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On: 03 January 2015, At: 14:52
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Terrorism and Political Violence
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ftpv20

A response: Reflections from the perspective of mimetic theory

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Published online: 21 Dec 2007.

To cite this article: René Girard & Mark R. Anspach (1991) A response: Reflections from the perspective of mimetic theory, Terrorism and Political Violence, 3:3, 141-148, DOI: 10.1080/09546559108427120

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546559108427120

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A Response: Reflections from the Perspective of Mimetic Theory

RENÉ GIRARD AND MARK R. ANSPACH

The two of us both feel that we learned a lot from these essays, and we are both aware that our knowledge in most of the fields to which these articles belong is very limited. Our comments are not intended as an evaluation of them; they record the ideas, primarily theoretical, that the papers suggested to us. The theory to which we constantly refer, explicitly or implicitly, is the mimetic theory, of course, to which we both subscribe but with some significant individual nuances.

In the light of the papers published here, and also of others presented at the H. F. Guggenheim Foundation conference, it seems that everything labelled fundamentalism, regardless of the religious or political tradition it affects, is a reaction to the same kind of fear of undifferentiation, and the mimetic theory can contribute to a better definition and understanding of this fear as well as to an awareness of its long history. There are specifically modern features, no doubt, in contemporary fundamentalism that distinguish it from traditional religions, but there are also highly traditional features.

In the Indian Puranas, for example, history is divided into cycles of four ages, and the fourth is the *Kali Yuga*, or somber age, which prepares the final disintegration. It is described as the age in which brahmins cannot be trusted, classes mix with each other, and people follow foreign customs until their perversity leads them to ruin. But, in this Hindu cosmology, there is nothing new about such a state of affairs: all known human history falls within the *Kali Yuga*.

The Puranas are a typical rendition of perceptions and values which are present in most traditional societies. They all root the dissolving of culture, if not an apocalyptic end of the world, in a sinful undifferentiation of human relations in which we can recognize an incomplete portrayal of the mimetic-sacrificial crisis. There are also purely literary examples of this, the most splendid and powerful of which is Ulysses' speech on the demise of 'Degree' in *Troilus and Cressida*; see R. Girard, *A Theater of Envy*: *William Shakespeare* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), Chapters 18–20.

In a mimetic crisis, religious and cultural differences are felt to be slipping away as a result of an invisible but omnipresent influence. All efforts to hold on to the remaining differences and to recapture the lost ones increase the tension and conflicts, which arise less and less with other groups grounded in 'similar' traditions and more and more with those who hold to the opposite attitude, those for whom the crisis is caused by the differences themselves and who think that salvation lies in doing away with them entirely.

It is impossible to discuss fundamentalism without taking into account the perspective of the fundamentalists themselves and the reasons they think they have for thinking the way they do. The problem with some recent studies is that they completely ignore the fundamentalists' own viewpoint. We greatly appreciated David C. Rapoport's observations on this subject.

It is an objective fact that, not only in our society but in the entire world, differences tend to dissolve and disintegrate as a result of religious, social and political evolution. This evolution is inseparable from technological development, but it is the result of factors too complex and too numerous to be discussed in this brief statement.

This evolution is regarded by some as the best thing that can happen to the human race while others see it as the worst. The first do their utmost to accelerate this evolution; the second try just as hard to arrest it. The reason why religious aspects are becoming paramount once again is the conviction that religion is more deeply rooted, more basic, more primordial even, than anything situated at the political or social level.

In our view our culture is indeed in the midst of a deepening mimetic and sacrificial crisis, but this has been true for centuries, at least since the Renaissance, and we feel alien to the two attitudes we have just defined because it seems to us that both of them mutilate, or suppress entirely, certain aspects of our historical experience – or rather, of the way we ourselves interpret this experience.

We feel that even though there are negative aspects to the modern experience that remain strikingly typical of the traditional mimetic crisis, strikingly similar to what the Puranas describe, and therefore likely to trigger a 'fundamentalist' reaction, there are also immensely positive aspects, some of which may be unique to the age that is called 'modern', and they make the fundamentalist views unacceptable.

Studies which regard fundamentalism as some kind of pathology remain inevitably superficial in our view. They take no account of the role that, for instance, viewing fundamentalists as pathological cases may play, paradoxically, in the growth of fundamentalism.

The articles by Emmanuel Sivan and Ehud Sprinzak treat their subject with more respect than an apparently neutral stance would. The reader perceives a touch of anger in their tone that is the truly human reaction when people we regard as responsible human beings do intolerable things or espouse intolerable opinions. This does not mean that we advocate anger as the attitude that will solve the dilemma of which perspective to adopt *vis-à-vis* the problems we are discussing. It simply means that this problem is very difficult and probably insoluble.

Indeed, we do not think that some middle-of-the-road position can be defined between the extremes of 'fundamentalism' and 'post-enlightenment rationalism' from the comfort of which one could criticize the two extremes in any fashion that could be called 'objective' or 'scientific'. But this does not necessarily mean that the attempt should not be made. Our history is open-ended precisely because it cannot be imprisoned in the categories of these two extremes.

Turning now to the detail of the articles, it may be worth clarifying a point made by Emmanuel Sivan on the several remarkable cases of convergence that he found between Jewish and Islamic religious radicals. The problem is how to explain the rarity of expressions of mimetic desire in this area.

Sivan rightly emphasizes that the primary struggle of the radicals is with perceived apostates within their own religious camp: the Muslim-Jewish conflict is secondary to them. Radicals on 'opposite sides' are so far apart that they are not apart, that they are not rivals for the same constituency.

On the other hand, it is not surprising to find a much clearer case of mimetic rivalry between Amal and Hizbollah, since, as Martin Kramer so forcefully shows, these two movements are competing for leadership of the same Lebanese Shiite community. Precisely because of the intensity of their rivalry, however, it would be surprising were Amal openly to hold up Hizbollah as an example to be followed, as the radical member of the Knesset cited by Emmanuel Sivan did with the distant enemy Khomeini.

Any deliberate imitation of a close rival is likely to be left unspoken as the sign of a shameful lack of self-sufficiency and as a damning acknowledgement of superiority on the part of the rival. Moreover, imitation is just as likely to be unconscious and not deliberate at all. The word 'unconscious', though, does not have the same implications here as it does in Freud. By 'unconscious', we do not necessarily mean 'repressed', but simply 'unwitting'. People locked in rivalry may well be oblivious to the ways in which they come to resemble each other.

In fact, unconscious mimetic rivalry operates, most of the time, as a desperate search for and espousal of views, attitudes, and actions antithetical to those of the model. It operates, therefore, as a search for independence that produces an impoverished opposite of the model's attitude. The improverishment means that the job of acting, thinking and desiring differently from the model is bungled. It looks superficially successful because it focuses on spectacular features of the model's behavior and ideas but, at a deeper level, imitation prevails.

The main reason, however, that the actual behavior and thinking of the antagonists are the same is the mimetic process itself, the way rivalry necessarily operates. The antagonists' behavior and even thinking are shaped by the requirements of their struggle, which forces them to mirror each other no matter how fervently they may desire to differentiate themselves; to borrow Shakespeare's expression from *Timon of Athens*, they become *confounding contraries*.

Ehud Sprinzak's compelling portrait of the late Meir Kahane and his ideology stands as a case study of mimetic doubling in the revenge process. Sprinzak usefully places Kahane's early development in the context of 1960s America, in which militant spokesmen for other causes set an example with their talk of becoming 'the executioners of our executioners'. In contrast, Kahane's theory of revenge appears new and unprecedented in the context of the traditional attitudes of Jewish activists to Gentile persecution.

But the precedent must be sought on the other side, since, as Sprinzak observes, Kahane promoted the 'Gentilization' of the Jew, imitating the very persecutors on whom he sought revenge. If Kahane seemed an actor in a classical Jewish tragedy, it was because of his larger-than-life obsession with what Susan Jacoby in *Wild Justice* calls 'the longest-running revenge tragedy of western civilization': the persecution of the people blamed for 'killing Christ' (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1983, p.68).

Gentiles rationalized their attacks on Jews by accusing them of having attacked God. Kahane's revenge theory merely reverses the roles. Identifying God with His 'chosen people', Kahane accused the Gentiles of attacking God: 'When the Jew is attacked – it is an assault upon the Name of God!' Jewish vengeance becomes God's own revenge in the way Christian vengeance was supposed to have been. Moreover, just as medieval Christians 'firmly believed that the Jewish Diaspora was God's revenge for the sin of deicide' (Jacoby, pp.102–3), Kahane's theory holds the ending of the Diaspora to be God's revenge against the Gentiles.

Kahane echoes another tenet of the medieval Christian revenge theory, the notorious 'blood libel', when he hails Jewish dominion over the holy places of 'the Church that sucked our blood'. Just as the Church once accused Jews of draining Christian blood, Kahane accused the Church of draining Jewish blood. Unfortunately, his use of the mythic language of 'blood-sucking' obscures the crucial distinction between the mythical nature of the Gentile blood spilled by Jews and the reality of the Jewish blood spilled by Gentiles. Worse, his actions threaten to nullify this distinction by making the ritualistic spilling of Gentile blood by Jews a reality.

Unrestrained, as Sprinzak notes, by ordinary political considerations, Kahane's quest for revenge assumed religious dimensions. But did its lifting of traditional Judaic checks on violence also reverse the normal function of religious ritual, as Ehud Sprinzak concludes? Certainly Kahane sought to increase tensions with external enemies, and he may have raised the level of discord in Israeli domestic politics, too. Still, an answer to this question might ultimately require an analysis of cleavages already existing in Israeli society. Martin Kramer's paper suggests the possibility that violence directed outward can serve to keep internal tensions under control.

Comparison of Kramer's study of the interface of religion and politics with Sprinzak's yields interesting parallels between Kahane's religious innovation and the transformation of Lebanese Shiism. Where Sprinzak attributes to Kahane the aim of liberating Jewish vengeful impulses held in check by generations of Halakhic sages, Kramer writes that the Lebanese Shiite community is stripping away the layers of pious restraint over violence accumulated through time by its own theologians. Also a religious minority, Shiism, like Judaism, traditionally emphasized inner repentance rather than blood vengeance. When Hizbollah's leading cleric called on believers to abandon self-flagellation in favor of resistance to the foreigner, struggle against the self was, in Kramer's words, transformed into struggle against the other. What is reversed here is the direction in which the violence is channelled, the direction of the sacrifice.

Martin Kramer also makes an important point in showing how the 'self-martyring' operations blur the distinction between self-sacrifice and sacrifice by the group. In fact, groups that undertake ritual sacrifice often seek to impart a self-sacrificial dimension to it (for a discussion of consenting victims in myth and history, see the fifth chapter of *The Scapegoat*). The striking arguments marshalled by Hizbollah's leading cleric to minimize the difference between a willing death in battle and 'self-martyrdom' cast the former in a new light. By setting out to blur the distinction 'between dying with a gun in your hand or exploding yourself', he suggests how recruits – whether conscripts or volunteers – can be sacrificed in the guise of cannon fodder.

In a sense, then, the explicitly religious framing of military actions renders visible an aspect of warfare that can be found in the West as well. Martin Kramer is duly careful to avoid the danger underscored by Bruce Lawrence of demonizing Islam. Generally speaking, the object in focusing on sacrifice is not to stigmatize the 'other' for primitive savagery, but to uncover the continuity among many distinct varieties of violence, including those our own societies practice.

We are reminded of how Stanford anthropologist Renato Rosaldo came to terms with his discovery that the gentle Philippine tribesmen with whom he lived were headhunters. When he received his draft notice for Vietnam, his companions 'were more horrified at the news that I might become a soldier than I was at the news that they took heads': 'What appalled them morally and was utterly beyond their comprehension was the fact that one guy would get up there and tell his brothers, as they would put it, to move into the line of fire' (in *Violent Origins*, Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly ed., Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987, pp.253–55).

An obvious reason for the outbreak of fratricidal warfare in Lebanon is the collapse of the state. David Rapoport and Bruce Lawrence both discuss state monopolization of violence. Bruce rightly emphasizes that no treatment of Islamic violence should neglect the role of the state. Of course, the Iranian revolution stands as a reminder that independent forces can successfully overcome the security apparatus of the state even today. The outcome of any given rebellion may depend, as Bruce Lawrence says, on the relative weights of national and religious loyalties. A Third World 'state-nation' is more vulnerable if it lacks a solid base in nationalism – which, as Mark Juergensmeyer suggests, is in important ways similar to and therefore a potential rival for religion.

Religion is susceptible to manipulation as an ideological resource, as Bruce Lawrence indicates, but stirring up Islamic feeling is a dangerous game when tried by pro-Western regimes eager to find a rival for socialist-oriented national movements. Lebanese analyst Georges Corm recently reminded Western readers that it was the Lebanese state itself, hoping to contain the expansion of Marxist nationalism among Lebanese youth, that invited in Musa al-Sadr, the Iranian-born cleric behind the awakening of Lebanon's Shiite community described by Martin Kramer. In the same way, Sadat, who was ultimately killed by an Islamic extremist, banned Nasserian youth organizations from Egyptian universities while opening them to Muslim Brotherhood groups that his predecessor had prohibited ('Le casse-tête moyen-oriental: religion ou géopolitique', *L'Evénement Européen*, Vol. 8, 1989, pp.99–113). It is well to remember, too, that America's own anti-Soviet strategy has led to direct support for Islamic extremists in Afghanistan and largely motivated our longstanding flirtation with Khomeini.

In any event, the relationship between religion, nationalism, and the state is a complex one – and could well provide the subject of another conference! David Rapoport's paper includes some interesting remarks on the similarity of the origin of religion proposed by *Violence and the Sacred to the origin of the state* conceived by Hobbes and other political theorists. The transition from the state of nature imagined by Hobbes furnishes an especially strong parallel, since the opening situation of war of all against all is resolved by establishing 'unanimity minus one'.

In the mimetic theory, the solution is a war of all against one – the victim; in *Leviathan*, it is in effect a war of one against all, since the sovereign is the only one to retain the unlimited right to the use of force that exists in the state of nature. In fact, the sovereign is the only one to remain in the state of nature because he alone is not a party to the social contract. As it turns out, this aspect of Hobbes' thought experiment corresponds to indigenous conceptions of monarchy reflected in myths of what Marshall Sahlins in *Islands of History* calls 'the stranger-king': 'By his own nature outside the home-bred culture of the society, the king appears within it as a force of nature' (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p.78). Although king and victim may appear poles apart, they are both excluded from the social contract (see pp.81–84 of M. Anspach, 'Tuer ou substituer: l'échange de victimes', *Bulletin du MAUSS* 12, Dec. 1984).

Unlike classical social contract approaches, though, the mimetic theory dispenses with the assumption of rationality by positing a spontaneous mechanism. It is, after all, much easier to choose a victim than a sovereign. One may then envisage a gradual development from a divine victim awaiting sacrifice to a 'ruler' who, initially powerless in the manner of the Amerindian chiefs described by Pierre Clastres, in time acquired real power. Thus, it is perhaps not so much that the state emerges when religion can no longer do what it was designed to do – and we should be particularly wary of loaded terms like 'design' – but that the emergence of the state out of the religious matrix eventually diminishes the need for violence-reducing religious rites. For a good early discussion of how ritual institutions are transformed into political ones, see A. M. Hocart's *Kings and Councillors* (first published in 1936 and reprinted by the University of Chicago Press in 1970).

Mark Juergensmeyer takes the question of religion, violence, and the state to another level by formulating it in terms of the tension between order and disorder. In recent years, theorists in many fields have been thinking in new ways about the relationship between these two concepts. Order contains disorder, but it also emerges spontaneously from it. For Jean-Pierre Dupuy, the mimetic theory is an example of this type of reasoning: religion contains violence – in both senses of the word ‘contain’ – having emerged spontaneously out of it. It might be appropriate for us to conclude by referring readers interested in this broader theoretical perspective to *Disorder and Order*, the proceedings of an international, interdisciplinary symposium held at Stanford in 1981 (edited by Paisley Livingston and published by Anma Libri of Saratoga, CA, 1984).