Mimesis and World-building: Berger and Girard on the Sacred

1. Religion as a Social Construction

If one is willing to regard Girard’s theory as related to the sociology of religion, it must surely be related initially to Peter Berger’s concept of religion as a *social construction*, created by humans.¹ In fact, Girard and Berger do not only have, loosely speaking, the same starting point (understanding religion initially as human needs); they also have several central themes in common regarding religion, despite the fact that they speak from different academic traditions.²

Peter Berger begins his argument in *The Sacred Canopy* by revisiting a model he developed previously in *The Social Construction of Reality*. Man is a world-builder and a social being.³ Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established.⁴ It is, therefore, in our nature to construct social worlds.⁵ Berger argues that the self “externalizes” as a matter of its very nature.⁶ The sum of its “externalizations” produces society, which becomes an objective reality that in turn acts on the individual.⁷ This externalization in Girard’s work begins with the act of scapegoating which, in due time, because humans cannot stand the violence they have committed, creates religious institutions.

2. Religion Protects against Meaninglessness

Both Berger and Girard see religion as protection from meaninglessness - despite Berger’s emphasis on religious alienation. Both thinkers deny biological
determination. According to Berger, humans have no specific biological milieu.8 The human situation is open and cannot be stable as regards desire.9 Humans are the most unfinished species, and its project of world-building is never ending. Human world-building is a consequence of its biological constitution.10 World-building is a consequence of insufficient instincts. Therefore, world-building becomes acute and absolutely necessary in order to survive.

3. Mimesis and Religion

There are, however, few instances in Berger’s work where mimesis or imitation is introduced into the act of mediating anthropology and religious beliefs, which is, in my view, the main difference between Berger's and Girard's religious understanding. Berger does, however, claim that identity is created by the individual, who becomes what he is addressed as by others.11 And by repeating acts of everyday life man compensates for his lack of biological determination.12 Also Berger claims that successful world-building, where the norms of society become internalized, is totally dependent upon socialization.13 Despite there being an “interindividual” tone in Berger’s research on the human condition, he does not focus on imitation as a fundamental desire. In fact, the notion of desire is hardly present in his theory. He does, however, see religious imitation in the traditional context of representation, in that everything here below has an analogy up above.14 And in The Social Construction of Reality the authors emphasize the intersubjective dimension of everyday life.15 But this kind of imitation is less a drive than a response to social norms. In Berger’s analysis of divine imitation there is no generative drive. The image of divine role models, for example the role of a father imitating the divine father,16 does not contain mimesis as desire but as representation. It does have a real function, however, as it protects against
meaningless. Perhaps one could call both world-building and the strategies of establishing meaning conscious desires, that represent the accepted desires of a community, where sons imitate their fathers' norms. This means, however, seeing Berger’s theory very much from a mimetic point of view.

4. The Sacred Emerges Out of Chaos

In Berger’s work there is a great deal of focus on the sacred as protection against chaos. An essential element is the theme that the sacred enables humans to experience meaning and protects them from the unavoidable threat of death. Religion for Berger is on the whole the establishment, through human activity, of an encompassing holy order or holy cosmos which is capable of maintaining order despite the continual threat of chaos. Berger sees death as something that every society is compelled to deal with, and from the problem of death, religion is engendered. This seems quite similar to the theory of culture arising from scapegoating. However Berger’s emphasis on death and all the marginal situations associated with death (war, natural catastrophes, abrupt social changes) differs initially from Girard in that, for Berger, mimetic desire is not decisive in the process of constituting a ‘sacred canopy’. It is the fear of death, not the violent nature of human beings towards other human beings, which ignites the sacred. On the other hand, on the issue of the sacred, their theories do seem to converge. According to Berger, the sacred deviates from the normal routine of life, and is seen as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous. The sacred is something which emerges out of chaos. And by losing contact with the sacred, humans stand in danger of being swallowed up by chaos. This is exactly the setting in which Girard sees the initial stages of sacrifice; when a society is smitten by chaos, there is a frenzy
of violence, differences are abolished and society is haunted by a lack of structure and meaning.

It is in such circumstances that scapegoating shows its efficiency, because it restores order and brings the community back from chaos to peace. (And later turns the victim into a divinity). Thus both Girard and Berger see the sacred as something which is established when threatened by death.

5. Berger Avoids Viewing the Sacred as something Violent

Being threatened by death (Berger) or being threatened by violence (Girard) must, in some ways, be seen as related. In *The Sacred Canopy*, however, Berger neither connects death nor the sacred to violence. Violence does not have any privileged or essential place in his reflection on the sacred. He sees death more from a traditional metaphysical point of view, where consciousness of one’s own and other people’s deaths make men question ‘normal life’. Clearly Berger speaks exclusively from a contemporary context here, from a Western worldview, where religious sacrifice is not primarily violent, and religious practice is more centred on individual needs. It is this discrepancy in time between Girard’s focus on primitive religion and Berger’s focus on the contemporary which partly makes their theories on the sacred somewhat incongruous – even if Berger operates relatively freely between past and present.

6. Using Mimetic Theory to Understand Contemporary Christianity

In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard starts with an analysis of violence as such. Methodically, the analysis is based on the premise that primitive religion sheds light on violence. But his later works show that Girard has a twofold understanding of religion:
one anthropological and another based on Christian theology. I do not think it is stretching the matter too far to say that Girard interprets primitive religion from a Christian standpoint. Especially in his most non-sacrificial phase sacrifice is clearly seen as anti-Christian. Since *Things Hidden*, false and true religion have been regarded from the perspective of how one interprets the victim. The victimimage mechanism is the stumbling block as regards truth in religion, as it can evoke either a violent or a forgiving response. And what reveals true religion is a non-violent interpretation of the Passion.

If one were to limit Girardian theory to a contemporary westernized, Christian worldview, the modifying aspects surrounding sacrifice would play down violence to such a degree that religion, despite its mimetic nature, would look similar to a non-sacrificial sacred canopy à la Berger’s description of religious life. This, however, opens up for viewing mimetic theory partly as a theory on modern desacrilized religion as it is manifested within the twentieth century theological tradition, the same tradition by which Berger, despite operating within the scientific methods of sociology, is clearly influenced. Girard’s normative and apologetic approach to Christianity, however, is something which make Girard’s and Berger’s work differ considerably.

If one used mimetic theory in order to investigate contemporary Christianity, one would also see the relevance of mimesis in order to interpret the more mundane grey zones in society as being moderately sacrificial and violent - thereby stemming from ancient sacrificial rites. On the other hand, one should have in mind the incredible degree of communication in our everyday life which is non-violent. I am therefore quite sceptical towards the tendency of some Girardians who use mimetic theory in
order to brand everything man and especially mundane man does as violent, destructive and evil. From a Girardian context one must take into account the Paraclete who makes it possible, to a certain extent, to live according to a good mimesis, the mimesis of Jesus.

7. Mimesis is Prior to Violence

If one should try to further Girard’s mimetic theory as a theory on how contemporary, Christian religion works, mimesis must be given priority to violence. Girard has combined mimesis and scapegoating in such a way that the one automatically follows the other, and they create a catapult effect. This makes the theory strong, generative, and relevant wherever there is violence or serious conflict around. But by fusing mimesis and scapegoating too tightly together, one also risks leaving out much of everyday mimesis. *Violence and the Sacred* is often the starting point among theologians and religious scholars for understanding Girardian theory. It is therefore understandable that there has been a tendency to give scapegoating and violence priority and that many scholars, after giving a general description of mimesis, tend to neglect the mimetic principle that lies behind scapegoating and violence. One of the reasons for this is that Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* devotes his first five chapters to sacrifice before mimesis is introduced in chapter six under the heading: ‘From Mimesis to the monstrous Double.’ Thus in *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard, by giving the scapegoat mechanism primacy, runs the risk of overexposing violence. In this work he claims that ‘mimetic desire is simply a term more comprehensive than violence for religious pollution.’ In chapter five, when interpreting Euripides’ *Bacchae* Girard dismisses psychological motivation in order to understand rites. But deleting psychological motivation, both in its conscious and unconscious form, also means not
drawing the full consequences of mimesis, the force which motivates sacrifice. This, in my view, marks a deviation from the primacy of the mimetic principle in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, where desire towards the other is clearly motivated by a mimetic-psychological force.

This tendency to see scapegoating as existing prior to mimesis and the only outcome of it is however, refuted by Girard in an interview in 1978, where he claims that unanimous victimage is only one mimetic phenomenon among others. Giving mimesis first priority is also emphasized in *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*. By focusing on what generates violence and scapegoating, mimesis may be revealed as the originary principle. In my view both violence and other kinds of conflict stem from mimesis. It is the imitation of the other’s desire that creates violence, not violence that creates imitation. Therefore, in order to understand religion, one should see mimesis as the force which leads men into the act of scapegoating. The act of placing scapegoating or victimizing prior to mimesis seems to have created a certain precedence, making mimesis look as though it were born out of sacrifice. This tendency to begin with sacrifice has somewhat distorted the flexibility and multi-layered potentiality of mimetic theory, making society look as though it were governed by violence and not by other more moderate mimetic possibilities. If mimesis is seen as emerging only in the aftermath of sacrifice, this would mean that human nature is not basically mimetic. If one places mimesis after sacrifice, mimesis cannot explain crises and violence, but only the process whereby the victim is transformed into something sacred.
Thus, mimesis must be seen to be the primary force if we are to make sense of a
development from more violent cultures to less violent ones, and thereby using
mimetic theory in a more sociological way. Man’s externalisation projects stemming
from the fear of death can also be seen as mimetically motivated. Without mimesis
there can be no culture and no religion. And cultural transferences, among them the act
of turning exclusive religious beliefs into religious ‘melting pots’, would be quite
unintelligible if we did not take into consideration the influences and contagion
brought about by mimesis. Although H. Kühn could be right in claiming that sacrifice
is the oldest form of religious action, the phenomenon or action, all the same, is
generated by mimesis.

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1 Wuthnow. 'Religion as Sacred Canopy' in Ainley/Hunter (Ed.). Making Sense of Modern Times,
2 Both acknowledge anthropology as basic in religious research. Also both show a rather unacademic
flexibility as regards relating and mediating between historical epochs.
3 Peter L. Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (Garden City:

http://comcast.net~berdwa/sacredcam.pdf

4 Ibid., 25.
5 Ibid., 6-7.
6 Ibid., 8.
7 Ibid., 14-15.
11 Ibid., 16.
14 Ibid., 34.
16 Berger. The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Social Theory of Religion, 35.
17 Ibid., 23-24, 43-44.
19 See Berger. The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Social Theory of Religion.
20 Thus Berger lays more emphasis on the symbolic in people’s dealing with life.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 23, 43-44.

27 Ibid., 132.

