

1 Introduction

The world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-stricken town needs doctors. Where there is a need there is also an obligation. (Weil, 2001, p. 99)

Today the topic of symposia, workshops, or lectures is usually religion and violence, not the other way around. This is a first concern I want to express in this Element. We must start with human violence and ask afterward in what way religion relates to violence. It may enhance violence or strengthen peace. Both these relations are possible. To find out, however, what type of religion is prone to violence and what type of religion contributes to peace, we need a normative concept of religion. To focus on such a concept is my second concern. For many years, I have followed René Girard's anthropological approach concerning violence and religion without, however, putting enough emphasis on his later distinction between the sacred and the holy.

Working on the so-called European wars of religion a couple of years ago showed me how important Girard's distinction really is (Palaver, 2016a, pp. 257–258). Scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds have demonstrated in recent years that it is much too simple to see religion as the main cause of these wars. José Casanova, the well-known sociologist, showed that these wars were not caused by religion leading to the secularized modern state but were much more part of the modern state building that led “to the confessionalization of the state and to the territorialization of religions and people” (2008, p. 9). In addition, many historians today question the usual understanding of these wars. Luise Schorn-Schütte, for instance, a German historian, emphasized the dovetailing of religion and the political against all too simplified concepts that focus only on religious or political dimension of these wars (2010). William Cavanaugh's theological contribution to this debate was also important for me. He criticized the myth of religious violence by interpreting the so-called European wars of religion as the birth pangs of the modern state (2009, pp. 123–180). Cavanaugh also showed that the use of the term “religion” in these debates was already highly problematic because its modern understanding stems from the questionable claim that these wars were religious wars. His insight that

the modern state itself fulfils a religious role if we reflect on nationalism and modern wars also underlines the fact that it is very difficult to distill a special religious dimension as a root cause of violence.

Girard's distinction between the sacred and the holy can lead us further because it distinguishes between a type of religion that directly results from violent entanglements between human beings and a type of religion that the nonviolent God has offered to his creatures. In the following, I will show how Girard clarified his distinction between the sacred and saintliness during the unfolding of his mimetic theory. Two scholarly debates serve as its theoretical background and enhance our understanding of Girard's distinction. Both started around Emile Durkheim's book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* from 1912. The first debate was the war over the sacred in French sociology in which Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade criticized Durkheim's approach for its societal reduction of the sacred. A nearly contrary critique of Durkheim came from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Gauchet who rejected the claim either that the sacred is the primary social institution or that it would not be possible to reach an end of religion. Girard's mimetic theory differs significantly from all these positions. Like Durkheim, he recognized the foundational dimension of the sacred and could not follow Lévi-Strauss's or Gauchet's view of religion. He also clearly distanced himself from Otto's understanding of the holy with its emphasis on its nonrational dimension. His important deviation from Durkheim's view of the sacred, however, followed indirectly a second debate that leaned more strongly toward philosophical and theological questions. It started during the Dreyfus Affair with Charles Péguy's discovery of saintliness in the defense of innocent victims of scapegoating. Péguy, a student of Henri Bergson, influenced his teacher in his development of a concept of religion that distinguished between two types of it in Bergson's late book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* from 1932. Bergson's distinction between a static and a dynamic religion systematized some of Péguy's intuitions; complemented Durkheim's reductionist view; and initiated a tradition of saintliness, which influenced thinkers like Simone Weil, Jacques Maritain, or Emmanuel Levinas. Their emphasis on sanctity contributed to Girard's seminal distinction between the sacred and saintliness as two sections of this Element will show in detail. Finally, I conclude

this Element with an overview of the most important dimensions of saintliness as they follow from Girard's distinction.

2 Why Violence Precedes Religion and Not the Other Way Around

To ask “why is there so much violence around us?” may feel like an eternal question, but in fact it is really a very modern one. (Girard, 1998, p. 129)

2.1 Starting with Human Violence

Reflections on religion and violence in news media and popular literature and by scholars like the new atheists tend to emphasize religion as the main culprit by usually putting this term first. I prefer “violence” as the starting point because it reminds us immediately about the fact that human beings are ultimately responsible for acts of violence. It is also easier to define violence than religion. When people use physical force to injure or abuse other human beings, we rightly call it violence. This type of direct or personal violence ranges from muggings in the street to rape, terrorism, or acts of war. Reducing violence, however, to physical or direct acts is a much too narrow approach. We definitely need a broader concept and have to include for example psychic violence, symbolic violence, or epistemic violence (Lawrence and Karim, 2007; Christ, 2017). The Norwegian founder of peace studies Johan Galtung decades ago went beyond direct violence by introducing the concept of “structural violence” that he identified with social injustice: “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (1969, p. 168). Later Galtung defined violence more precisely as consisting in “avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to *life*, lowering the real level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible” (1990, p. 292; unless otherwise noted, all emphasis in original text). He also broadened his understanding of violence by adding cultural violence as a third type besides direct and structural violence (1990; cf. Dennis, 2018, pp. 38–40). According to Galtung, these three types of violence form a “vicious *violence triangle*” (1990, p. 294; cf. 2004).

Direct violence is the most visible form, whereas structural violence and cultural violence remain invisible most of the time. Structures of unequal economic or political power following sexism, racism, or the discrimination of minorities are typical examples of structural violence. Cultural violence that overlaps partly with symbolic violence provides the justification of direct or structural violence. It is essentially symbolic and plays an important role in “religion and ideology, in language and art, in science and law, in media and education” (Galtung, 1996, p. 2). According to Galtung, this violence triangle is vicious because the different types of violence tend to reinforce one another. Focusing on violence means considering the whole violence triangle.

Starting with violence does not mean maintaining that human nature is violent but to open our eyes for the violent potentials that are part of human life. According to Galtung, human beings have potentials for violence as well as for love (2004, p. 6). A century ago, the Austrian writer Robert Musil who participated in the First World War noted afterward that “human nature is as capable of cannibalism as it is of the *Critique of Pure Reason*” (1995a, p. I 391; cf. 1995b, p. 121). Behavioral scientists express similar insights today. Richard Wrangham (2019), for instance, claims in his recent book *The Goodness Paradox* that human beings “can be the nastiest of species and also the nicest” (p. 3).

It is highly irritating and embarrassing to belong to a species with such violent potentials. We therefore want to attribute immediately all violence to others by claiming our innocence and our inborn nonviolence. René Girard rejected the notion that aggression is the main cause of violence because it is often one-sided in its attempt to blame others for being violent aggressors: “It aggressively divides mankind between the aggressors and the aggressed, and we include ourselves in the second category. But most human conflicts are two-sided, reciprocal” (2004b, p. 9). Starting with violence also means confronting ourselves with our own inclinations toward violence. The Swiss writer Max Frisch formulated the most challenging question in this regard: “Let us assume that you have never killed another human being. How do you account for it?” (1974, p. 4). Frisch’s harsh question does not lack evidence. Steven Pinker refers to studies that were conducted with university students who are not known to be exceptionally aggressive but showed high rates of homicidal fantasies: “Between 70 and 90 percent of the men,

and between 50 and 80 percent of the women, admitted to having at least one homicidal fantasy in the preceding year” (2011, p. 484). To face one’s own violence, however, is quite challenging. Strong defense mechanisms protect us against this self-inspection. Girard claimed in an interview with Robert Harrison that the “real unconscious” is the “rejection of an awareness of our own violence” (Haven, 2020, p. 123).

Recent research shows a certain inclination toward conspecific violence among primates and human beings due to social behavior and territoriality (Gómez, Verdú, González-Megías, and Méndez, 2016; Pagel, 2016). This heritage, however, does not mean that human beings are determined to violent behavior. These studies claim a 2 percent rate of lethal violence at the origin of our species. During human history, this rate rose as high as 30 percent and declined to 0.01 percent in modern societies.

Girard’s mimetic theory has contributed significantly to the field of violence studies. Like Galtung, he rejected claims about an inborn violent human nature and he too went far beyond acts of direct violence, clearly deconstructing types of structural and cultural violence. Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim recognize Girard as an important author to understand the “religious element to structural violence” because he understood that the primordial religious attempt to tame violence had to rely on the “application of violence” (2007, p. 221; cf. Girard, 1977, p. 20). More in line with Galtung’s typology, Girard reflects on structural violence where he refers to the “deprivations of the poor,” the general tendency of majorities to scapegoat minorities or to acts of racism (1986, pp. 6, 17–18, 22, 32, 39, 90, 120; 1987c, pp. 38, 129, 446). Girard’s deconstruction of the pre-Axial religions as the offspring of a foundational murder that not only shaped religion but also the whole culture due to its being rooted in violence goes even beyond Galtung’s critical assessment of cultural violence. Girard’s critical approach dares to unmask violence even in those myths that show no obvious traces of violence by relying on structural parallels with those myths that expose at least some traces of violence:

We are beginning to see that the representations of persecution we have already deciphered are for us an Ariadne’s thread to guide us through the labyrinth of mythology. They

will enable us to trace the real origin in collective violence of even the myths that contain no stereotypes of persecution. (1986, p. 33)

Violence not only shaped the realm of the sacred but culture as well. According to Girard, the judicial system and even ancient philosophy are outstanding examples of cultural violence because of their roots in a murderous victimhood mechanism (Palaver, 2019).

In an important regard, however, Girard reached a deeper level of unmasking the invisible underground of violence that remained outside Galtung's scope. In the work of this pioneer of peace research, we do not find a convincing explanation of the human causes leading to the vicious violence triangle. Girard, however, recognized in ordinary human relations a high potential for human violence. In an article in which he distances himself from those scholars of violence who confine their studies to small acts of direct violence, he highlights the relational character of human violence:

They want to isolate the smallest knowable particle of violence. By the act of violence they mean mugging in big cities. Of course violence in big cities, anonymous violence that strikes like lightning, more or less at random, is a real problem today. It is a very big problem which I do not want to minimise. But all criminologists will tell you that most violence occurs between people who have been acquainted with each other, often for a very long time. Violence is a relationship. (1998, p. 129)

Girard's focus on the relational dimension of violence enabled him to recognize the puzzling fact of sibling rivalry as a main root of human violence:

We instinctively tend to regard the fraternal relationship as an affectionate one; yet the mythological, historical, and literary examples that spring to mind tell a different story: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Eteocles and Polyneices,

Romulus and Remus, Richard the Lion-Hearted and John Lackland. . . . The fraternal theme . . . itself is a form of violence. (1977, p. 61)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2015) endorses Girard's insight in his book *Not in God's Name*, highlighting sibling rivalry as a key to understanding religious violence.

Initiated by his careful readings of great European novelists, Girard shares insights with many poets and writers who recognized how easily human relations can turn into nasty entanglements (1966). The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin whose writings accompanied Girard throughout most of his unfolding of mimetic theory observes in his fragment *Hyperion's Youth* that ordinary life often resembles a "war" that is fought beneath a "mask of peace" (2008, p. 242). This invisible war stems from entanglements of desiring humans. A sentence in his novel *Hyperion* summarizes marvelously what Hölderlin understands about rivaling desires after basic needs are satisfied: "Young lambs butt their heads together when they are sated with their mother's milk" (1990, p. 69) What Hölderlin expressed with this sentence leads to Girard's insight into mimetic rivalry that he discovered in major writers. Whenever human beings imitate others and desire objects they cannot share or enjoy together, they easily turn against one another. Mimetic desire is, according to Girard, the main cause of human rivalries and violence. Girard criticizes social sciences harshly for overlooking the potentials of violence in human relations:

The mimetic nature of desire accounts for the fragility of human relations. Our social sciences should give due consideration to a phenomenon that must be considered *normal*, but they persist in seeing conflict as something accidental, and consequently so unforeseeable that researchers cannot and must not take it into account in their study of culture. (2001, pp. 10–11)

This claim to recognize the normality of conflicts coming along with human relations, however, does mean that human beings are necessarily prone to

violence caused by mimetic desire. In the very same book, in which Girard highlights the fragility of human relations, he also maintains, “mimetic desire is intrinsically good” (2001, p. 15)

Recognizing mimetic rivalries as the main root of human violence also consists of concepts that refer to scarcity instead. Two authors have explained religious violence by emphasizing scarcity as its prime cause. Regina Schwartz used it to address monotheism’s proneness toward violence, and Hector Avalos (2019) extended her thesis to religions in general. An emphasis on scarcity remains, however, banal and superficial because it is mainly the result of mimetic rivalries and not their precondition. Girard rightly highlights the advantages of a “theory of conflict based primarily on appropriative mimicry” over against one “based on scarcity” (Williams, 1996, p. 10). Paul Dumouchel, a philosopher following Girard’s anthropology underlined the secondariness of scarcity and its social origin:

Scarcity is defined neither by any quantity of goods and resources nor by parsimony of nature. Scarcity is constructed in the fabric of interpersonal relations. . . . Scarcity exists nowhere but in the network of intersubjective exchanges that creates it. Scarcity is a form of social organization, nothing else. (2013, p. 23)

It is true that scarcity has a central role in many religious scriptures. Sibling rivalries in the Hebrew Bible most obviously illustrate this problem and disclose at the same time its roots in mimetic rivalry. Many passages in the Bible reveal the mimetic causation clearly and do not prove a violent religious scarcity to justify violence. Schwartz at least recognized passages that emphasize God’s plenitude but weakened her insight by claiming that this vision was difficult to sustain (1997, pp. 34–37; cf. Mittleman, 2018, p. 170; Meir, 2019, pp. 75–77). Indeed, the vision of plenitude is difficult to sustain because we humans so easily end up in mimetic entanglements. According to Rabbi Sacks, the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible seems to illustrate nothing but scarcity caused by mimetic rivalry. However, this is only true if we overlook the counternarrative that we find beneath the surface of these texts hinting “at the most radical of monotheism’s truths:

that God may choose, but God *does not reject*. The logic of scarcity – of alpha males and chosen sons – has no place in a world made by a God whose ‘tender mercies are on *all* his works’ (Psalm 145:9)” (Sacks, 2015, p. 123). Sacks knows that scarcity comes along with competition for wealth and power, but that divine love “is governed by the principle of plenitude” (p. 172). We touch here the realm of the holy that unites people and due to its lack of materiality does not necessitate scarcity, as the German philosopher Max Scheler very well understood: “Nothing unites beings more immediately and intimately . . . than the common worship and adoration of the ‘holy,’ which by its nature excludes a ‘material’ bearer, though not a symbolic one” (1973, p. 94; cf. Palaver, 2013a, p. 94).

If we would start with religion instead of violence, it might also be an attempt to blame others for causing violence. Girard justly warned us not to give in to this temptation: “The violence we would love to transfer to religion is really our own, and we must confront it directly. To turn religions into the scapegoats of our own violence can only backfire in the end” (2004b, p. 20). Girard’s warning does not mean that we should turn a blind eye on all those cases of violence in which religion played a role. We just have to look at the so-called European wars of religion between 1520 and 1648 that resulted in one of the bloodiest periods in modern Western history (Pinker, 2011, p. 293; cf. Palaver, Rudolph, and Regensburger, 2016). The cruelty in these wars was so extreme that terms like “massacre” and “cannibal” became part of common parlance during these years (Jacoby, 2011, p. 12). It is, however, much too simple to see religion as the sole root of violence. André Comte-Sponville, an atheistic French philosopher does not overlook in his *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* all those examples that show how religions contributed to violence, but he refers in the end to human beings as such where he looks for causes of violence:

What incites people to commit massacres is not faith; it is fanaticism, whether religious or political. It is intolerance. It is hatred. Believing in God can be dangerous. We need only remember the massacre of Saint Bartholomew’s Day, the Crusades, the wars of religion, the Jihad, the September 11

attacks. . . . Not believing in God can be equally dangerous. We need only remember Stalin, Mao Tsetung or Pol Pot. . . . Who will add up the deaths on either side and decide what they mean? Horror is numberless, with or without God. Alas, this tells us more about humanity than it does about religion. (2007, p. 76)

It is also important to understand that the interplay between violence and religion differed significantly throughout human history. We have to distinguish between the most important stages of this history. (Comte-Sponville, 2007, p. 76) If we follow Robert Bellah's distinction between tribal, archaic, and Axial religions, we can find specific types of violence that characterize these different forms of religion. Concerning tribal religions, Bellah states that these societies were not automatically peaceful despite their strong in-group solidarity but knew, for instance, "endemic conflict between groups," adding, "even cannibalism shows up in the fossil record" (2011, p. 130). Group identity often developed in opposition to other groups. Bellah recognized friend-enemy patterns in tribal societies that have not yet left our world: "In-group solidarity and out-group hostility are recurrent human possibilities at every level, from foragers to school-children to nation-states" (p. 94). In-group aggression, too, was "only relatively successfully controlled" (p. 130). Hunter-gatherer bands were egalitarian but needed aggressive acts to prevent upstarts from dominating the group. Bellah refers to Christopher Boehm's book *Hierarchy in the Forest* and summarizes the usual sanctions of these egalitarian bands in the following way: "Potential upstarts are first ridiculed, then shunned, and, if they persist, killed" (p. 177; cf. Boehm, 1999). Regarding the latter Boehm himself recognizes in such killings the most extreme form of ostracism and claims, "45,000 years ago, capital punishment was a human universal" (2011, p. 528; cf. 2012, p. 35).

With the emergence of chiefdoms, sedentarism, and agrarianism, humanity entered its archaic stage. Although this was certainly a step forward in the development of human culture, it also led to severe forms of violence. Benjamin Schewel, a philosopher working on history and religion, explains why "conflict, violence, and oppression were common