

A Conversation With René Girard About Jacques Ellul

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Ellul Forum

David W. Gill made the pilgrimage from Berkeley to Stanford on April 12, 2005, to interview Professor Girard at his home.

David W. Gill: Professor Girard, you and Jacques Ellul have been two of our most creative and penetrating analysts of contemporary society with all of its religion, technology, conflict and ferment. And you were both Christian in a deep way. This is not a normal situation among French intellectuals. Did you and Ellul ever meet each other?

René Girard: In 1970 I sat next to him at a dinner party organized by some friends. We had a nice interaction then and at several other brief contacts over the years but always in circumstances where we were interrupted a lot. So I never had a real, serious conversation with him.

I am mostly interested in his views as a sociologist of religion in the modern world. By contrast, I am an anthropologist of religion interested in the contact and opposition between archaic religious phenomena and Christianity. But I find in Ellul many ideas that I share with him completely. In some ways I am trying to do something similar to what he has done.

Gill: Is it true that you became a Christian as an adult?

Girard: My mother raised me as a Catholic but I abandoned it when I was about thirteen. She was quite liberal and didn't force her children to go to church. I didn't return until about 1961 at age thirty-five and then it was because of my work. But I am now a fairly active member of the St. Thomas Aquinas parish here at Stanford.

About the time I returned to the church is when I also encountered Ellul's work. So I'm a little rusty but I have re-read some of his work recently, including *Ce Que Je Crois [What I Believe]*, a powerful book which hasn't lost any of its relevance since it was first written.

Gill: Your work places a central emphasis on sacrifice and the scapegoat---whereas Ellul places a central emphasis on Scripture and the word. Could this be because Ellul was Reformed while you are Catholic?

Girard: I don't think so. The reason is that the relationship between archaic religions and the biblical religion is fundamental in my view. I am very interested in religious anthropology and I believe that there is an enormous break that comes with the Bible and Christianity. I believe in the basic unity of all religions. Religion is always oriented towards peace. Archaic religious phenomena are primarily scapegoat phenomena, a kind of mimetic gathering against victims that are fundamentally random. The killing of the initial scapegoat reconciles the disrupted, divided community. Sacrifice is fundamentally, deliberately reenacting that pattern, with carefully chosen victims, in order to make peace.

Christianity begins fundamentally with that same phenomenon. Jesus is the innocent victim, the scapegoat. But in archaic religion, the victim is believed to be powerful because he too is guilty and violent. Christianity tells us that it's not true. God is totally different from what we think. He is nonviolent. Fundamentally he is himself the innocent victim who dies for us. So Christianity is both the same and radically different from archaic religion.

Gill: Does this ultimate sacrificial act liberate us to make peace without finding another scapegoat to blame?

Girard: That's what Christianity should be.

Gill: Do we recapitulate that sacrifice by forgiving and bearing the pain of a conflict rather than blaming others (like the Muslims are often blamed today for all that is wrong)?

Girard: Not only the Bible but all of human religion is prophetic in somewhat the same sense---the victim is innocent, whether Joseph, or Job, or the innocent victim of a lynching. It is always prophetic of Christ.

Gill: With this long and continuing story of sacrifice, blame, violence, and threats, and with a contemporary culture that evades responsibility and searches for scapegoats, what do you say?

Girard: We are always practicing some kind of expulsion and victimization and this is becoming increasingly violent because of technology, bringing us closer and closer to total destruction. But the Bible and Christianity direct us against victimization, against viewing the enemy as less than ourselves. Those faced with conflict have to face the truth. There is no shortcut. We cannot be satisfied with half measures and compromises and not looking at the oneness of the world.

Gill: So authentic Christianity should unmask the reality of life so that we can face the truth and cease scapegoating others, especially the innocent?

Girard: Authentic Christianity explicates this truth. Much of the anti-Christian feeling of our own era is because of the way today's church often replicates archaic religious practices. We must see the similarity---as well as the difference---in Christianity. Christianity must denounce its own scapegoating and say it is people who act this way, not God.

Gill: Regarding technology, you have suggested that it only became possible when people stopped looking for scapegoats (for disease and other misfortunes of life) and developed science and technology.

Girard: In an archaic community, if a roof falls in there must be a culprit somewhere. But as long as you think that way you will not improve your building and construction techniques. Magical explanations are always scapegoating phenomena. The old anthropologists like Fraser often made this point. Christianity preconditioned the type of rationality required by technology. Far from being anti-scientific or anti-technology, Christianity made them possible.

Gill: In *The New Demons* Jacques Ellul argues that Technique has become our new sacred, at the center of our culture. The old religious demons have been exorcised but there are new ones. People look to technology as they used to look to God. Questioning technology is treated as profaning God's name used to be. Ellul would say we must desacralize technology.

Girard: *The New Demons* was very prophetic. Religion is back in a big way. All the cliches of the Enlightenment are collapsing. Our technology is like the sorcerer's apprentice. It threatens us and must be controlled or restrained in some way.

Gill: How would you describe the "sacred" in today's society?

Girard: The sacred always has aspects of violence mixed up in it. The shift in Christianity was from a violent sacred to love. The great mystery and paradox is that religions begin with a violent sacred in order to suppress violence. If we stay in an archaic atmosphere we sacralize technology, we sacralize power, which means that ultimately we sacralize violence. So to worship technology today, rather than being modern, is really to return to the archaic. The danger from our technology is becoming very obvious.

Gill: What do you make of the rise of Islam? This was something that concerned Ellul.

Girard: For Islam, God is essentially power. There is a great distance between the people and the omnipotent God. With Ellul, I would argue that Christianity shows us a God of non-power, something very different even from nonviolence. God chooses not to use the power he has but instead to leave humanity free. The question is whether people will be capable of exercising this freedom. I think the great mistake of Christianity today is to try to reassure people, to make things more palatable. They think that people want to be reassured. No. They want the truth!