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# A Foundation for African Theology That Bypasses the West: The Writings of René Girard

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*'He spurned her. That's why she killed him', I was told at the funeral of a man in his fifties. But 'she' lived many miles away. The dead man had been living with his other wife. How the ex-wife might have killed him didn't come into question. She had good reason for despising him; he had died; she must have killed him.*

The vast majority of publicly available scholarly material on Africa is rooted in Western thinking. That includes publishing by African scholars, who to achieve accreditation are required to legitimize their academic writing by building on Western education.

The writing of the late French scholar René Girard was different. As far as I know, Girard never visited Africa. Yet his work can greatly elucidate our understanding of African people. In contrast, the West views Girard as fitting into no recognized category in contemporary academia.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Girard's body of work—both in its methods and in its conclusions—is largely out of step with current theoretical trends in the humanities and social sciences, and yet

Girard (1923–2015) was a French-born scholar who spent nearly all of his academic life in the USA. He was a distinguished professor at Stanford University until his retirement in 1996 and a member of the elite *L'Académie Française*. In his vast work, Girard, a practising Roman Catholic, presents 'a theory of astonishing power and scope, [that helps one] to see ... Christianity ... in an entirely new light: no longer as a more or less doubtful body of "beliefs" but instead as a breakthrough in understanding'.<sup>2</sup>

Girard, in my view, stepped outside of today's dominant Western worldview. He achieved that feat through close analysis and comparison between literatures, many of which predated contemporary modernism.

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in itself it is hard to see this as a disrecommendation', writes Chris Fleming, 'Mimesis, Violence, and the Sacred: An Overview of the Thought of René Girard', in Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming and Joel Hodge (eds.), *Violence, Desire, and the Sacred*, vol. 2 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Kennedy, 'On Violence and Religion: Part One', podcast, 14 March 2015, <https://www.davidcayley.com/podcasts?category=Ren%C3%A9+Girard>.

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Whereas real-life histories tend to conceal what is nasty and cruel, writers of literature for whom attracting and holding an enthralled readership is more important than being politically correct can revel in it.

Girard commonly uses the term 'scapegoat', whereas a victim of public disapproval is widely known in Africa as a witch. In this article I use the latter term.

Contemporary scholarly writing on Africa often ignores the prominence of the Christian gospel on the continent. Even those scholars who recognize it struggle to express why Christianity, a phenomenon long considered by Western academia to be past its sell-by date, has been and continues to be so enthusiastically adopted by African people. Girard's writings give a very clear and highly pertinent explanation as to why this is happening.

In this essay, I highlight Girard's amazing relevance to a proper understanding of Africa by identifying important ways in which Girard and Africa align. In each section, I demonstrate a key observation on human behaviour made by Girard; then I make a connection to African life.

Although for purposes of clarity I begin with Girard, my own journey of discovery was the other way around. I noticed interesting things about African life and only much later (in 2018) discovered how pertinently Girard speaks into those contexts. His insights have sharpened and helped me to more effectively articulate my prior understanding.

parallel to that of God,<sup>3</sup> Girard considers Satan to be strongly oriented to encouraging people to satisfy their desire. Satan loves to convince people that 'greed for whatever they desire' will enable them to thrive and live contented happy lives.<sup>4</sup>

If people actually followed Satan's guidance that involves satisfying as many of one's desires as possible, human society would break down. Yet Satan, according to Girard, has come up with a mechanism to keep people convinced that satisfying their carnal desires is the best way forward. Drawing on Matthew 12:26, Girard describes this mechanism as 'Satan drives out Satan.'

Realizing our tendency to blame others for our troubles and then to rejoice if someone whom we hold responsible for our misfortune suffers, Girard explains how the demise of a witch (i.e. scapegoat) brings a false, deceptive, yet convincing conviction to people that they are on the right track. After all, it is logical to think that if so-and-so is causing my problem, and if so-and-so is killed, then my problem will end. The four gospels describe Jesus' death for the people in this way. In each account, he is murdered by a mob. Luke 23:13 tells us that the enmity between Herod and Pilate was dissipated as a result of the death of Jesus. His death helped, even before his disciples had any wind of his resurrection, to restore a false sense of peace and unity to these two men.

A false sense of peace, achievable by the death of a witch, is used by

## I. The Identity of Satan

While denying him a real existence

<sup>3</sup> René Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2001), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Girard, *I See*, 40.

Satan to lead people to follow him rather than God. Jesus blew this cover by rising from the dead. For Girard, the deception that someone's death brings lasting peace and unity 'cannot be revealed without Christ'.<sup>5</sup> Once the deception is revealed, then true peace can come only through Christ.

Satan often has a high profile in African Christianity, unlike in many forms of Western Christianity. Hence, it can be hard for African people to understand how the West can get by without witchcraft. They know that keeping peace and unity in traditional African communities requires the periodic identification of and chasing or even slaughtering of a witch. They realize, however, that the peace and unity thus achieved are transient. They also realize the terror of this system—the danger that at any time a community can turn against and proclaim the death sentence on one of its members. Kroesbergen, writing about Zambia, shared this account:

Once I asked a student to give an example of the great care for community in Africa, and she told about a shopkeeper who was suddenly accused of being a witch. Everybody in the village, even people who never had had anything to do with this shopkeeper, joined together and, as one community, they lynched this supposed witch. Does this show a sense of community? It is a very particular sense of community. To me, it does not feel like a rosy kind of community. Should they not have included the shopkeeper in the community as

well? Yet one may argue that the community in the story is more inclusive and harmonious than other kinds of community.<sup>6</sup>

The fear of being lynched underlies *Ubuntu*, or the sense of shared community. It makes people 'inclusive and harmonious'. The gospel is loved in Africa because it gives a way out of this prison of fear into a potentially durable peace and unity, in which grace and forgiveness are made foundational to life and God's laws replace dread of the mob. Satan is widely known as the proponent of the old system, and God through Christ, who willingly submitted to being murdered to save others from their sins, is seen as providing a way out from it.

## II. How Satan Is against Satan

In human community, it is easy to become suspicious that many different people are 'against you'. Resolving one's misfortune would then require a kind of war of all against all.<sup>7</sup> Part of the secret of Satan's defence of his kingdom is that he manages to get people to aggregate their suspicions against a singular victim or group.<sup>8</sup> This happened at Jesus' crucifixion. Many of those approving of his crucifixion, which was basically everybody,<sup>9</sup> came to that position only in the heat of the moment. Although they might have had their suspicions about all sorts of people, the mob's

5 René Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 60.

6 Hermen Kroesbergen, *The Language of Faith in Southern Africa: Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism* (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2019), 176.

7 Girard, *I See*, 8.

8 Girard, *I See*, 36.

9 Girard, *I See*, 24–25.

reaction to Jesus drew them into its throes. Then, after the death of Christ, they would have been more at peace with others of whom they had been suspicious. In this way, by offering a communal victim, Satan protects his domain from the very violence that he himself creates.<sup>10</sup>

Girard explains that Satan was duped by the cross.<sup>11</sup> Satan expected the murder of Jesus to have the outcome of every other witch hunt: people would conclude that the peace and unity that arose after Jesus' death proved that he really was guilty. When Jesus was found to be the sinless Son of God who rose from the dead, that blew Satan's cover. From that point on, anyone familiar with what happened to Jesus, and who believes that he was resurrected and offers eternal life, would realize the deception underlying Satan's trick of making people think that killing a witch is the way to peace. Christians derive a peace other than what the world gives (Jn 14:27) from the death and resurrection of Christ, which has exposed the mechanism that Satan had been using up to that time.

A Kenyan colleague recently told of being asked to plough a friend's field. Because oxen plough well when it is cool, my colleague sent his sons with cattle to the field at 4:00 am on a moonlit night. His sons were attacked and almost killed by people who suspected them of being cattle rustlers. It seems that African people, when they come across what they believe to be a clear case of theft, unleash anger that has arisen from the building up of diverse suspicions of misdemean-

ours by a wide variety of people. The satisfaction derived from getting a victim, someone (evidently) unambiguously opposed to the community, can assuage their anger and subsequently restore relationships with others who may have been suspects. Once a lynching of this sort has begun, others may quickly join in as a means of expressing their anger; they know that acting as part of a large mob will make them immune from subsequent conviction.

### III. Identification with the Victim

Despite being encouraged to explore what is unique about different samples of classic literature, Girard decided to explore what they had in common.<sup>12</sup> He found the same theme throughout: people feeling justified that someone who had been victimized on the basis of a very poorly grounded foundation of evidence was actually guilty. 'Girard's most recurrent example of myths is that of Oedipus.'<sup>13</sup> Another example is the 'horrible miracle of Apollonius of Tyana', in which the human victim, after death, took the form of a Molossian dog.<sup>14</sup>

Having been raised as a Christian, Girard felt that he knew a better way.

<sup>12</sup> René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 38.

<sup>13</sup> Gabriel Andrede, 'René Girard (1923–2015)', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: a Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/girard/#SH3d>.

<sup>14</sup> Girard, *I See*, 50. The fact that the victim turned into an animal presumably demonstrated his having been other than a normal human and thus clearly guilty.

<sup>10</sup> Girard, *I See*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Girard, *I See*, 150.

Later he realized that one aspect of the absolute uniqueness of the Bible, in relation to all non-biblical texts, arises from its identifying with the victim. Time and time again, the world's myths and stories acquiesce to the slaughtering of victims, considering the outcome of such slaughter to be beneficial—except in the Bible.

After the 2007 Kenyan election, different tribes blamed one another for their ills. The old spirit of killing to solve your problems returned. 'Two months of bloodshed left over 1,000 dead and up to 500,000 internally displaced persons in a country viewed as a bastion of economic and political stability in a volatile region.'<sup>15</sup> Many—accurately, I believe—read this tragedy as an embarrassing lapse in faith by Christians in Kenya.

Shamala, speaking of African communities in Western Kenya, stated that 'when an individual is absent from a communal ceremony he or she ... runs the risk of being suspected of wanting to destroy it'<sup>16</sup> (i.e. being considered a witch), which makes the person liable to lynching or exclusion. Many Westerners, including even Western Christians, are amazed at the spread of the gospel in Africa, but they have an inadequate grasp of the penetrating nature of the pro-

victim theme that is found throughout the Bible. I believe this is one of the mind-blowing themes that keep African people attentive to Bible teaching and preaching. It is amazing to them that God has given a way out of the spiral of revenge, witch hunts and destruction under which they previously laboured. They constantly re-emphasize this theme to maintain their stand against the alternative of hateful exclusion and killing.

#### IV. The Role of Rituals

Rituals, for Girard, are re-enactments of the killing of a witch and are intended to recycle beneficial effects (i.e. bringing peace and unity) that the killing originally induced.<sup>17</sup> People attend rituals to acquire relief from the rivalries caused by inappropriate levels of mimetic desire<sup>18</sup> or envy, sometimes called 'sin'.<sup>19</sup> Should

<sup>15</sup> Ben Rawlence and Chris Albin-Lackey, 'Ballots to Bullets: Organised Political Violence and Kenya's Crisis of Governance' (2008), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/03/16/ballots-bullets/organized-political-violence-and-kenyas-crisis-governance>. I was in Kenya at the time and observed the process.

<sup>16</sup> Lucas Shamala, *The Practice of Ubuntu Among the Abaluyia of Western Kenya: A Paradigm for Community Building* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2008), 135.

<sup>17</sup> 'Rituals reproduce the mimetic crisis' (Girard, *Things*, 19). Girard seems to be referring to all rituals.

<sup>18</sup> Girard uses the term 'mimetic desire' to indicate that the desire to which he refers is a desire to imitate another. See James G. Williams, 'Foreword', in Girard, *I See*, x–xi. Newell says this even more strongly: mimetic desire is 'the surrender of one's power to choose the objects of one's desire'. William Lloyd Newell, *Desire in René Girard and Jesus* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 7. I believe that the failure to identify desire as mimetic, identified by Girard as characteristic of the contemporary West, does not extend to African people, who are much more aware of how people desire possessions, capabilities, and even the desires of others.

<sup>19</sup> Such rituals are at the basis of what Girard calls 'religion', which is a means to prevent people from killing each other completely. Christianity has clothed itself as a religion so that, like a Trojan horse, it can

rituals not work, then the problem is not incorrect performance of the ritual, but the failure of people attending the ritual to have sufficiently cleansed themselves.

I am constantly amazed, in my day-to-day life in Africa, by people's love for preachers. Once I was in a café where a news broadcast was on the television and no one seemed to notice it. When the programme changed to preaching, suddenly everyone was glued to the TV.

Amongst the rituals that remind us of and recycle the shed blood of sacrifice are the messages of preachers. Christian preachers have a different role from teachers. The latter seek to impart knowledge; preachers seek to impart cleansing. In classic Pentecostal preaching, they do this by enabling the congregation to enter emotionally into the Christ-event as guilty sinners, thus encouraging repentance through their renewed acceptance of his death on our behalf. His having been crucified reduces the risk of their becoming the next witch to be lynched. (Constant fear that non-compliance with a community would result in one's being lynched was sufficiently debilitating to community functioning that its absence has come to be associated with 'prosperity'; hence a foundational underlying reason for the prosperity gospel's prevalence in Africa.)<sup>20</sup>

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penetrate and demystify violence in other 'religions'. See Gianni Vattimo and René Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith. A Dialogue*, ed. PierPaolo Antonello, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

**20** 'Certain people fall into poverty as a result of the oppressive forces of witchcraft', states Frederick Kakwata, in what to me is

In the Luo tradition, if a woman should walk out on her husband and then come back, a ritual including the slaughter of a sheep must be performed before she regains her normal status as a wife. The killing of that sheep substitutes for her own blood. In contrast, Jesus' death on the cross both saves her from her own death and enables her to be forgiven without the sacrificial ritual.

The faith in Christ that does away with the dark tradition of fearful witch hunts also brings responsibility in its wake. Concluding that a witch is not responsible for someone's predicament forces one to search for an alternative cause, what is in the West known as 'truth'. Such a notion of truth was not present in traditional Africa.<sup>21</sup> This is one reason why Christianity is so closely associated with education in Africa: people are seeking wisdom on how to live together in peace within the newfound freedom given by God's grace.

## V. The Concealing of 'Traditional' Violence

Myths explored by Girard often seem, on the surface, to outline a straightforward overcoming of evil by good. The good is exaggerated, and what is contrary is underplayed. According to Girard, a careful reading reveals that this is a result of the universal practice of concealing violence that actually occurred.<sup>22</sup> Healing, Girard sus-

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rather an understatement. Kakwata, 'Witchcraft and Poverty in Africa: A Pastoral Perspective', *Black Theology: An International Journal* 16, no. 1 (2018), 22.

**21** Shamala, *The Practice of Ubuntu*, 104.

**22** Girard, *The One*, 31; Girard, *I See*, 68–69.

pects, is traditionally always rooted in an original sacrifice, i.e. the killing or chasing of a witch.

Similarly, I have long been struck by the difference between how my African colleagues explain a series of events and how I would explain them. For example, healing can be declared to have happened before it is even symptomatic, presumably as a way of trying to avert a death that would otherwise occur as a prerequisite for the healing. (Denying that Christian prayer has resulted in healing can be tantamount to condemning a witch for bringing your malady. Hence, Christians must acknowledge healing by faith.) 'Say you are healed by faith, even if you don't feel better' is a common instruction to someone being prayed for. The healing referred to here, however, is not so much biological healing, but a release from inter-human tensions (which may well include the dead and those not yet born).<sup>23</sup>

Cases in which bloodshed was considered necessary for healing may not be described as such; the implicit action of killing is not made overt. For example, I recall an occasion when a boy born out of wedlock was sick. I accompanied my African colleagues to pray for him, but I was surprised when all attention and prayers were focused on the mother. After drinking tea together, we left. Later, I was told the baby was healed. Another day later, the baby had died. The fact that our prayers were focused on the mother made it clear that in my colleagues' understanding, her sin was

making the baby sick. Had God forgiven her, the baby might have survived. That the baby had to die to pay for the mother's sin was implicit but never mentioned.

Ways in which African people can conceal the violence that underlies their traditional ways of life became evident to me in 1992. During my time amongst the Kaonde people of Zambia between 1988 and 1991, I became increasingly mystified as to how tensions in the local community were being resolved. Although I perceived that fear of witchcraft was underlying these tensions, only when I read an account of Kaonde beliefs written by an outsider, Melland, did I grasp some details.<sup>24</sup> In a subsequent visit to Kaondeland, when I cautiously probed these issues using the indigenous terms from the Kaonde language that Melland had captured, I regularly found people familiar with them, and they always appeared a little embarrassed that such practices in their community might be known by outsiders.

## VI. The Origin of Gods in Lynchings

Girard claims to explain the origins of gods in popular mythology. For example, drawing on the myth of Tiamat,<sup>25</sup> he suggests that the gods whom peo-

<sup>23</sup> I acknowledge that I am here fusing the categories of emotional and physical healing, which are usually treated separately by Westerners but not by Africans.

<sup>24</sup> F. H. Melland, *In Witch Bound Africa: An Account of the Primitive Kaonde Tribe and Their Beliefs* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1923).

<sup>25</sup> According to this myth, Marduk kills Tiamat and then uses her body to form the heavens and complete the creation of the earth. Joshua J. Mark, 'Marduk', *Ancient History Encyclopedia* (2016), <https://www.ancient.eu/Marduk/>.



ple draw on to sustain their lives represent the ongoing presence of witches who were at one time lynched. Those killed are accused of evil, yet the impact of their death is the bringing of prosperity. As the community members who had been responsible for the lynching perceive benefits following the act, they wonder whether such benefits could really have resulted if the one who died had been a mere normal human. They begin to suspect that, to have that effect, the deceased must have been an exceptional kind of human. This process leads to the acknowledgement, after a lynching, that the departed has the status of a god, to whom people pray and who is named in future rituals so as to ensure their effectiveness.<sup>26</sup>

The fact that the Swahili term *miungu* can be used for 'the people who have died in a person's clan', i.e. deceased ancestors, is pertinent here.<sup>27</sup> *Miungu* would normally be translated into English as 'gods'. Because the singular, *mungu*, implies an ancestor, a translation of the Bible into Swahili distinguishes between 'god' and 'God' by terming the latter as *Mwenyezi Mungu*.<sup>28</sup> Gods (ancestors) are often considered malevolent in Africa, even if the person who has been transformed into a god (the ancestor) was seen as good.

On this basis, I surmise, it would also be possible for a person lynched

as a witch to become viewed as a helpful 'god' after his or her death. Because these gods are born out of the system of killing witches, faith in 'gods' (*miungu*) is of a totally different order from the more recently introduced alternative of faith in the Christian God (*Mwenyezi Mungu*), who by allowing himself to be killed as a witch exposed the wiles of Satan, thus enabling true peace and unity.<sup>29</sup>

## VII. Violence Ubiquitous in Traditional Societies

The widespread practice of child sacrifice in archaic cultures<sup>30</sup> runs in the face of contemporary romantic understanding that they were inherently peaceful and that violence has been a product of modern times. The 'noble savage' is now 'mainstream' in anthropology,<sup>31</sup> Girard suggests. However, Girard cannot accept the European romantic tradition.<sup>32</sup> This is itself a deep challenge to Western scholarship, which likes to see violence as 'accidental and ... unforeseeable' aberrations in human commu-

<sup>29</sup> Girard, *The One*, 55. Using the term as it applies to Africa, I believe it is correct to say that Jesus was accused of, and killed for, being a witch (Girard, *The One*, 62).

<sup>30</sup> Sandra Newman, 'Infanticide', *Aeon*, 2017, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-roots-of-infanticide-run-deep-and-begin-with-pov-erty>.

<sup>31</sup> Girard, *The One*, 28. For Girard, anti-ethnocentrism which refuses to use the label of primitive 'is the most specific feature of the modern age'. René Girard, 'Ethnocentrism' (1992), address delivered at the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, Stanford University, [cornerstone-forum.org/?page\\_id=915](https://cornerstone-forum.org/?page_id=915).

<sup>32</sup> Girard, *Things*, 279, 303.

<sup>26</sup> This is in contrast to the divine in the Bible, which comes from God; Girard, *The One*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph G. Healey, *A Fifth Gospel: The Experience of Black Christian Values* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), 146.

<sup>28</sup> Vyama vya Biblia, *Biblia: Habari Njema Kwa Watu Wote* (Nairobi: Vyama vya Biblia Tanzania na Kenya, 1995).

nal living.<sup>33</sup> For Girard, 'non-violence is [always] Christian.'<sup>34</sup>

This issue is still alive in Africa. 'There are many reasons [why many] children are being accused of witchcraft in Nigeria', claims Safechildafrica.<sup>35</sup> Revelations of such accusations have recently caused horror around the world. Underlying the notion that a child may be a witch is the idea that killing or chasing away that child might be a means of solving problems that people think the child is causing. I do perceive a very different understanding of children in Africa from that widely held in the West. Though much loved, children can also be held at arm's length in ways relatively unfamiliar in the West.

Unlike the Western legal notion that someone is innocent unless proven guilty, there is a strong tendency in Africa to treat people as guilty unless they prove their innocence.<sup>36</sup> This underlies a preoccupation with cleansing and the assumption that people are thinking evil things about others—for example, that they are harbouring envy.

### VIII. Human Civilizations Are Founded on Murder

For Girard, 'there is no human

thought that was not born out of [a] founding murder.'<sup>37</sup> Civilizations, including ancient Rome, were founded in this way.<sup>38</sup> The Bible is, for Girard, replete with examples of founding murders. For example, the first city was founded by Cain after his murder of Abel (Gen 4:17).

Alfayo Odongo Mango's memory became sanctified and his martyrdom without doubt is the cornerstone of ... *dini ya Roho*' (a flourishing Christian denomination, founded in Kenya in 1934).<sup>39</sup> This church spread after the murder of twelve of its founders. I have frequently heard this story recounted in worship services at these churches, reflecting their own commitment to the founding role of murder in human institutions. Given this background, the link between Jesus' crucifixion and believers' salvation in his name is profoundly experienced by African Christians.

### IX. Mimetic Desire and Envy

For Girard, human beings are imitative creatures who desire what others have. To distinguish what he means by desire from others' more limited understanding of the term, Girard refers to *mimetic desire*. According to Girard, people do not so much desire things of themselves as they desire experiences, or even the desire itself, that other people have. Something

33 Girard, *I See*, 11.

34 Girard, *The One*, 93.

35 'How many children are accused of witchcraft?' asks Safechildafrica, in 'Defending Rights, Creating Futures' (2009), <http://www.safechildafrica.org/childwitches>. 'The answer is that no one really knows, because no one is counting' (I have not come across the identifying of children as witches in parts of Africa known to me.)

36 Kroesbergen, *The Language of Faith*, 215.

37 Girard, *Things*, 113.

38 Brittany Garcia, 'Romulus and Remus', *Ancient History Encyclopedia* (2018), [https://www.ancient.eu/Romulus\\_and\\_Remus/](https://www.ancient.eu/Romulus_and_Remus/).

39 Bethwell A. Ogot, 'Reverend Alfayo Odongo Mango 1870-1934', in Ogot, *Re-introducing Man into the African World: Selected Essays 1961-1980* (Kisumu: Anyange Press, 1999), 128.

is desirable if someone else has it or wants it. A man might well find his wife more desirable should he discover that other men are trying to take her from him.<sup>40</sup> Parents often observe young children leaving a pile of toys lying on one side while desiring to play with whatever toy another child is using. If Girard is correct, then the desires that people seek to fulfil in life are constantly formed by their imitation of what others around them are desiring; 'We always borrow [desire] from others', he says.<sup>41</sup>

Many descriptions of African life, including those by Melland, Evans-Pritchard and later Mbiti,<sup>42</sup> find witchcraft to be prominent. Choosing English terms to translate African categories is always difficult. This choice of the term 'witchcraft' has had the effect, as far as Western people are concerned, of 'othering' what is African, into a category which Westerners did away with centuries ago, so that African people should 'stop believing in such superstitious nonsense'. My own experience of Africa has led to the conclusion that the powerhouse behind so-called witchcraft is envy.<sup>43</sup>

This envy resembles Girard's mimetic desire, and the foundational role of envy in African society reinforces Girard's observation that mimetic desire is at the root of the problems of human living.<sup>44</sup>

'I do not need to be paid, I will do this voluntarily', African people have occasionally assured me regarding their participation in a Bible teaching programme. On every occasion, that turned out to be a strategy to get inside the operations, on the assumption that they would then benefit financially. Subsequently, they mocked me for having thought that they could or would work for nothing! In Africa, it seems that people's propensity for envy prevents true volunteerism.<sup>45</sup>

## X. Rivalry Is Greatest between Those Who Are Closest

Girard finds that mimetic desire has a 'levelling' effect on human populations. Contrary to modern perceptions that individuals seek to satisfy their particular longings independently of what others have and do, if the model one imitates is always another person, then that imitation tends towards making one the same as that person. Tensions between Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and others recounted in the Bible and mythological accounts illustrate frequently how proximity generates division and even violence as a

40 Girard, *I See*, 10.

41 Girard, *The One*, 7.

42 Melland, *In Witch-Bound Africa*; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1991), 19. Mbiti is at pains to point out that African religion isn't all about magic, although witchcraft is clearly a prominent part of it.

43 Jim Harries, 'Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa', *Missiology: An International Review* 40, no. 2 (2012), 201. I wrote this long before I came across Girard.

44 'Mimeticism is ... pride, anger ... envy, jealousy', Girard concedes (*The One*, 129).

45 David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: Observations from Africa* (Dallas: SIL International, 2001), articulates numerous ways in which as a result friendship in Africa is integrally linked to money.

result of rivalry.<sup>46</sup> Girard explains how when people desire the same object, the 'obliteration of difference' that occurs is tragic.<sup>47</sup> For example, brothers both desiring the same woman will, as they seek to satisfy her, become more similar to each other.

The resulting fear of 'sameness' underlies strong taboos in many African communities regarding twins.<sup>48</sup> These rules are intended to avoid setting up twins for violent clashes, as 'primitive societies repress mimetic conflict ... by prohibiting everything that might provoke it.'<sup>49</sup>

In this instance, Girard, though he had no personal experience of Africa, drew heavily on his reading of African societies.<sup>50</sup> The presence of twin-related taboos amongst the Luo in Kenya is carefully articulated by Mboya.<sup>51</sup>

## XI. The Identity of the 'Powers'

There has been much discussion about identity of the 'powers' described by Paul (Rom 8:38; Col 2:15). For Girard, the powers are rulers who seek to apply the only pre-Christian way of building a civilization: killing or expelling people to maintain peace

and unity. As a result, pagan cultures are also a source of abhorrence for Christians, who know of a better way—i.e. peace and unity as an outcome of faith in Christ.

Many African people today seem very much aware of ways in which traditional and pagan communities maintain themselves through marginalizing and killing victims. This belief, which draws on the deep human desire to see someone else suffer so that one can acquire prosperity, requires deep heartfelt faith in God to overcome it. Only such faith in God, an overt allegiance that seems to be declining in the modern West, can counter the evil powerhouse of envy (for Girard, mimetic desire) that easily engulfs human hearts. This is the basis for much prayer in Africa, as believers battle in what might be termed the ephemeral realm.

## XII. Knowledge of Pagan Myths Is Not Damaging to Faith in Christ

Anthropologist James George Frazer, in his 1890 work *The Golden Bough*,<sup>52</sup> suggested that because other myths have stories of a 'dying God' that parallel Christ's death on the cross, biblical stories are no different from other myths. Girard radically counters this claim, contending that Frazer's motivation for condemning the archaic practice of accusing witches who were then resurrected was to also condemn, by implication, Christianity

<sup>46</sup> Girard, *Things*, 25. Rivalry, for Girard, is the main source of human conflict; see René Girard, 'Victims, Violence and Christianity' (edited version of the Martin D'Arcy Lecture, Oxford, November 1997), *The Month* (April 1998): 132.

<sup>47</sup> Girard, *The One*, 15; Girard, *Things*, 199.

<sup>48</sup> Girard, *I See*, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Girard, *Things*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Girard, *I See*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Mboya, *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi* np (1938; Nairobi: East African Standard Ltd. 1984; Kisumu: Anyange Press, 1997), 112–19.

<sup>52</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged from the 2nd and 3rd editions, ed. Robert Fraser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

as no different.<sup>53</sup> For Girard, knowledge of myths will not threaten Christians' faith, if they recognize foundational differences in the Gospel, such as its orientation to favouring victims.

The parallel in Africa today is that African people's close knowledge of their traditions is more likely to act as an encouragement than a discouragement to their becoming Christian.

### XIII. The 'Rationality' of the Cross

Girard explains with remarkable clarity how Jesus' death on the cross, by which he avoided 'participating in the system of [witches]',<sup>54</sup> can save men from their sins—without, in his terms, reference to the need for supernatural intervention.<sup>55</sup> Only at the end of his perhaps most readable text, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, does Girard concede that the reality he has met with is beyond human understanding.<sup>56</sup> Girard considers the redemptive value of the shed blood of Christ as very understandable yet at odds with much modern thinking, which has set aside any redemptive role for shed blood.<sup>57</sup> For Girard, Christ's death on the cross duped Satan, exposing his machinations and enabling people who were previously deceived to overcome them.<sup>58</sup>

African people's implicit appreciation of death as a means of healing gives them a deep perception of the

phenomenal difference that Christ's sacrifice made. Time and time again, both inside and outside church services, African Christian believers testify to me that they are committed to not going the route of the *waganga* (a term often translated into English as 'witch doctor'.) *Waganga* seek to manipulate the power arising from deaths of animals and people in favour of their clients. Such profuse denial of a route that many seem to still be following (seeking advice from *waganga*) speaks volumes about the ongoing attractiveness of witchcraft to those not convinced by the Gospel. That the work of witch doctors entails using the power released from killing to bring healing is further demonstrated by the frequency with which they demand animals to kill so as to perform their craft. In addition, the maiming, chasing or killing of assumed protagonists of someone's misfortune is almost constantly their aim.

### XIV. The Reality of the Resurrection

Girard considers the resurrection of Jesus to be 'real'.<sup>59</sup> Some might say that this is where the scientific nature<sup>60</sup> of his investigation comes to an end. Girard himself sees the resurrection as marking the end of mythology; once one has been exposed to the Gospel, it is impossible to believe the myth that the death of a witch will result in healing.

In the West, the resurrection of the dead is often considered to require a suspension of the rules of nature. Na-

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53 Girard, *The One*, 22.

54 Girard, *The One*, 54.

55 Girard, *I See*, 192.

56 Girard, *I See*, 193.

57 'In every instance modern man minimises the role of religion' (Girard, *Things*, 66).

58 Girard, *I See*, 125.

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59 Girard, *I See*, 136.

60 Girard, *I See*, 141.

ture, so the logic goes, requires that death be permanent. In non-dualist Africa, nature and super-nature are hardly distinct. The notion of the ongoing existence of a person who no longer enjoys bodily life is relatively easy for African people to accept. Resurrection may be seen as incredible, but not impossible.

Many African people realize that the Gospel has massive implications for their traditional beliefs in witchcraft. They are endeavouring to respond to that truth in a myriad of ways. The frequency with which even small private schools in my home area of Kenya are labelled 'Christian' demonstrates an awareness that events central to the Gospel are responsible for today's value of truth and knowledge.

## **XV. Conclusion: Girard's Challenge to Contemporary Scholarship**

The comprehensiveness of Girard's thought has challenged contemporary scholarship,<sup>61</sup> and he received much opposition from people who support the status quo. Girard's thinking challenges the cohesiveness of many modern disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, psychiatry, and certain branches of contemporary theology: 'If the social sciences were to be Christianised, they would no longer be social sciences. They would lead to an impossibility. There is no way out from sacrifice. There is

no purely objective knowledge.'<sup>62</sup> It also has many healthy implications for the whole life of African people, including their theology, ecclesiology and church practice.

I am reminded of the graduation speech I once heard at the Kima International School of Theology in Kenya. The African speaker denounced the 'gy's' (i.e. sociology, psychology, anthropology) on behalf of the local context. He seemed to have anticipated my subsequent discovery of Girard.

Girard's critique of modernism, coming as it does from outside the Western worldview, could help Westerners understand how they are perceived by non-modern people such as those in Africa. Although some of Girard's thinking was new, I think that to a large extent he was taking us back to what was before. He represents the school of comparative theology that was very active—and very strongly supportive of Christianity—until, as Tomoko Masuzawa explains, it was without good reason discredited in the West:

It seems to us today rather remarkable that so many nineteenth-century authors of varying attitudes toward non-Christian religions claimed—or, for the most part assumed—that their enterprise of comparing religions without bias was not only compatible with but in fact perfectly complementary to their own proudly unshakable con-

<sup>61</sup> 'All modes of contemporary thought will collapse whenever what we have said concerning the king and the god is finally understood' (Girard, *Things*, 54).

<sup>62</sup> Girard, *The One*, 72. He also stated, 'Humanity results from sacrifice.' René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversation with Benoît Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), Kindle edition.

viction in the supremacy of Christianity. Nowadays we generally discredit this claim as naive at best, disingenuous at worst. We hold in disbelief the seriousness with which some of those comparativists with strong dogmatic views pronounced that their surveys of other religions were—not just in principle but in actuality—‘fair’, ‘sympathetic’, and ‘impartial’. And since we find ourselves incapable of taking these pronouncements seriously, there is little incentive today to reexamine the nineteenth-century reasoning that might have made it feasible for those authors to advance such an argument in earnest. But this may be our loss. Surely our thorough lack of interest in their logic is ultimately to the detriment of our own historical understanding.<sup>63</sup>

I am not insisting that we need to agree with everything Girard says. But by stepping outside recently dominant Western philosophical presuppositions, Girard gives us insights that could be extremely helpful to our understanding of Africa, and thus to our relating to African people inside and outside the church. It is rare to find a contemporary Western scholar who can operate outside dualistic foundations (i.e. denying the sacred-secular distinction), yet be truly biblical and truly logical. This is where I believe Girard’s scholarship has great potential value.

African self-understanding, since

the beginning of the colonial era, has come increasingly under attack. The dominance of European languages on the continent has made it very difficult for African people to express themselves clearly in formal contexts. Taboos on racism in the West have added to this difficulty, effectively making it impossible to express oneself honestly about the nature and distinctiveness of contemporary African cultures. As a result, from the perspective of the West, African ways of life remain shrouded in mystery. Africans who have benefitted financially and in other ways from a close relationship with the West (which is almost all prominent African people) have had to deny their own identities and histories. Given his long devotion to extensive research that led him to advocate for radically unconventional paradigms, Girard’s legitimizing in Western thought of something that is far from Western<sup>64</sup> offers a possible way out of this impasse.

The future development of African societies and of the competence of African people will be hindered by a continuing dependence on Western aid. Girard’s thinking offers a possible foundation for scholarship, theology and Christian understanding that can be understood indigenously without

63 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 103–4.

64 Many African people’s lack of depth in understanding the West makes it very difficult for them to express themselves in a way that is critical of but that also makes sense to contemporary academia. Girard’s deep roots in Europe enabled him to maintain academic prominence despite his detractors. The fact that thinking comes from a Westerner, in today’s world, legitimizes it. Murphy Haliburton, ‘Gandhi or Gramsci? The Use of Authoritative Sources in Anthropology’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (2004): 794.

Western domination. At the moment, the only globally visible 'way forward' seems to be that everyone must become modern, Western and liberal. Girard's thinking opens another door of possibility, to a unifying, comprehensive, intercultural union based on the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

If you have been enticed to learn more about Girard, one good place to start would be his 2001 publication with the English title *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. If you prefer listening over reading, five broadcasts by Paul Kennedy (referenced in note 2 above) are highly useful.