept of war with all of its rigorous implications. (Clausewitz, 1976: 580)

This passage clearly shows the coincidence between theory (war as “pure concept” or “absolute perfection”) and reality in the Napoleonic war machine. Clausewitz had himself experienced these “extremes”: in Napoleon's crushing victory over the Prussians in 1806 at the battle of Jena-Auerstedt.²⁴ Referring to this disastrous defeat, Clausewitz could not help observing that

without the cautionary examples of the destructive power of war unleashed, theory would preach to deaf ears. No one would have believed possible what has now been experienced by all. [...] Would [Prussia] in 1806, have risked war with France with 100,000 men, if she had suspected that the first shot would set off a mine that was to blow her to the skies? (Clausewitz, 1976: 581)

The theory of extremes is here effectively merged with its historical actuality. Napoleon had made the apocalypse into a concrete concept.

Global Terrorism and Total War

Using Clausewitz's theory of extremes, can we not also consider global terrorism to be a form of absolute war, tending toward “pure” violence, i.e., violence that outstrips politics? Girard contends that “we must think in Clausewitzian terms about what the introduction of terrorism represents today. At bottom, it is an intensification of total war in the sense of Hitler or Stalin” (Girard, 2007: 129). Terrorism is total war in the sense that it recognizes no distinction between military and civilian targets (the attacks of September 11, 2001 included both). Civilian targets are often preferred, for they are more efficacious in attracting attention and eliciting a response. Indeed, one could argue that the primary

objective of Al Qaeda terrorism is escalation itself. And what is terrorism, after all, if not asymmetrical provocation? As Lawrence Wright, the Pulitzer Prize author of *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (2006), observes in his article “The Master Plan: For the New Theorists of Jihad, Al Qaeda is just the Beginning,” escalation was the “goal”:

[Bin Laden’s] goal, for at least five years, had been to goad America into invading Afghanistan, an ambition that had caused him to continually raise the stakes – the simultaneous bombings of the United States Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, in August, 1998, followed by the attack on an American warship in the harbor of Aden, Yemen, in October, 2000. Neither of those actions had led the United States to send troops to Afghanistan. After the attacks on New York and Washington, however, it was clear that there would be an overwhelming response. Al Qaeda members began sending their families home and preparing for war. (Wright, 2006)

Because the United State was measured in its response to the first Al Qaeda attacks, treating them as law enforcement issues, Al Qaeda was led to up the ante, as it were, to get the “reciprocity” it desired; this was 9/11. Bin Laden had imagined that in their ensuing invasion of Afghanistan, the Americans would get bogged down, as did the Russians in the 1980s, and that, just as the USSR had collapsed after ten years of unsuccessful war, the American republic would suffer a similar fate. Yet this was only to be the first step on the way to a “total confrontation” on a global scale.²⁵

Despite the extreme challenge that global terrorism and “rogue nations” (Iran, North Korea) have presented to international institutions, the only real solution to the escalation of violence remains the strengthening of these institutions. As Girard observes in *Violence and the Sacred*, in a very different context than that of *Achever Clausewitz*, “as long as there exists no sovereign and independent body capable of taking the place of the injured party and taking upon itself the responsibility for revenge, the dangers of interminable escalation remain” (Girard, [1972] 1977: 17). Can we not apply this insight to the world situation? If so, it would seem that only a world system of justice that is “sovereign and independent” can transcend global violence and forestall our apocalyptic future.

NOTES

- ¹ Girard (2007), *Achever Clausewitz: Entretiens avec Benoît Chantre*, Paris: Carnets Nord, p. 245. All of the translations from this book are my own. An English translation has recently been published under the title *Battling to the End*, trans. Mary Baker, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009.
- ² "Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with René Girard," *SubStance* 37.1 [2008]: 25.
- ³ The term "total war" was coined not by Clausewitz but by a German military officer, General Ludendorff, whose memoir, *Der Totale Krieg*, was published after World War I. This concept of "total war" is not to be confused with Clausewitz's notion of "absolute war" *Vernichtungskrieg*. This later concept is a theoretical construct that imagines a pure state of war. See the chapter entitled "Absolute War and Real War" in Carl von Clausewitz, 1976: 579-581.
- ⁴ "*Achever* ce qu'il [Clausewitz] n'a fait qu'entrevoir, c'est retrouver ce qu'il y a de plus profond dans le christianisme" (Girard, 2007: 151).
- ⁵ Prior to *Achever Clausewitz*, Girard had never studied war *per se*. Had Girard focused on Clausewitz earlier in his career, *On War* would have no doubt figured prominently in his work.
- ⁶ The first three phases of Girard's thought are: the mimetic theory of desire (*Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, 1961); the theory of archaic religion and sacrifice (*La violence et le sacré*, 1972); and the theory of the Christian deconstruction of myth in the Gospels (*Les choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, 1978).
- ⁷ "Le Christ impose donc une alternative terrible: ou le suivre en renonçant à la violence, ou accélérer la fin des temps" (Christ places us before a terrible choice: either follow him in renouncing violence, or accelerate the end of days) (Girard, 2007: 149).
- ⁸ "The only Christians who still speak about the apocalypse are the fundamentalists, but they make it into a completely mythological idea. They think that the violence of the end of time will come from God himself; they require the notion of a vindictive God. Strangely, they do not see that the violence gathering over our very own heads has all of the necessary qualities to unleash the worst. They have no sense of humor" (Girard, 2007: 21). However, this is not merely an attitude of religious fundamentalists. Erich Pratt, the director of communications for Gun Owners of America, was recently quoted in the *New York Times* as follows: "These politicians need to remember that these [gun] rights aren't given to us by them. They come from God. They are God-given rights. They can't be infringed or limited in any way. What are they going to do: limit it two or three rounds. Having lots of ammunition is critical, especially if the police are not around and you need to be able to defend yourself against mobs." (*The New York Times*, January 14, 2011).
- ⁹ As Girard remarks on many occasions, man is the only animal that fights to the death. All other animals fight for dominance; that is, the weaker submits to the stronger thereby ending the violent encounter before it leads to death.
- ¹⁰ Girard has recently been somewhat ambivalent about the relation between Christianity and sacrifice: "Christianity has always been sacrificial. It's true I gave the nonsacrificial interpretation too much importance — in order to be heretical. That is what was left of the avant-gardist attitude in me. I had to be against the Church in some way. The attitude was instinctive, since my whole intellectual training came out of surrealism, existentialism and so forth, which were all anti-Christian. It was probably a good thing, for the book might not otherwise have been successful" (Doran, [2008]: 30).

- ¹¹ This formulation bears a superficial resemblance to Marcel Gauchet's famous dictum, "Christianity is the religion of the exiting of religion"; but Gauchet's idea is very different. See Gauchet, 1997: 101.
- ¹² Thus those who feel that they are being falsely accused will often apply the term "scapegoat" to themselves, thereby drawing attention to their innocence.
- ¹³ In terrorist attacks the innocent (non-military, civilian) are often targeted; they are effectively scapegoats; but this follows the more general logic of the blurring of the lines between civilian and military that is the hallmark of total war.
- ¹⁴ Even such common terms as "fall guy" (*Webster's New Dictionary*: "a person made the victim, or left to face the consequences, of a scheme that has miscarried") testify to this dynamic. Like "scapegoat," the use of the term "fall guy" implies an awareness that the condemned person is innocent or only minimally responsible for what he/her is being blamed. Thus the archaic instinct to project or cast blame in scapegoating is still a somewhat effective way of directing and channeling rage, even if its operation is partially transparent.
- ¹⁵ And the fact that in the United States white juries are more likely to convict back defendants testifies to this dynamic.
- ¹⁶ Girard observes in the interview mentioned above: "Jacques Maritain said that there is more good and more bad in the world all the time. I think this is an excellent formula. In other words, the world is both more Christian and less Christian, constantly. But it is fundamentally disorganized by Christianity" (Doran, [2008]: 27).
- ¹⁷ The progressive elimination of dueling in the nineteenth century is a case in point. Dueling was almost always against the law, but widely practiced at this time as an expression of the aristocratic code of honor. Here democratization and the effective mastery of violence coincide in a legal system that provides "justice for all."
- ¹⁸ As David Bell notes, "[during the 1700s] military leaders saw their adversaries largely as honorable equals. This is not to say that war was not horrific. War is by definition horrific. But historians need to be able to make distinctions between shades of horror, and if the eighteenth century did not exactly reduce the slaving dogs of war to 'performing poodles' (as Sir Michael Howard once jokingly put it) its conflicts still ranked among the *least* horrific in European history." Bell's book, entitled *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It*, addresses many of the same issues as Girard's *Achever Clausewitz*, and, coincidentally, was published the same year (2007). Inspired by Clausewitz's analyses, both see the origins of total war in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era; and both see the advent of total war in apocalyptic terms. Bell remarks that the European conflicts from 1792 to 1815 "deserv[e] the adjective 'apocalyptic'" (Bell, 2007: 7).
- ¹⁹ Though the only nation ever to use an atomic bomb in war was a democracy, the United States.
- ²⁰ The atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan and the firebombing of Dresden in Germany during the Second World War are clearly the culmination of this blurring of distinction between civilian and military targets.
- ²¹ For an incisive discussion of the genesis of patriotism in France, see Bell, 2001, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism 1680-1800*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- ²² This aristocratic respect for the enemy is admirably shown in Jean Renoir's film about World War I, *La grande illusion* (1937). See my essay, "Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion*: An Antiwar Film?" in *The (In)visibility of War*, ed. Isabel Gil, forthcoming.
- ²³ In his very helpful *On Clausewitz: A Study of Military and Political Ideas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 88), Hugh Smith summarizes the three extremes as follows: "once force has been

introduced there is no logical limit to its employment; each belligerent fears the other will seek to overthrow him; and each belligerent feels compelled to match or outdo the enemy's exertions."

²⁴ Clausewitz's unit was forced to surrender and he was taken to France as a prisoner. He returned to Prussia in the spring of 1808.

²⁵ Wright also reports they had a long term plan for global domination: "The sixth phase will be a period of 'total confrontation.' The now established caliphate will form an Islamic Army and will instigate a worldwide fight between the 'believers' and the 'non-believers.' [Radical Jordanian journalist Fouad] Hussein proclaims, 'The world will realize the meaning of real terrorism.' By 2020, 'definitive victory' will have been achieved. Victory, according to the Al Qaeda ideologues, means that 'falsehood will come to an end. ... The Islamic state will lead the human race once again to the shore of safety and the oasis of happiness'" (Wright, 2006).

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