Engaging Girard
Is a Girardian Political Ethic Necessary?

Nathan Colborne

Nathan Colborne is Assistant Professor of Religions and Cultures at Nipissing University in North Bay, Ontario, Canada. His most recent article, "A Peace Crueler than War? Just Policing in a Foucauldian Perspective," appeared in the Mennonite Quarterly Review (April 2010).

René Girard's thought on sacrifice, religion, and the scapegoat has bequeathed to modern thinkers a variety of important tools for understanding the relationships between these things and the formation of society, including political community. A great deal of important work has been done in the development of Girardian criticisms of ancient and modern political thinkers and the sacrificial violence they place at the center of their thought.[1] Despite this, however, not as much work has been done in outlining the potential elements of a political theory that might emerge from Girard's suggestion of a positive mimesis of Christ that embodies his renunciation of violence exemplified in the Crucifixion. This lack can be attributed, at least partially, to Girard's own reticence to outline the precise lineaments of a society emerging from the renunciation of violence he espouses. But it would seem that a contributing factor must also be the difficulty of imagining a politics that renounces violence and also remains political. This may be a symptom of a lack of imagination that humans have, formed as they are by practices that assume the necessity and inevitability of violence. And yet it is one of the most attractive characteristics of Girard's thought—that his relentless criticism of the scapegoat mechanism provides an opportunity to "unthink" the necessity of violence. Several important political questions, however, must be asked before this imaginative leap can have structural purchase.

In this paper, I will attempt to reflect on the kinds of questions that must be asked to develop Girard's thought in terms of a positive political theory. I will do this by developing a conversation between Girard and the political theorist William Connolly. Connolly is an important conversation partner for Girard because he addresses many of the same issues that

Girard does but in the context of political theory and in a way that is startlingly different from Girard's renunciation of violence and relations of rivalry. In this way, Connolly's thought interrogates Girard's (and perhaps Christianity's) abstract renunciation of violence and forces it into the world of political practices and structures. In this paper, I will discuss the ways in which Connolly's attempt to develop a positive ethos, rooted in specific practices, habits, and attitudes, requires a corresponding reflection on the ethical habits that would accompany the renunciation of violence that Girard advocates.

Girard and the Renunciation of Violence

René Girard's insight into the place of violence in society begins with his account of the mimetic nature of desire. For Girard, humans learn to desire what they desire through imitating the desires of others. This imitation draws desiring subjects into close proximity to their models but also has the potential of making this relationship a rivalry over the same objects of desire. This rivalry cannot be defused simply by increasing the available goods because the scarcity of the goods at issue is only the occasion of conflict, not its source. The source of the conflict lies in the mimetic nature of desire, and thus the mimetic nature of rivalry itself. In fact, as Pieter Tijimes intimates, for Girard "it is rivalry that creates scarcity, not scarcity that creates rivalry."[2]

This account of desire is the first step in Girard's attempt to expose human tendencies towards violence through an uncovering of the scapegoat process that releases the tensions brought about by mimetic desire and rivalry. Girard's view, in brief, is that multiplying mimetic rivalries results in a spiraling escalation of repressed mimetic rivalries that threaten to erupt into violence. The threatened societal disintegration is prevented, however, by the practice of the scapegoat mechanism. All of the repressed tensions find an outlet in a sudden outpouring of violence on a victim who is blamed for the friction straining social relations. The entire community unites in this violence, forgetting, for the moment, the rivalries that set its members at odds. The new-found unity that comes at the expense of the victim is seen as evidence that the victim, indeed, was to blame for the original discord. Girard argues that this process is found in every society and culture, hidden, however, from that culture's self-understanding in mythology and religious ritual. Girard's contribution is an attempt to demonstrate that Judaism and Christianity, in their holy texts, stories, and rituals, instead of participating in this scapegoat mechanism, expose and criticize it. Through consistently

taking the side of the innocent victim and condemning those who sacrifice this victim, Biblical texts, and the societies based on these texts, escape the violence of the scapegoat mechanism and provide a possible alternative to a social order based on communal violence against the scapegoat.

Girard has been somewhat taciturn on what exactly this alternative might look like.[3] He has claimed that the exposure of the scapegoat mechanism makes its continuation difficult, if not impossible. He has also made several evocative comments about an alternative mimesis founded by Jesus Christ's refusal of violence and offer of reconciliation and forgiveness.[4]

In this, Girard distinguishes between the mimetic desire that generates mimetic rivalry and a possible alternative desire, yet still mimetic, that avoids rivalry and violence through its imitation of Christ.[5] Girard, however, has resisted the temptation to develop an overly programmatic alternative to a formation of the political subject founded on the scapegoat mechanism, fearing, perhaps, that an overly determined alternative would merely recapitulate the very constructions he is attempting to avoid. Although some have claimed that Girard's recalcitrance is a significant weakness,[6] it seems that a more sympathetic reading would have Girard developing a tactical approach to politics that resists the hidden violence of the scapegoat mechanism wherever it is found and refuses to erect a contrasting politics that would redraw battle lines Girard has worked so hard to erase.

But this still leaves us with the question of how precisely Christ represents this complete renunciation of violence. In a fascinating reversal of much contemporary exegesis, Girard goes to the Gospel of John, often excoriated for its anti-Semitic violence, for his explanation. He reads the gospel's use of the term Logos, in contrast to Heidegger's reading, as an attempt by the author to place Christ's nonviolence at the foundation of the cosmos and then to depict dramatically its expulsion by humanity. As Girard claims:

> The Johannine Logos is foreign to any kind of violence; it is therefore forever expelled, an absent Logos that never has had any direct, determining influence over human cultures. These cultures are based on the Heraclitean Logos, the Logos of expulsion, the Logos of violence, which, if it is not recognized, can provide the foundation of a culture. The Johannine Logos discloses the truth of violence by having itself expelled. First and foremost, John's Prologue

undoubtedly refers to the Passion. But in a more general way, the misrecognition of the Logos and mankind's expulsion of it disclose one of the fundamental principles of human society. [7]

In this quotation the distinction between what Girard calls the "Logos of love" and the "Logos of violence" is evident. The Logos of love, exemplified in Christ's teaching and ministry, demonstrates its commitment to nonviolence by allowing itself to be expelled. But, far from being a marginalization in futility, the Logos of love actually accomplishes its goal by revealing the fundamental violence of this second Logos and exposes the fact that the Logos of violence only keeps its place by means of this violent expulsion. Girard's hope lies in his belief that, once this expulsion is revealed, the power of the Logos of violence to maintain its place as the founder of culture is destroyed.

Of course, the victory of the Johannine Logos is not quite so simple, as the millennia since the coming of Christ and the writing of John's Gospel will attest. In fact, the history of interpretation of both John's Gospel and the Incarnation, according to Girard, has allowed the Logos of violence to worm its way into our very understanding of John's account of the Logos. Girard argues that the sacrificial understanding of the atonement is precisely the rereading of John's account of the Logos of love according to the logic of the Heraclitean Logos of violence.[8] Girard wants to undo the damage that the sacrificial reading of the atonement has done and restore the Gospel's vision of a genuinely nonviolent order based on an identification with the victim and exemplified in the repudiation of violence Christ demonstrates. Christ's rejection of violence holds forth the possibility of a cultural and individual transformation that is no longer based on mimetic rivalries and the scapegoat mechanism.

The precise nature of this transformation is left somewhat unspecified beyond its description as a repudiation of violence and an imitation of Christ. This has invited criticisms of Gnosticism.[9] Girard does suggest, however, that "no purely intellectual process and no experience of a purely philosophical nature can secure the individual the slightest victory over mimetic desire and its victimage delusions."[10] His work is filled with examples of the intellectual recognition of the scapegoat mechanism that results only in the re-inscription of the mechanism in its very rejection.[11] What is necessary is not simply that

one learn a lesson that can be taught by a reading of the Gospels or of Girard or of any number of works of literature Girard believes encapsulate this insight into mimetic rivalry and its violence. Instead, what is necessary is a "conversion" in which, Girard claims, "the victimage delusion must be vanquished on the most intimate level of experience; and this triumph, if it is not to remain a dead letter, must succeed in collapsing, or at the very least shaking to their foundations, all the things that are based upon our interdividual oppositions—consequently, everything that we can call our 'ego,' our 'personality,' our 'temperament,' and so on."[12] This is not simply an intellectual realization but a complete transformation of the subject and its reorientation away from mimetic rivalry and victimization.

What Girard does not go on to discuss at this point, and what his language of "conversion" would seem to require, are the actual practices and social structures that would need to be in place to encourage and sustain this conversion. The scapegoat mechanism is the basis of the political orders that we know at present and has emerged as a mechanism because it fulfills a genuine need. Spiraling mimetic rivalries require some kind of resolution, some kind of pressure valve that releases the pent up violence inherent in an epidemic of mimetic rivalry. A renunciation of mimetic rivalry and the violence that attends it is a necessity if one is to avoid the scapegoat mechanism, but it would hardly seem to release those who have undergone this 'conversion' from the necessity of organizing themselves politically. What is lacking in Girard, however, is an explicit discussion of the structures of political organization, the practices of the political subject, or even the characteristics of an ethos that would allow this transformation of the subject to happen and sustain it in community. Nor is there any discussion of the engagement that would take place between those who have renounced violence and the scapegoat mechanism and the violent and sacrificial practices even of our present democratic polities.

In addition to attacks for a putative Gnosticism, Girard has been attacked for what has been termed "Pelagianism."[13] Girard claims, however, that the transformation of the human subject he is speaking of is not the result of the realization of a potential that is immanent in humanity itself. He writes, "[m]y reading of the gospels is not a humanistic reading at all. It is almost impossible for human beings, and also terribly perilous, to conceive a divinity that would be absolutely free of violence."[14] The precise nature of this peril is not outlined in the text from which this quotation comes, but Girard treats of the particular dangers brought about by the Biblical disclosure of the scapegoat mechanism in several other places.

Wolfgang Palaver, in an essay on Carl Schmitt, [15] sums up one of Girard's most important points when he writes that the exposure of the scapegoat mechanism has the effect of opening up formerly closed societies based on the logic of a sacrificial ethic. This allows for the possibility of a global society but this global society also has the potential to engender a social crisis brought about by the end of cultural differentiations.[16] This provides fertile ground for spiraling mimetic rivalries on a global level.

The crisis brought about by this end of cultural differentiations is intensified by what Girard calls our "apocalyptic" situation. By this Girard means that as humanity has rejected the peaceful alternative to the scapegoat mechanism offered by God in Christ, and has demonstrated this rejection in the Crucifixion, our escalating power of destruction has left us in an untenable situation. Humanity maintains its faith in the power of violence to provide peace (demonstrated most vividly in the belief that maintaining a nuclear arsenal will prevent the use of nuclear weapons[17]), but with the exposure of the scapegoat mechanism, we are deprived of the single technique that could justify our faith in the efficacy of violence to maintain peace. So we are in a time that forces us to reconsider our commitment to violence as a tool of peacemaking. And Girard intimates that the possibility of accepting the proffered invitation to renounce violence completely is perhaps still available to humanity and even more desperately necessary than ever.[18]

Both of the above points are related to Girard's view that the exposure of the scapegoat mechanism found in Christianity and filtering down within societies influenced by this religious tradition, even if they have attempted to reject the relation, actually intensifies the tendency towards Manichean dualities. As he writes, "'rituals of Manicheism' are not entirely specific to cultures influenced by the Bible, but they may be more widespread there, because of a conflict between the growing awareness of scapegoating, as a result of the Judeo-Christian influence, and the difficulty of giving up the practices. You have to make your scapegoating more convincing to yourself by displacing it and also by accusing your victims of being the chief victimizers, in order to justify your own victimization of them."[19] Christianity and Christian cultures have certainly not been immune to the temptation to divide the world into two groups representing light and darkness or good and evil forever pitted against each other. While the Christian revelation makes the scapegoat mechanism less effective and less prevalent, this is not unambiguously good news because this mechanism truly does mitigate the violent effects of mimetic rivalries. These mimetic

rivalries, now at a global level, become ever more intense and are magnified in their effects by the ever greater destructive capacities of human beings.

This tendency towards Manichean dualities leads towards what Girard calls the two great temptations of modern Christianity.[20] These are, on one hand, the tendency to divinize the present social order and, on the other, the opposite tendency to divinize social disorder and revolution in the name of liberation. Both of these tendencies attempt to escape from the messiness of actual political engagement with others and replace the very definition of these others as neighbors with a definition of them as implacable enemies, not only to one's own political agenda but to divine truth. Again, for Girard, this tendency is actually intensified by the marginalization of the scapegoat mechanism, which allows for the unification of society around a single victim. The value of the crisis that emerges from this situation is that it has the potential to force humans to embrace a solution as radical as the nonviolent mimesis of Christ's renunciation of violence in the way of the Cross. There is, however, nothing inevitable about this possibility and, although Girard believes it is the only possible path towards peace, there is no guarantee that it will be taken.

William Connolly

It is at this point that I would like to turn to political theorist William Connolly. Connolly is a useful interlocutor for Girard for several reasons. First, he has many of the same concerns that Girard does. Connolly attempts to reveal our attempts to scapegoat, marginalize, and exclude others while simultaneously concealing this from our understanding. He also attempts to develop intellectual resources that can help us avoid our tendencies towards anathematization and scapegoating. Secondly, although Connolly takes religion, and particularly Christianity, seriously, he finds the resources for avoiding the scapegoat mechanism in precisely those figures that Girard is most critical of for unconsciously entrenching scapegoating in their very attempt to avoid it, namely Nietzsche and Heidegger. A third important reason for the development of a conversation with Connolly is that, in a more explicit and fully developed way, Connolly attempts to elaborate an ethos of political engagement that avoids the scapegoat mechanism but allows for a genuine encounter between those who disagree on even the most fundamental issues.[21]

This third reason is the most important because it has the potential of pushing Girard

scholars to develop an account of the political ethos that might emerge from it. Girard is quite right that the rejection of the scapegoat mechanism is fraught with danger and has every possibility of becoming a deeper and more difficult to perceive entrenchment of scapegoating. His alternative of unconditional forgiveness, the repudiation of violence, and a commitment to identification with the victim requires more specific discussion of political engagement if it is not to tend towards abstraction. To this end, an encounter with Connolly can force this Girardian alternative to flesh out its political ethics.

Like René Girard, William Connolly attempts to analyze the roots of violence, seeing these roots as deeper than a simple competition for scarce goods. Instead, Connolly argues that the roots of violence have their basis in human resentment at mortality and at the ambiguity and arbitrariness of the universe. Our own mortality and finitude present the greatest challenge to our own existence, filling the subject with dread and anxiety. This anxiety is intensified by the disciplines that the subject is coerced into applying to itself in the hope of finding a stable source of success and happiness. The problem of attempting to refine the subject into a solid and stable basis for politics, for Connolly, is not that the identity of the subject is, in actuality, fractured and unstable. Rather, his argument is that a fractured identity is a result of the application of normalizing disciplines to the subject. This process creates more and more abnormalities and fragmentations as the subject resists its comfortable normalization.[22] This continuing failure to establish a stable identity through the use of normalizing disciplines, instead of releasing the self from an unreasonable attempt to ground itself unambiguously, creates a pressure to found the identity of the self transcendentally. Because the contingent realm in which the subject actually exists is seen to be fleeting and unstable, a realm impervious to this contingency is hypothesized and is assumed to be the source of "true" identity. This tactic of projecting the source of identity into a transcendental realm is a means of removing identity from the political realm. The fear of anarchy or relativism caused by the inability to found the subject in a stable way is used by those insisting on the importance of a stable and integrated self to justify this depoliticization and transcendentalization of the identity of the subject. Those who resist the universalization of the subject in this way are accused of being relativists and this relativism is assumed to be a much worse alternative than universalizing a contingent model of the subject and marginalizing those who fail to meet its demands.

The problem that Connolly is concerned with is the attempt to universalize this model of the

subject in order to use it to found a stable political society. Connolly calls this 'transcendental egoism.' It is inevitable that an identity is crucial to those who bear it, whether as individuals or as a collective. Connolly does not dispute this or question its importance in the formation and ongoing operation of the political community. What Connolly wants to argue for, however, could almost be called a sense of guilt at the necessity of giving this privileged place to identity.[23] It may be necessary that the identity of subjects and the structures of a political society form each other and marginalize expressions of identity that cannot be integrated easily into the society, but this can be held in tension with a view of identity that sees it as "historically contingent in its formation and inherently relational in its form … because it treats as true the proposition that no identity reflects being as such; no identity is the true identity because every identity is particular, constructed and relational."[24] This view has clear parallels to Foucault's understanding of the self, described by Connolly as being that "there is no essence, telos, or purpose in the self which could be realized through a well-ordered society and hence no self-alienation in the existing order; but every order, by creating a self appropriate to it out of the raw material available, simultaneously organizes and subjugates the self."[25] This recognition of contingency and arbitrariness in the very constitution of the self does not, in Connolly's view, undermine the importance of identity in political formation. Instead, it introduces into the basic and most fundamental structures of political society a sense of ambiguity. Because this ambiguity casts doubt on the stability of the subject, it also discourages two effects of a "transcendentalized" identity. The first is a tendency to force a stable identity on others because this calls them to their "true" identity. The second is a tendency to marginalize others because their unconventional identities appear to be a threat to the formulation of true identity.

For Connolly, every organization of society simultaneously orders and subjugates the self. This poses a challenge to harmonious and teleological construals of subjectivity that understand the subject as coming to its fulfillment or realization in social organization. Connolly does not, however, then posit an alternative subjectivity that liberates the self. The difference between Connolly's vision of political organization and communitarians or individualists is not that Connolly has discovered a form of inter-relational subjectivity that does not subjugate the self and repress some of its intransigent elements. Connolly's vision of political order, in contrast, is one that does not hide its darker side from itself, either through a teleological vision of harmony or through an arbitrary marginalization of

challenging expressions of selfhood to an apolitical realm invented for this purpose.

To this end, Connolly highlights the paradoxical nature of ethical reflection. What he means by this, in his own words, is that "without a set of standards of identity and responsibility there is no possibility of ethical discrimination, but the application of any such set of historical constructions also does violence to those to whom it is applied."[26] All construals of political order are forced to deal with a subject that it constructs "all the way down," and is, at the same time, resistant to its full determination. In fact, as Connolly argues, the very constitution of subjectivity encourages the formation of that which does not fit easily into its bounds.[27] The very process of drawing a line of definition around the subject must leave something outside that line, if only enough to define oneself against. The temptation is to absorb, exterminate or strive to contain that which does not easily conform to the measure of the subject. The ordering of the subject, then, cannot avoid doing violence to what is being made into a subject.

This does not mean that in a perfect world we could live without political order and thus without violence. Connolly does not imagine that we could avoid drawing lines around the subject and therefore avoid the exclusion of what does not integrate easily into our understanding of the subject. In fact, even this formulation of the problem is founded in a fundamental misunderstanding. It implies that there is an autonomous subject who could make decisions about whether and how to construct a subject. For Connolly, we find ourselves already in a world within the bounds of which we have been formed. The formation of the subject is the ground of choice, desire, and consent.[28] Connolly's political vision is not one in which the violence implicit in the construction of a subject is denied but one in which some of the more insidious effects of this are avoided. Connolly espouses political practices and beliefs that he believes defuse the anxiety and fear (and their occasional eruption into violence) that can characterize the engagement with those others (and those other parts of our selves) who challenge our harmonious models of subjectivity. He proposes to do this by reinscribing the conflict between them in the political sphere once again. Connolly's view is that those who propose an harmonious and teleological view of the subject and its political expression use the specter of anarchy and uninhibited violence to suppress or exclude expressions of subjectivity that challenge their own expression. The greatest threat facing modern democracies, in Connolly's view, is not really that they will descend into violent chaos because of moral disintegration but that the "management" of

conflict entrenches a violence within our society that cannot be recognized or analyzed using the tools of contemporary political discourse. Connolly's suspicion about attempts to formulate political identities that are not rivalries is that they hide a deeper violence beneath their superficial harmony that is reflected in attempts to police, manage or exclude those with alternative formations of identity.

Connolly is attempting here not to suppress or eliminate rivalry, an impossible goal according to him, but also not to sublimate it in a transference to the kind of non-acquisitive mimesis that Girard envisions. Instead, Connolly wants to re-imagine rivalry as a relationship that does not require the elimination, ostracization, or exclusion of the rival. Connolly calls this the "spiritualization of enmity," by which he means the cultivation of "agonistic respect for minorities who draw ethical inspiration from alternative sources, including nontheistic and asecular sources."[29] This ethos would see the enmity that emerges from engagement with those who appeal to utterly different moral sources not as endangering one's own moral sources but as a spur to greater acts of generosity and hospitality.

Of course, Connolly is aware that simply re-envisioning rivalry intellectually is not adequate if one truly wants to transform the subject and its political relationships. The subject cannot be reduced to the intellect and therefore the transformation of the subject cannot be solely intellectual. For this reason, Connolly presents a model of political engagement that is embodied, even visceral, and includes an account of subconscious psychological and neurological aspects of subjectivity. Just as our social engagements with others do not take place in a pure intellectual realm, our political engagements do not take place in a realm of pure intellect. A genuine transformation of the subject must therefore take into account the micro political realm that is only transformed as the subject transforms itself.

Connolly's attempt to develop specific "technologies of the self" that involve the transformation of the subject has been criticized as narcissistic or subjectivist.[30] Inherent in Connolly's vision of these techniques, however, is that they emerge from the engagement of the subject with others who challenge aspects of the subject previously considered natural or foundational. These engagements are a necessary precursor to techniques of transformation, and transformation cannot, for Connolly, be pursued outside of this intersubjective context. What Connolly wants to do is provide a realm where these

engagements, which inevitably take the form of rivalries, can be sustained without turning into violent exclusions or attempts to demonize or anathematize those one confronts.

It would seem that this account of Connolly's project presents a clear and stark contrast between him and Girard. They are not, however, as far apart as appearances might suggest. Girard's persistent and rigorous unveiling of the scapegoat mechanism can also be understood as a "technology of the self" that transforms the subject and its relations to others. Girard's language of conversion that I have highlighted above is an attempt to draw attention to the possibilities of a radical transformation of the subject in its relation to itself and to others.[31] Both Girard and Connolly accept the necessity of a transformation on the level of the subject in order to respond adequately to the problem of violence.

Connolly's Critique of Girard

The fact that both Connolly and Girard place hope in the transformation of the subject should not lead us, however, to overemphasize their similarities. What sets Connolly apart from Girard is that he proposes a political response to what he sees as a political problem. In this section I will attempt to develop a critique of Girard's response to the problem of the scapegoat mechanism as an attempt to escape from the messy realm of politics. I will argue that Connolly's attempt to undermine the scapegoat mechanism by means of political engagement can reveal some weaknesses in Girard's thought and force it to develop an account of the political consequences it would entail and that must supplement its exposition.

For Connolly, Girard's attempt to eliminate the necessity of rivalry and therefore to eliminate the possibility of violence is an attempt to escape from politics itself, and is, therefore, both self-deceptive and dangerous. This is a charge that Girard himself lends some weight to in his claim that the only possible foundation for this nonviolent alternative is that "all men together should adopt the single rule of the Kingdom of God. The decision to do so must come from each individual separately, however; for once, others are not involved."[32] Here, it seems that a vertical relationship with the transcendent allows one to bypass the communal and social human realities. Connolly's suspicion of this alternative is that the founding of political identity on a relationship to the transcendent bears within it the almost irresistible temptation towards exclusion and anathematization.

In contrast, Connolly's response to the human potential for violence in the scapegoat mechanism, which does not pretend to escape from the relationships of rivalry, is inherently political. Connolly's response does not rely on the separate individual adoption of a "single rule" but drives the subject out of him- or herself to an engagement with actual, embodied others. According to Connolly, the idea that one could escape violence through a transformation that explicitly does not involve others, seems dangerously naïve.

Connolly's critique goes right to the heart of the alternative mimesis that Girard suggests is the only possibility of an escape from the violence of mimetic rivalries. Girard suggests that the only alternative to the violent desire that results in mimetic rivalries is a non-acquisitive desire patterned on Christ's repudiation of violence. This maintains the importance of a model of desire, a psychological necessity for Girard it would seem, but allows this relationship of imitation to avoid becoming a rivalry.

It is from this non-acquisitive mimesis, and only from it, that a genuine human subject can emerge. Girard agrees when an interlocutor claims that "the real human subject can only come out of the rule of the Kingdom; apart from this rule, there is never anything but mimetism and the 'interdividual.' Until this happens, the only subject is the mimetic structure."[33] Girard later clarifies that there is an imitation that does not result in rivalry but is a non-acquisitive mimesis of Christ's repudiation of violence.[34]

What this model of desire maintains, however, is a basic structure of model, copy, and simulacrum or false copy. And for this reason it is vulnerable to Connolly's suspicion about what he calls the "drive to wholeness," which he claims "becomes most destructive when you both obsessively interpret the cultural identity you participate in to be the best available copy of a true model and place that model above the threshold of legitimate interrogation in politics."[35] Girard's new model of non-acquisitive desire sets the standard for true or genuine subjectivity. Models of subjectivity that are not ordered according to this ideal fail to meet the standard of genuine subjectivity. They are failed attempts at being a true human being. Girard's understanding of genuine subjectivity defines the terms; all other attempts to be human are articulated according to the terms already set by his model. The terms of political and social discourse and political engagement are therefore narrowed to criticism of alternative models of subjectivity according to the "correct" model and attempts to encourage those who espouse these alternatives to recognize the validity of Girard's model.

It therefore becomes impossible to consider the potential validity of other models of subjectivity or to have one's certainty in the absoluteness of one's own subjective formation relativized.

This does not mean that Girard's understanding of the proper way to form the subject is necessarily violent. There is no necessary link between certainty in one's own identity and violent repression of others, according to Connolly. But Connolly worries about an imagined unity of the subject that acts as its idealized and unchallengeable origin or telos and presents the standard by which all other acts of self-formation are judged. Despite its foundation in a repudiation of violence, in Girard's case, Connolly fears that the very idealization of a unified subject has the potential of feeding fear and resentment and creating a context in which violence, in both subtle and obvious forms, is a possibility.

An example of this tendency may be found in a recent interview Girard gave regarding apocalyptic thinking and 9/11.[36] In this interview Girard interprets 9/11 as an event that is indicative of a fundamental difference between Christian and Muslim understandings of violence. Girard claims that Islam, as an "archaic religion," has "many aspects of the Biblical religions minus the revelation of violence as bad, as not divine but human; it [Islam] makes violence totally divine."[37] Girard goes on to argue that the conflict between the West and Islam is more significant than the conflict that occurred between the West and the Soviet Union, which he argues was a conflict "within humanism." It will be increasingly recognized, however, "that the fight is really between Christianity and Islam, more than between Islam and humanism" and he further clarifies this by agreeing with the statement suggested by the interviewer that the conflict is "between the consciousness that violence is human and the consciousness that violence is divine" and that "with Islam I think the opposition [between these two consciousnesses] is total."[38]

It is not the point of this essay to dispute Girard's interpretation of Islam and its view of violence. That is an argument beyond my competence to address. What I would like to point out, however, is the way in which Connolly's analysis of the problem of an attempt to escape from political engagement in one's formation of one's identity can be used to understand the comments Girard makes in this interview. Girard's understanding of Islam seems to begin from a model of the subject whose wholeness is accomplished only by the realization that violence is fully human and in no way divine. This realization, attributed to the Bible and most fully to Jesus Christ, is the standard by which all attempts to be fully

human are judged. As noted above, Girard agrees that "the real human subject can only come out of the rule of the Kingdom."[39] The trouble with Islam is that it fails to come to this realization and therefore fails in its attempt to bring its adherents into genuine human subjectivity. How this is determined is not fully clear from the interview, but it appears to emerge from an analysis of the sacred texts and mythical and ritual life of Islam. As Girard states, "Since the Muslim religion has copied Christianity more than anything, it is not openly sacrificial. But the Muslim religion has not destroyed the sacrifice of archaic religion the way Christianity has. … Many parts of the Muslim world have retained pre-Muslim sacrifice."[40] Here the language of Islam as a failed copy or simulacrum of Christianity is explicit. And its political use is not simply to criticize Islam but to call us in the West away from what Girard terms "the weakness of our humanism," [41] by which he seems to mean the post-Christian West's secularism and liberalism.

Connolly's concern with this articulation of the modern political situation is not simply that it poses an inevitable conflict between the West, or more particularly Christianity, and Islam but that this conflict is necessarily asymmetrical. Islam is presented by Girard as a simulacrum of Christianity, as all other archaic religions are, and presumably the subjectivity of Muslims has the same relationship to the subjectivity of Christians. [42] This definition of Islam is not based on engagement with actual Muslims but on an analysis of Islamic texts and rituals that Girard assumes grant insight into the subjective construction of Muslims. This engagement is not encouraged by a model of subjectivity that posits a unity or wholeness of the subject coming only from a uniquely Christian insight. In fact, engagement with others, including Muslims, is finally reduced to criticism of the practices and myths that inform their subjective formation and attempts to persuade.

This articulation of the situation, of course, has important political implications, and these are indicated by Girard's implicit critique of the West. The conflict with an external enemy that 9/11 showcases reveals also an internal threat. The decline from Christianity to a 'weak' humanism in the West demonstrates an instability that Girard implies will not be able to withstand the external attack. Both of these threats together place the world in the "apocalyptic situation" that Girard claims is foretold in the Bible.[43]

Of course, it is the furthest thing from Girard's mind, and in direct opposition to the thrust of his thought, to move from this articulation of the international political situation to a

vindication of violence against external enemies or the suppression of an internal "fifth-column" of weak humanists. But Connolly fears that Girard's view can justify subtle, and not-so-subtle, ways of excluding, marginalizing and anathematizing others, and that these have the potential of feeding a resentment born of an inability to understand how these others can refuse what seems to some the only possibility for genuine subjectivity. Political engagement with those seen as either ignorant or stubborn in their refusal of genuine personhood is too severely limited to be genuinely political at all. And, although this is not his intention, Connolly suggests that it may be the result of his understanding of the human subject and its pursuit of wholeness.

A Girardian Political Ethic

A criticism of Girard inspired by Connolly's political thought censures what it sees as Girard's attempt to escape from the political and its ambiguity, messiness, and requirement that individuals engage with others. What this requires in response is not simply a blanket condemnation of Nietzsche's influence on contemporary attitudes towards Christianity but an account of the actual political practices that would emerge from a Christian renunciation of violence and how these would allow for genuine political engagement. This account would, ideally, provide guidance for avoiding the scapegoat mechanism, not simply with an individual transformation or conversion but with structures that, if they cannot themselves exemplify this transformation, can encourage and support it.

The attempt to frame Girard's contribution as tactical instead of strategic, as I argue above, is an important element of this project but not adequate in itself. It must be supplemented with an account of the particular ways for genuine engagement between political actors and not simply an inevitable conflict between authentic and inauthentic subjects. This does not require policy suggestions or the construction of a complete institutional framework but a description of the practices by which people would be engaged and an account of the ethos that would characterize these engagements. This would not force Girard to become a strategic rather than a tactical thinker but would give specificity to the tactics that are appropriate according to his thought. It seems to me that Connolly can both provide the justification for doing this and present an alternative that requires response, a more persuasive response than the claim that a Nietzschean rejection of an authentic subject and a stable morality is nihilistic or meaningless or inherently violent. If Girard does not come to

terms with these criticisms, he risks being vulnerable to the critique that he attempts to escape politics and erect a utopian and totalizing alternative in its place.

Girard's work does, however, contain resources for exactly this kind of work. Two particular statements that Girard makes in Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World have the potential to open up into criticisms of present political structures and to suggest alternatives that rely on genuine political engagement. The first is a reference to a Talmudic principle that Girard summarizes in the following way: "Any accused person whose judges combine unanimity [sic] against him ought to be released straight away. Unanimity in accusation is in itself a cause for suspicion! It suggests that the accused is innocent."[44] Girard interprets this principle as an indication that a Jewish culture formed by the Biblical texts understands and rejects the scapegoat mechanism and its potential to unite a society against a victim. But the principle could also be developed in important ways that Girard does not pursue. It appears to invite a criticism of the ways in which legal and penitential structures are implicated in the scapegoat mechanism. The aphorism to which Girard refers seems to suggest a radical critique of conventional understandings of how a justice system ought to operate and how we ought to understand concepts like guilt and innocence. Girard's work is peppered with allusions to a radical reorientation of our understandings of guilt, judgment and forgiveness,[45] but it is rarely clear what structural or systemic implications might follow from them. What would such a justice system, chastened by the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism and committed to a repudiation of violence and the radical forgiveness of enemies, actually look like? How would the act of judgment and the attribution of guilt operate in such a system? How would punishment or rehabilitation be effected? An attempt to develop a detailed account of such a system would force Girardians to confront Michel Foucault's depiction of these structures[46] in a more substantive way than dismissing them as fueled by suspicion and unwittingly indebted to the Christian concern for the victim.

A second example comes also from Girard's conclusion to Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World and involves Girard finding "in public and private suffering, in the anguish of mental patients, in the deprivations of the poor and in the rivalries of politics … [an openness] to the ironic reversal of the judgement against the judge that recalls the implacable functioning of the gospel law in our world."[47] Here, Girard calls for a genuine engagement with those who suffer, the mentally ill, and the poor, as it is in this engagement,

or, to put it in stronger terms, this identification, that a genuine understanding of justice and law can emerge. What is needed to support this engagement is an analysis of the structures that silence these voices, but also the suggestion of an alternative political structure for this engagement and not simply an alternative mythical or textual understanding of what victimhood is.

The point of bringing Girard into conversation with Connolly is that it can push Girard's thought toward the development of systemic and structural political alternatives chastened by an understanding of the temptations of the scapegoat mechanism. But Connolly's concerns can also bring a pressure against tendencies to view the only genuine human subjectivity as that defined in Christian terms and to measure all alternative models of human identity as failures to approach this ideal. This model of human subjectivity makes genuine political engagement difficult, if not impossible, and threatens to undermine the most promising aspects of Girard's theory and its possible contributions to political thought. It is here that Connolly's Foucauldian political sensibilities can help Girardians develop a political ethic that might give specificity to their criticism of the scapegoat mechanism.

1. 1. See, for example, the essays in *Politics and Apocalypse*, edited by Robert Hamerton-Kelly (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2007), as well as Wolfgang Palaver, "Hobbes and the Katechon: The Secularization of Sacrificial Christianity," *Contagion* 2 (Spring 1995): 57-74, and "Mimesis and Scapegoating in the Works of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant," *Contagion* 10 (Spring 2003): 126-148. See also Harald Wydra, "Human Nature and Politics: A Mimetic Reading of Crisis and Conflict in the Work of Machiavelli," *Contagion* 7 (Spring 2000): 35-57 and Jim Grote, "The Founding Murder in Machiavelli's The Prince," *Contagion* 5 (Spring 1998): 118-134.
2. 2. Peter Tijimes, "Desire, Technology, and Politics," *Contagion* 6 (Spring 1999): 85-95. The quotation is found on page 88.
3. 3. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990) and Willard M. Swartley, "Discipleship and Imitation of Jesus/Suffering Servant: The Mimesis of New Creation," in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, edited by Willard M. Swartley (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000), 218-45.

4. 4. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 22-23.

5. 5. Rebecca Adams, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion and Literature* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 23.

6. 6. See, for example, *Theology and Social Theory*.

7. 7. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 271.

8. 8. George Hunsinger, however, argues that a sacrificial reading of the atonement can escape Girard's claim that it is fundamentally violent if the sacrifice is understood, not according to a model of divine-human exchange, but as something that occurs within the Trinity itself. George Hunsinger, "The Politics of the Nonviolent God: Reflections on René Girard and Karl Barth," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 30-34. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 298-313. Girard later moved away from a relentlessly negative account of sacrifice "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice," (29).

9. 9. See, for example, a question to Girard in Rebecca Adams' article "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice," *Religion and Literature* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 26. Unfortunately, the conversation seems to take a turn away from this challenge and a full defense against this charge is never mounted by Girard.

10. 10. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 399.

11. 11. The history of Christian interpretation of the atonement mentioned above is one important example.

12. 12. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 399-400.

13. 13. George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 28.

14. 14. René Girard, "The Evangelical Subversion of Myth," in *Politics and Apocalypse*, edited by Robert Hamerton-Kelly (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 42.

15. 15. Carl Schmitt, "Apocalyptic" Resistance against Global Civil War," in *Politics and Apocalypse*, edited by Robert Hamerton-Kelly (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State

University Press, 2007), 69-94.

16. 16. Girard discusses the crises brought on by the homogenization of cultures in *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). See especially the chapter titled "Stereotypes of Persecution," 12-23.

17. 17. This is Girard's example. See *Things Hidden, since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 255.

18. 18. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 251.

19. 19. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 140.

20. 20. René Girard, "How Can Satan Cast out Satan," in *Biblische Theologie und gesellschaftlicher Wandel*, edited by Georg Braulik (Freiburg: Fs. N. Lohfink, 1993), 125-141.

21. 21. K. Roberts Skerret also focuses on a comparison between Girard and Connolly in "Desire and Anathema: Mimetic Rivalry in Defense of Plenitude," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 1, no. 4 (December 2003): 793-809. He focuses on Girard and Connolly's contrasting understandings of desire and relates these to their understandings of rivalry and anathema. My focus is on practices of political engagement found in Connolly but not in Girard.

22. 22. William Connolly, *Identity\Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 172.

23. 23. This can be seen in Connolly's article "Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (August 1993): 365-389 in which Connolly talks about the need not to liquidate ethics but to be ashamed of the transcendentalization of contingent identities.

24. 24. William Connolly, *Identity\Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 46.

25. 25. William Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 124.

26. 26. William Connolly, *Identity\Difference*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 12.

27. 27. William Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 133.

28. 28. William Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 64.

29. 29. William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 157.

30. 30. Connolly defends himself explicitly from this in "Debate: Reworking the Democratic Imagination," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (1997).

31. 31. Of course an important difference between the two lies in the implication in Girard's use of the term "conversion" that this transformation of the self is beyond the capacity of human beings left to their own resources. This is a point Girard makes explicitly in "The Evangelical Subversion of Myth" cited above (see note 14). This contrast should not be drawn too starkly, however, as Girard would certainly have an important place for the participation of the subject in this transformation and Connolly refuses to rule out the important place of moral sources outside the realm of the human. This is not to say that Girard's confidence that the source of this transformation is God (and specifically as revealed in Christ) doesn't present a significant difference between the two.

32. 32. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 199. Christopher A. Fox, ["Sacrificial Pasts and Messianic Futures," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 5 (2007)] also uses this quotation to interpret Girard as attempting to escape the political.

33. 33. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 199.

34. 34. Rebecca Adams, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion and Literature* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1993).

35. 35. William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 141.

36. 36. Robert Doran, "Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with René Girard," *SubStance* 37, no. 1 (2008): 20-32.

37. 37. Robert Doran, "Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with René Girard," *SubStance* 37, no. 1 (2008): 28.

38. 38. Robert Doran, "Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with René Girard," *SubStance* 37, no. 1 (2008): 29.

39. 39. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA:

Stanford University Press, 1978), 199.

40. 40. Robert Doran, "Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with René Girard," *SubStance* 37, no. 1 (2008): 31.

41. 41. Robert Doran, "Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with René Girard," SubStance 37, no. 1 (2008): 29.

42. 42. Girard recapitulates this construction of the relation between Islam and Christianity in an articulation of the relation between "genuine" Christians and false copies of Christian subjects when he calls the American South "perhaps the least Christian part of the United States in terms of spirit, although it is the most Christian in terms of ritual" [Robert Doran, "Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11," *SubStance* 37, no. 1 (2008): 31]. The most prominent reason for this appears to be the practice of lynching, which Girard calls "a kind of archaic religious act."

43. 43. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 253-262.

44. 44. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 444.

45. 45. See, for example, the chapters "Scapegoat" and "The Modern Concern for Victims," in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, by René Girard (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).

46. 46. See especially Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

47. 47. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 446.