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PEACE IN TIMES OF WAR: GIRARD'S MIMETIC THEORY COMPLEMENTED BY GANDHI'S ETHICS OF NONVIOLENCE

During the last years of my high school, I was part of the Catholic youth movement in Austria that also participated in the peace movement of the late 70ies and early 80ies of the last century. My involvement in the peace movement caused me to become a conscientious objector and influenced my decision to study Catholic theology at the University of Innsbruck. Raymund Schwager, a Jesuit who was teaching dogmatics there, introduced me to René Girard's mimetic theory. I immediately realized that this anthropology is very important to understand the challenges that peace making must be aware of. Girard's mimetic theory shows us that violence is highly mimetic and contagious. The twentieth century is full of examples of the destructive escalation of violence. During the Cold War Girard began to underline that the diminishing of the old sacred that helped humanity to contain violence at its beginnings pushed our world towards an apocalyptic stage in which any escalation of violence could lead to humanity's self-destruction. Modern weapons of mass destruction do no longer allow humans to enter games of violence. Already his book *La violence et le sacré* from 1972 expresses his concern about the dangers following an escalation of violence: "The slightest outbreak of violence can bring about a catastrophic escalation."[1] This remained a key insight of Girard throughout his unfolding of mimetic theory as his last book *Achever Clausewitz* from 2007 most clearly expresses. Girard's careful reading of Carl von Clausewitz's theory of war shows that the underlying mimetic dynamic often does not allow politics to

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[1] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 20.

prevent a violent "escalation to extremes."[2] It is this dangerous escalation that threatens, according to Girard, our world of today. Jihadist terrorism and the war against terror are his most recent examples of an escalation that even led to a "reciprocal theologization of war ('Great Satan' versus 'the forces of Evil')."[3]

Against the background of the mimetic nature of violence Girard discovered a plausibility of Christianity that attracted me from the very beginning. The biblical revelation is not only responsible for the weakening of the old sacred by siding with the victims of collective persecution it also shows us its awareness of the dangers of retaliatory violence by emphasizing the importance of nonviolence to live together in peace. Girard referred especially to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount with its warnings against revenge and its recommendation to renounce violence and love our enemies. Girard did not read it as an idealistic idea or a utopian prescription but as a realistic account of what is at stake today: "At the highest level of political power it is already an obvious fact of contemporary life that violence must be renounced, unilaterally if need be, or universal destruction will ensue. The late prophetic and evangelical replacement of all primitive law by the sole renunciation of violence is no longer a utopian or arcadian dream. It is the scientific *sine qua non* of bare survival."[4]

My immediate reading of Girard understood it as the endorsement of an absolute pacifism. Only later did I realize that this was a misunderstanding. Although Girard rejected criticisms of the Sermon on the Mount "as a utopian sort of pacifism, manifestly naïve and even blameworthy because servile, doloristic, perhaps even masochistic" he did not become a pacifist himself[5]: "I should make it clear that I myself am not an unconditional pacifist, since I do not consider all forms of defense against violence to be illegitimate."[6]

Girard helped me to appreciate the deep anthropological insights that the gospels contain. Studying Girard over many years strengthened my own Christian convictions. Coming from a non-religious family mimetic theory has fostered my own religious development. After my own confidence has slowly

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[2] René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre.* Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 53–57.

[3] Ibid., 211.

[4] René Girard, *"To double business bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 227.

[5] René Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 19.

[6] Ibid., 131.

grown I became able to reach out beyond Girard's commitment to the biblical legacy. I realized that some of his main insights are not limited to Judaism or Christianity but can also be discovered in Islam or in other world religions.[7]

In recent years I studied the peace ethics of Mahatma Gandhi from a Girardian point of view.[8] First, I discovered many parallels between Girard and Gandhi and could show that also in the Indian traditions there is a deep awareness of the dangers coming along with mimetic desire and how religion can teach us to break away from our violent entanglements. Girard's mimetic theory helped me to understand the Christian tradition about God as the *summum bonum*, the highest good, as way out of violence.[9] If God is our *summum bonum*, we can imitate each other without automatically becoming enemies because God is not at all a good that is lessened if more people reach out for it. The longing for God can be shared and imitated without being driven into relationships of violence and war.

A very similar insight can be found in the work of Gandhi where he reflects on the religious preconditions of peace. His love of religion was not so much focusing on specific religions in their concrete institutional settings but on the "religion which underlies all religions."[10] Where he describes the main teaching of this religion underlying all religions, he comes very close to the Christian teachings about the *summum bonum*: "Hinduism, Islamism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and all other religions teach that we should remain passive about worldly pursuits and active about godly pursuits, that we should set a limit to our worldly ambition, and that our religious ambition should be illimitable. Our activity should be directed into the latter channel."[11]

Even more important for me is Gandhi's ethics of nonviolence. In this regard he complements Girard's anthropology that does not provide us with an explicit ethics. Again, however, we first must underline the many parallels between Girard and Gandhi. Like Girard, also Gandhi is aware of

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[7] Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk, eds., *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018).

[8] Wolfgang Palaver, "Gandhi's Militant Nonviolence in the Light of Girard's Mimetic Anthropology," *Religions* no. 12 (2021): 988; idem, "Sacrifice Between West and East: René Girard, Simone Weil, and Mahatma Gandhi on Violence and Non-Violence," in: *Mimesis and Sacrifice: Applying Girard's Mimetic Theory Across the Disciplines*, edited by Marcia Pally (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 51–63.

[9] Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 93–95.

[10] Mahatma K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 100 vols (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1958–1994) [CWMG], here: vol. 10,24.

[11] Ibid.

the contagious nature of violence. He expressed this danger most clearly in 1947 close to the end of his life when Hindus and Muslims fought against each other in India: "Once the evil spirit of violence is unleashed, by its inherent nature it cannot be checked or even kept within any prescribed limits."[12] Like Girard, also Gandhi appreciated the Sermon on the Mount for its deep insight into the nature of violence and how to break free from it. In his autobiography he expresses his admiration of the Sermon on the Mount by underlining those verses that also caught Girard's attention and by showing how it chimes with insights in other religious traditions: "The verses, 'But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man take away thy coat let him have thy cloak too,' delighted me beyond measure and put me in mind of Shamal Bhatt's 'For a bowl of water, give a goodly meal', etc. My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the *Gita*, *The Light of Asia* and the Sermon on the Mount."[13] Like Girard, also Gandhi recognized that the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki made nonviolence a necessity to avoid humanity's self-destruction. In an interview in 1946 he was asked if he recognized an antidote against the atom bomb. In his answer he underlined the importance of nonviolence: "It is the only thing the atom bomb cannot destroy. I did not move a muscle when I first heard that the atom bomb had wiped out Hiroshima. On the contrary, I said to myself, 'Unless now the world adopts non-violence, it will spell certain suicide for mankind.'"[14]

Gandhi is often described as an absolutist pacifist. This, however, is a false understanding of his ethics. He was aware that a clear-cut distinction between violence and nonviolence is not possible. He called, for instance, Poland's defense against Hitler's troops in 1939 as "almost non-violence."[15] In December 1939, he clearly distinguished between aggression and defense: "My non-violence does recognize different species of violence – defensive and offensive. It is true that in the long run the difference is obliterated, but the initial merit persists. A non-violent person is bound, when the occasion arises, to say which side is just. Thus I wished success to the Abyssinians, the Spaniards, the Czechs, the Chinese and the Poles, though in each case I wished that they could have offered non-violent resistance."[16]

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[12] CWMG vol. 87, 424.
[13] CWMG vol. 39, 61.
[14] CWMG vol. 85, 371.
[15] CWMG vol. 70, 181.
[16] CWMG vol. 71, 10–11.

This quote is highly relevant for our world of today and for the current war in Ukraine, too. First, it shows that we must distinguish between aggression and defense, between an offensive war and a defensive war. Neutrality in this regard is morally wrong. Secondly, Gandhi also understood that a violent defense easily can be drawn into a spiral of violence that blurs the distinction between aggression and defense. It is the risk of an escalation to extremes that prevents NATO today to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine despite the moral obligation many people in the world feel. Thirdly, Gandhi expressed the hope that non-violent resistance might more and more replace violence.

This third insight refers to a long-time perspective and means a task in which especially the world religions must play an important role. We need a culture of nonviolence that must grow from the grassroots level. The more civil societies are accustomed to solving conflicts nonviolently the more also politics can move away from using violent means. Religions that are more detached from the usual fights for worldly goods can become guides to develop a culture of nonviolence. Girard was at least indirectly aware that religion can help us to overcome our reliance on violence. When he was asked in 2005 what he would propose to politicians following his reading of Clausewitz he responded in the following way: "It's a complicated question because my vision fundamentally is religious. I believe in non-violence, and I believe that the knowledge of violence can teach you to reject violence."[17]

Mayor religious leaders of today understand the responsibility they have to create a more nonviolent world. I will therefore end with the example of Pope Francis who emphasized the importance of nonviolence in his message to the World Day of Peace in 2017 "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace" that was inspired by the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative of Pax Christi International.[18] The Pope demands in this message that nonviolence should more and more govern our relations on the local as well as on the

[17] Cynthia L. Haven, ed. *Conversations with René Girard: Prophet of Envy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 107.

[18] Francis. "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace: Message for the Celebration of the Fifthieth World Day of Peace on January 1st, 2017," http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html; cf. Marie Dennis, ed., *Choosing Peace: The Catholic Church Returns to Gospel Nonviolence* (Maryknoll–New York: Orbis Books, 2018); Rose M. Berger, Ken Butigan, Judy Coode, and Marie Dennis, eds., *Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace in the Church and the World: Biblical, Theological, Ethical, Pastoral and Strategic Dimensions of Nonviolence* (Brussels: Pax Christi International, 2020).

international level: “In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms.” He also claims that this task goes far beyond the Catholic Church because “nonviolent peacebuilding strategies” are “not the legacy of the Catholic Church alone, but are typical of many religious traditions, for which ‘compassion and nonviolence are essential elements pointing to the way of life’.” Mahatma Gandhi is one of models that the Pope mentions explicitly in his message.

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