RENÉ GIRARD AND
SECULAR MODERNITY

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In Memoriam

JOAN MEYERS

1923–2009

Many waters cannot quench love . . .
   Song of Songs 8:7
CONTENTS

Preface ix

Introduction 1

CHAPTER 1 Mimesis, Modernity, and Madness 17

CHAPTER 2 Violence, the Sacred Canopy 57

CHAPTER 3 Scripture and Secularization 83

CHAPTER 4 Modern Institutions and Violence 117

CHAPTER 5 War, Terror, Apocalypse 143

Conclusion 169

Notes 185

Bibliography 225

Index 243

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I came late to René Girard, and after three false starts. In the early 1990s, when I was completing my PhD dissertation on the uniqueness and finality of Jesus, I discovered and was much influenced by Walter Wink on the New Testament “powers and principalities,” though without appreciating Girard’s influence on Wink’s trilogy. In the late 1990s I was asked to review Why Must There Be Scapegoats? by the Girardian Jesuit theologian Raymund Schwager, but I could make neither head nor tail of it. I attended a gathering of Australian Anglican theologians where Girard’s work was introduced, and again things failed to spark. What finally awakened me from my dogmatic slumbers was an invitation in 2004 to review James Alison’s book On Being Liked. The time was right, and I was hooked.

Here was an intellectual vision of great simplicity and power, combined with a level of spiritual and psychological insight that has helped me greatly both personally and professionally. Reading Alison and Girard followed, then other Girardians. I advanced some way toward my own Girardian synthesis in a 2009 book, Abiding Faith: Christianity Beyond Certainty, Anxiety, and Violence, but it became clear to me that I needed to learn a lot more about Girard before proceeding with my longer-term theological project. Hence this volume, which undertakes a Girardian account of secular modernity.

I am grateful for a relatively new and (in Australia) rare opportunity to be doing this type of work more or less uninterrupted, so I thank Charles Sturt University for a Research Fellowship in Public and Contextual Theology. Within the life of our Research Center, based in Australia’s national capital, I thank Rev. Prof. James Haire, AC, our director, for his support and encouragement, along with my colleague Wayne Hudson for valuable conversations. My thanks also...
to the always helpful Kaye Malins, at St. Mark’s National Memorial Library.

In early 2010 I spent four months in the reading phase of this project on sabbatical leave in Collegeville, Minnesota, which Andrew M. Greeley described as the last magical place in American Catholicism. Life together with fellow resident scholars at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research was delightful, as was worship with the St. John’s Abbey monastic community in their iconic Marcel Bruer Abbey church. At the Institute I thank Donald Ottenhoff, Carla Durand, and Elisa Schneider, as well as Kilian McDonnell, OSB, and Wilfred Thiesen, OSB, who made me welcome at St. John’s University.

In Australia undergraduate and research degrees do not normally have a compulsory language requirement, so I had managed to get this far without learning French. Galvanized by this project, however, and in the company of my adventurous wife, I started from scratch during 2009, two nights a week at the Canberra Institute of Technology. To Jen Bateman, Christine Moore, and Jacqueline de Montmollin go my thanks for beginning my induction into this most beautiful and wonderful language and opening for me a deeper engagement with Girard. During the aforementioned sabbatical we also braved a one-month intensive course in French at the Université Catholique de Lyon, enjoying (patient) hospitality with the Communauté de Chemin Neuf. We have fond memories of our French teachers, Stéphanie Rabin and Christine Nodin, and our Chemin Neuf hosts at Rue Henri IV, Tim and Kate Watson.

I now want to mention those who helped me with preparation and publication. Special thanks to Charles Van Hof at the University of Notre Dame Press for commissioning this volume and seeing it on its way. Canberra is a long way from South Bend, but I hope to enjoy another boutique Indiana beer with Chuck at the Morris Inn on the UND campus before too long. I also thank Wendy McMillen and Sheila Berg, who have done me a great service with the editing and design of this book. I am especially grateful to the leading Australian painter, Jeffrey Smart, for once again allowing me to use his work on a cover, and to his archivist Stephen Rogers for invaluable
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Two last words of thanks, the first posthumous. Joan Meyers was my (adoptive) mother’s sister and our next-door neighbor during my boyhood in suburban Brisbane. Joan was a spinster who cared for her aged mother. She was well traveled, independent, and something of an exotic figure. She made me her project, and it wasn’t always smooth sailing. But, man and priest, my debt to her is deep, though I was not clear enough in expressing my gratitude before it was too late. Hence the dedication of this book to Joan’s memory. Finally, I thank Lisa Carley—my partner in faith, hope, and love—for sharing this Girardian journey with me, along with much wifely support and encouragement.

Canberra, Australia
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Introduction

In 2009 humanity marked the sesquicentenary of its arguably greatest intellectual achievement: the theory of evolution by natural selection. Darwinian molecular biology is now foundational for everything we know about life’s development, illuminating so much complexity by an essentially simple mechanism. Similar attempts to unify the human sciences have met with less success, from grand positivistic aspirations in nineteenth-century cultural anthropology—fictionalized by George Eliot in the character of her scholar-parson Edward Casaubon, who collapsed under the weight of his search for “the key to all mythologies”—through to today’s skeptical postmoderns, who question not only the likelihood but also the morality of encompassing cultural diversity within a single theory. And of course the possibility of a Christian intellectual synthesis holding faith and reason together has scarcely been conceivable since the late Middle Ages, when faith and reason went their separate ways in the West and the modern saeculum began to emerge.

But, wonder of wonders, an audacious claim to do just this has been in place for thirty-five years and is winning both intellectual and spiritual converts. In 2005 the French American thinker René Girard, in his ninth decade, was formally welcomed by Michel Serres on his election as an Immortel of l’Académie française as the “new Darwin
of the human sciences.” The postmodern intelligentsia, deeply wedded to the dogma of cultural relativism, remains largely unimpressed. They also despise any attempt to rehabilitate the Queen of the Sciences. Girard, with a dash of Gallic insouciance, shrugs off these detractors, referring to their small intellectual ambitions as “the comprehensive unionization of failure”; and of course his mimetic theory gives a good account of such academic rivalry, along with the arrogant individualist’s refusal of personal conversion that appreciation of his theory demands. Besides, his agenda is bigger than the intellectual or indeed the theological: Girard believes that having uncovered the origin of culture and explicated the emergence of secular modernity, he has revealed the apocalyptic acceleration of history toward a tragic denouement. Hence, from his study at Stanford, this scholar’s scholar has become a planetary prophet.

I have decided to focus on the issues of secularization and modernity in this project because they provide both a privileged perspective for surveying the whole Girardian vision and an opportunity for commending that vision by demonstrating its explanatory power in conditions familiar to us. In this introduction, then, it will be helpful to concentrate on three questions: Who is René Girard? What is secular modernity, and what is distinctive about Girard’s take on it?

WHO IS RENÉ GIRARD?

René Girard (1923–) was born under the shadow of history in Avignon, France, where his father was curator of the Castle of the Popes. In Nazi-occupied Paris, he trained in his father’s discipline, medieval history. The young Girard then left behind the French avant-garde (he knew Picasso, along with many other artists as well as writers) for postwar America. In his new country Girard was initially unable to find his feet academically, struggling in his intellectual life with the personal demons he later unmasked with the mimetic theory. His PhD in history at Indiana University, on American perceptions of wartime France, led to the teaching of French literature and a necessary move to Duke University (he also taught at Bryn Mawr College).
Meanwhile, the need to read all the novels that he had to teach opened Girard’s eyes to significant insights into the human condition, though the avant-garde had taught him that no universal truths were available in such texts.

It was at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore that Girard published his first book, introducing the first of three major intellectual breakthroughs: the mimetic theory of desire. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* traced his discovery of a new psychology in Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, and the great nineteenth-century French novelists: Stendhal, Flaubert, and Proust. These writers had broken through to a deeper perspective on human motivation, having shed the self-deceiving superiority of black-and-white moralism and the self-serving fictions of romantic individualism. They laid bare the dynamics of groupthink and the craven hunger for being that existentialism had named, with Proust and Dostoyevsky in particular learning to live more modestly, wisely, and ironically.

It is no accident that Girard’s conversion back to the Roman Catholicism of his boyhood took place at this time, for he was on a path to understanding what religion most truly is and is not. His second book followed in 1963, focusing on the psychology of Dostoyevsky’s “underground man”—a book appearing thirty-five years later in English as *Resurrection from the Underground*.

Subsequently, Girard grasped the primal role of scapegoating in the fostering of human peace and solidarity through reading classical literature, from which he advanced to mastering sociology, anthropology, and ethnography during the 1960s. Girard knew that he was onto something big. He moved from the chair he had held at Johns Hopkins since 1961 to Upstate New York and a Distinguished Professor position at the State University of New York in Buffalo, then returned to a named chair at Johns Hopkins in 1976. Girard published the French original of *Violence and the Sacred* in 1972 (the English translation in 1977) to great interest and acclaim. Here he revealed through its traces remaining in prohibitions, rituals, and myths the scapegoat mechanism that is hidden at the root of culture and religion. This uncovering of the bloody hands that humanity has used to build its venerable institutions and sacred narratives has not always
been well received. Girard waited until his next book, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978), to drop his great intellectual bombshell. This originally French volume, written in the form of an extended conversation with the psychiatrists, and his collaborators, Guy Lefort and Jean-Michel Oughourlian, reworked the mimetic and scapegoat theories. But, most notably, it explicated Girard’s new conviction that a remarkable anthropological breakthrough has taken place at the level of history, which is explicable purely in terms of scientifically objective evidence. The Judeo-Christian Scriptures in general and the texts of Jesus’ passion in particular are expounded by Girard as revealing and hence disempowering the scapegoat mechanism. This insight was of course cultural dynamite. Girard attributes its modern discovery to Nietzsche, who hated what he had found and was ultimately driven mad by it. Girard develops this insight in subsequent volumes, in particular, *The Scapegoat* (1982) and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (1999). Girard moved to his final academic post in 1981, as Andrew M. Hammond Professor of French Language and Literature at Stanford University.

In *A Theater of Envy* (1991), Girard went on to provide a detailed reading of Shakespeare as a sophisticated analyst of mimetic desire who also understood the scapegoat mechanism and its disempowering by the gospel. From the mimetic lovers of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to the failed sacrifice of *Julius Caesar* to the resurrection of Hermione at the end of *The Winter’s Tale*, Girard presents Shakespeare as a psychological genius and Christian prophet.

Girard extended his reflections on mimeticism as revealed in great literature, and on the nature of scapegoating culture and its scriptural undoing, in *Job: The Victim of His People* (1985) and *Oedipus Unbound* (2004), with both figures presented as the victims of Soviet-style show trials. Girard has also engaged with the Indian Vedic literature, in which he finds only a very limited awareness of the scapegoat mechanism. His 2003 French lecture series on the Vedas has been published in English with the title *Sacrifice* (2011). In 1990 the Colloquium on Violence and Religion was initiated, with annual conferences alternating between the United States and Europe, to explore, critique, and develop Girard’s work. An international community of

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Christians, Jews, atheists, and others have found in one, two, or all three aspects of Girard’s vision the intellectual and, in many cases, the personal and spiritual inspiration for their work and their lives.4

More recently Girard has offered something of a retrospective volume, *Evolution and Conversion* (2007), drawn from extended conversations in the late 1990s. His interlocutors there, in a book which updates *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, were Pierpaolo Antonello (Cambridge) and João Cezar de Castro Rocha (Manchester). A particular theme is the scientific nature of Girard’s conclusions, on the model of Darwin’s big, all-encompassing idea. Those who are disinclined to accept the truth of Christianity are shown how Girard makes visible a diagnosis of human ills that can commend itself apart from Christian belief, though it is clear that he sees no way beyond those ills apart from the healing of mimetic distortion and the abandonment of sacrificial violence that comes with repentance and conversion.

This issue became urgent for Girard in his eighties, in the decade after 9/11, when he turned his mind to the nature of warfare and fully crystallized his long-standing apocalyptic instincts about the direction and likely outcome of modern history. The escalation of violence has nothing reliably to restrain it once the scapegoat mechanism has been revealed, so unification at the expense of a common enemy or culprit becomes increasingly desperate, strident, one-eyed, and bloodthirsty—precisely because it is unreliable and ineffective. Through reflecting on Napoleon’s campaigns, such an escalation to extremes was discovered by Carl von Clausewitz, the early-nineteenth-century Prussian general and military theorist, who quickly resiled from his insight into a comforting but erroneous conviction that war could continue to be rule-bound and containable. Hence Girard’s 2007 book titled *Achever Clausewitz* (completing Clausewitz), which again took the form of an extended conversation—in this case with the French philosopher Benoît Chantre. It was later published in English as *Batting to the End*. In today’s era of globalization, rampant militarism, environmental crisis, and the resurgence of archaic violence since 9/11, Girard is convinced that we are on an apocalyptic roller coaster that mocks Hegel’s intellectual vision of peaceful resolution within history.
René Girard and his wife, Martha, have raised three children in America. The French Immortel now lives quietly in the seclusion of advanced age at Stanford.

**WHAT IS SECULAR MODERNITY?**

The meanings of *secular* and *modernity* are increasingly contested. Modernity, that once clean-cut specimen, now appears in scruffier postmodern dress, and it proves harder to recognize in a variety of non-Western guises. Its pedigree is less clear than we once thought, with Bruno Latour showing how modernity’s anxious myth of rational purity conceals a menagerie of strange hybrids. Secularization, too, is in trouble. This sociological theory, which attempts to explain the inexorable desacralizing drive toward functionally atheistic modernity, must now account for major international variations, postcolonial hybridity, and a number of frank reversals. Today’s rise of militant Islam is one such reversal and a distinctively modern phenomenon.

Secular modernity is a narrative available in various versions. One popular account—from the likes of Richard Dawkins—is that scientific advances have rendered belief in God obsolete as nature’s laws were brought to light, creating a go-ahead society of human self-betterment through technological spin-offs and by liberating our creativity from the oppressions of church and tradition.

The stubborn religiousness of Africa, the Middle East, and much of the rest of the world outside Western Europe, the United States, and a few satellites is surely exasperating for those proposing this view. Equally stubborn, and irritating to the skeptic, is the wonder and sense of deep obligation that still draws many Westerners to consider Wordsworth’s “sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused,” even if it is true that they are less and less likely to seek it in Western churches. So this view of secularization seems to put the cart before the horse. If modern people claim scientific reasons for abandoning “their faith,” it is likely that a lively faith has eluded them already, with science perhaps providing the catalyst for their unbelief, though not its cause.
A more believable account of secular modernity might go like this. Until the late Middle Ages in the West, human societies were more integral and holistic than has proved either sustainable or desirable in modern times. “Religion” and “society” were significantly interwoven. Likewise, a transcendent God underpinned a rationally ordered cosmos and human world. Church and state, pope and emperor, archbishop and king, were structurally interdependent in the sociopolitical manifestation of a deeper metaphysical belonging. A Durkheimian account of religion underwriting social cohesion is entirely appropriate here. Of course, explicit Christian belief, personal holiness, and devoted Christian discipleship were widespread in presecular times, but such focus and personal intensity by no means exhausted the meaning of belonging to a Christian society. Typically, these were tribal Christians who belonged, compared to the characteristic posture of individual choice usually associated with modern Western Christians who believe.

The breakdown of this unified synthesis had a number of elements. The shift in Western thinking about God that took place under the influence of late medieval nominalist philosophy (Duns Scotus, William of Ockham) made God sovereign over rather than transcendentally present everywhere within the order of things. The nominalist metaphysic proved conducive to the emergence of the saeculum—an independent natural order standing apart from the newly sovereign God, which could be left to scientific investigation and theorizing. The recovery of Greek learning and the shift of Europe’s intellectual center from the monasteries to the new universities furthered this bifurcation of the sacred and the secular. Shifts from feudal hierarchy to the naked sovereignty of monarchs, with a recognizably modern notion of the individual emerging for the first time in medieval romances and a newly prosperous middle class, extended the picture. Lay devotion, with its emphasis on individual belief and practice, developed under the influence of manuals, lay spiritual communities, and the new orders of preaching friars.

Next came the Reformation, inheriting this nominalist vision of God and the world. Doctrinally distinctive denominations jostled for position with “the universal Church,” while the newfound emphasis
on lay devotion was quickly diverted into the cultivation of markets and commerce, as Max Weber famously proposed. A public world increasingly understood as the work of voluntary human association, preserved by human know-how, for the pursuit of human well-being, left less room for God and less need for religion.

Key aspects of modernity are reform and diversification, with the one world of Christendom splitting its functions between agencies, economic classes, professions, and churches, as humanity for the first time began to take its own future in hand. Religion became a separate undertaking, with its values remaining in the public square while its doctrine and practice retreated behind a veil of privacy. Only thus could nation-states and markets begin their annexation of the modern world.

Into this account of an emerging saeculum fits Dawkins’s very partial picture, whereby science makes enormous strides in understanding and control. The machine age, the medical revolution accompanying the germ theory of disease, the revolutionary creation of our first great modern democracies, the prosperity growing with colonial markets and expansion on the North American continent, all contributed to a truly brave new world where divine providence—surely the deepest vein of popular religious sensibility—was outsourced to human agents. The unplanned evolutionary etiology of human being (Darwin) and its irrational inwardness (Freud) furthered the isolation of religion from a suitably triumphant, publicly shared view of reality. While both simple and sophisticated theological imaginations never lost Hopkins’s celebrated sense that “the world is charged with the glory of God,” nevertheless individualized faith became increasingly fragile as an essentially isolated matter of personal preference within a larger worldview that was secular.

The result is a degree of spiritual homelessness in the secular modern West, with few finding their way to churches and even fewer deeming those churches authoritative. Those who do are often retreating from the uncertainty and exposure that existentialism identified in Western modernity. Human inwardness tends to follow more romantic directions today, with consumer culture ensuring that it remains on a tight leash.
Tribal faith survives in particular localized forms—among ethnic groups, for instance, seeking cohesion in immigrant contexts as a stage on the way to fully inhabiting their new home in a secular modern manner. It also survives in particular national contexts, such as Ireland and Poland where church and Christianity served to maintain identity and resistance in the face of an invasive “political religion” (Ireland) or political ideology (Poland). Likewise, militant Islam provides a rallying point for the disaffected in today’s Middle East.

The impact of all this on church attendance throughout the West is a major issue in secularization theory, as is accounting for differences within a general pattern of decline. In Europe, for instance, where church attendance is plummeting but church taxes are still widely paid, the church is typically conceived of as a public utility to which one might occasionally need to have recourse. In America, however, where the actual extent of church attendance can be disputed, the church model is closer to that of a business competing for customers in the open market. My own country, like Canada and New Zealand, seems to lie somewhere in between, so that in the Anglican Church of Australia our current trials in the ministry remind me of doughy public utilities struggling to reinvent themselves as sexier and more relevant once privatization and the need to become competitive is forced on them.

The narrative of secularization that I have been sketching seems right enough, as far as it goes. However, the resurgence of religion in step with feral manifestations of modernity lends an air of tentativeness to these conclusions. Aspects of Western culture today make sense in the light of this narrative, but not all of them. Remember Durkheim and his key insight that religion ultimately has a social function, literally binding together communal life.

An obvious question is, therefore, what binds together the life of secular modern communities now that the old premodern synthesis is gone and “formal” religions are increasingly sidelined? An adequate answer must include nation-states and global markets, programmatic national enmities and grand ideologies, all seen to fulfill formerly religious functions (i.e., when religion and society were two sides of the same coin). Some sociologists of secularization, like Steve Bruce,
confine themselves to measuring religion as private belief and ecclesial affiliation, drawing predictable conclusions in accordance with the narrative of religious isolation and decline. But what if religion needs to be understood more broadly, more socially, less privately, less obviously—less 

religiously? This possibility indicates the direction of Girard’s approach.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT GIRARD’S TAKE ON SECULAR MODERNITY?

First, Girard’s account of secular modernity is not about loss of faith eventually ushering us into a brave new world once we have grown up and abandoned the consolations of religion. Religion for Girard is not about finding or making personal meaning. It is less of a private search and more of a specific public function, having to do with managing violence for the preservation of society. If there is a felt sacred aura, then it is likely to be a powerful effect of human togetherness. And if that felt sense has dwindled in secular modern times, it is because a particular social function is no longer working as it once did.

Second, Girard distinguishes between religion as an evolved concomitant of human culture and religion (typically, Judaism and Christianity) as a form of countercultural witness. Girard sees the Christian gospel outing and undoing the violent false sacred that undergirds human religiousness. Thereafter, the transformed “religion” typically colonizes the structures and legacies of the old, which generates a perennial unease for Christianity. New wine in old wineskins is Jesus’ image for this awkwardness (Mt 9:14–17; Mk 2:18–22; Lk 5:33–39). “A religion is revealed that is entirely other and yet inseparable from the old,” as Girard puts it. The archaic human religious impulse identified by Girard will always attempt to reconstitute this protective sacred, too, which while mortally wounded by the gospel was not killed outright. Consequently the gospel finds itself socially marginalized, within the church as well as outside it, for its countercultural unwillingness to maintain anybody’s status quo. This leads to some of history’s lowest points in terms of gospel values deserting the church—as when a pope blesses crusaders, for instance,
or righteous Protestant clergy hold out for the death penalty. But there remains a Christian alternative to typical human religiousness, even if regularly compromised throughout history.

Third, for Girard the rise of a sovereign individual God, and of the sovereign human individual, finds inspiration much earlier than the rise of nominalism—certainly much earlier than the modern individual whom we first glimpse in medieval romance and the emerging middle class. This separation of God from the social matrix, and the indiscriminate honoring of all human persons, was first of all a biblical development, as the victim mechanism began its undoing by the real God. So Girard provides a deeper, more anthropologically savvy account of imaginative and social transformation than standard versions of how secular modernity emerged.

Fourth, while Girard’s take on secularization accords with the influential account of Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, as the Girardian theologian Wolfgang Palaver also points out, nevertheless I have one important reservation. Girard’s understanding of the human person varies in emphasis from Taylor’s description of secular modern selves as less “porous,” and more “buffered.” These terms refer to a secularizing, modernizing shift in how people typically experience their world: from premodern, traditional societies in which attitudes and options were culturally given and constrained, with lives more scripted and limited—more porous, that is—to today’s experience of independent, freer, self-determining individuals, who are thus more buffered. This is true, but with a caveat. Girard’s mimetic theory shows that in an important sense we all remain porous. The independent buffered self is in reality a fragile metaphysical poseur, and the modern romantic individual is an illusion. Today it remains a question of what models of desire we follow, and what metanarrative we inhabit, just as in premodernity—though we have the illusion of greater and freer choice. With Taylor, Girard certainly recognizes the social disembedding of modern Western people by comparison to their forebears in traditional societies. He does not see modern people as any less mimetic, however, but likely more so.

Fifth, Girard seeks to identify a new “religious” face of society in modernity, denying that the measurable behavior of a “religious minority” in secular modern societies exhausts how “religion” might
be functioning. There is a *resacralizing* going on within secular modernity, which Girard tries to name. In his analysis of the violent false sacred returning under the championship of Nietzsche, he offers an alternative to viewing the secular modern West as a realm of declining religious engagement. Belief in the Christian God is definitely in decline, admits Girard, but this is chiefly because the preferred deity of secular modernity is Dionysus, who is worshiped in various (often unacknowledged) guises. So Girard sees secular modernity in the West as functionally religious. However, its “religious” dimension does not work as well in restraining violence as did archaic religious forms, because the gospel has begun their undoing. Hence Girard’s essentially apocalyptic account of modern history, based on there being greater risks with less protection.

Sixth, Girard concurs with Hans Blumenberg, Max Weber, and Marcel Gauchet—to name three proponents of this thesis—in finding the ultimate source of secular modernity in Christianity. This is certainly closer to the truth than Dawkins’s naive proposal, which sees Christianity expelled kicking and screaming from the modern world once noble-minded scientists had outsmarted it. Charles Taylor, by the way, scores a tidy point against this Dawkins-style view by identifying its religious roots in the spurned evangelicalism of Victorian-era skepticism. But Girard differs from all three in the details. Rather than Blumenberg’s late medieval nominalist account—which Taylor welcomes as “the intellectual deviation story” and which is championed today by the Radical Orthodoxy movement in theology—or Weber’s economic path to modernity focused on the Protestant ethic secularizing monastic discipline, or Gauchet’s structural theory whereby belief in a transcendent God who remains incarnationally and ecclesially invested in the world provides a perfect seedbed from which secular modernity might emerge, Girard goes deeper, darker, and further back. He declares the defeat of a violent cultural *habitus* that had evolved among mimetic creatures. The fact of such mimeticism, the scapegoat mechanism with its various religious echoes, and the way things are unraveling since that religio-cultural bubble was burst by the gospel, together account for the rise of secular modernity. Girard’s version is highly explanatory and predictive—for instance, the return of religion and pseudoreligion.