War is Peace: Analyzing Sigmund Freud's and René Girard's Theories of Violence and Sacrifice

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Abstract: This essay will compare and contrast the theories of Sigmund Freud and René Girard, particularly those aspects dealing with religion, culture, and violence, to decipher the role both Freud and Girard allocate to religion in controlling societal violence. Although both theorists offer socio-cultural narratives, their conceptions differ considerably, offering antipodal viewpoints on the topic of religion and sacrifice.

Introduction

History provides powerful examples of the human tendency toward violence, both on the level of society and the individual. Sigmund Freud and René Girard present comparable theories to comprehend this endemic nature of violence that has occurred throughout history. As Freud's successor, Girard is heavily influenced by Freud's past works, having participated in a continuous dialogue with Freudian theory to distinguish his own work from that of Freud. Freud and Girard, then, hold distinct theories concerning violence in the early beginnings of society and culture, yet both share a common thread in their efforts to *understand* the origins of society, culture, and religion.

> According to Freud and Girard, the origins of culture and religion are found in sacrifice; therefore, deciphering the origin of culture and religion can shed light on the nature and origin of sacrifice. Sacrifice is about giving and receiving. In its earliest forms, this 'give and take' was commonly expressed through a sacrificial killing. It created a space where beliefs and tensions could be expressed through a controlled form of violence. Freud and Girard both conceived of an event at the foundation of the socio-cultural formation that preceded sacrifice. This event, known as the collective murder, occurred in a time and space where violence was without the confines of society, and it also became the derivative from which religion and culture would evolve.

Distinguishing himself from the vast majority of academics in the latter half of the 20th century, Girard concedes "…a more positive view of *Totem and Taboo* than most people do" (Girard 1987, 121). "I believe in this insight [collective murder], but I disagree with Freud on how to interpret it" (*ibid*). Although Girard is indebted to Freud's insights, he strives to supersede them. All Freudian theory is based in psychoanalysis – evolutionary principles of the mind, culture, and religion. Girard avoids Freud's psychoanalysis, though he chooses to participate in an "exegetical debate" with Freud's works to formulate his own theory (Mack 1987, 15). Freud attempted to understand the foundations for religion through incestuous instinctual desires, whereas Girard replaces the Oedipal complex with mimetic desire and rivalry (*ibid*). Thus, even though Girard and Freud consider sacrifice and violence as emerging from non-conscious processes, the reasoning behind their postulations differ.

This essay will explore the differences between Freud's and Girard's theories to further understand their ideas surrounding culture, religion, and violence. Freud was guided by scientific principles to decipher the evolutionary origins of religion, calling for science to replace religion. Girard, on the other hand, turns to Christianity in his search for origins, asserting the importance of Christian beliefs within modern society. At the foundation of their theories is a claim supported by an abundance of contemporary and historical evidence: contrived socio-cultural structures are easily destroyed through violence. Although their warnings against violence are analogous, their solutions are antagonistic. Thus, while it is possible to compare their theories, they lack the capacity to be fully reconciled.

Surrogate Victim or Scapegoat Mechanism?

Girard suggests scapegoat sacrifice is the universal foundation of socio-cultural formation, and the basis of mythology, ritual, and religion (1987, 106). Mimetic rivalry intensifies idiosyncrasies within communities whereas the surrogate victim (the scapegoat) unites members by displacing hostilities onto a single victim (Girard 1987, 126 & McBride 2003, 307). He does not consider the identity of the victim, rather, it is only important that the "victim genuinely passes as guilty" (1978, 169). Thus, the

essence of the scapegoat is to incorporate and channel disparity in order to dismantle difference (McBride 2003, 308). Girard argues violence against "a single individual is substituted for the universal onslaught of reciprocal violence" (1978, 169).[1] The surrogate victim channels mimetic rivalry onto an appropriated victim, that is, the scapegoat, who becomes a sacrificeable victim preventing "the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect" (Girard 1977, 4).

Similar to the persecution of criminals, Girard theories that endorsed ritual violence is justified by upholding the status quo of society (1987, 79). The underlying principles for both forms of violence – from the death penalty and persecution to animal sacrifice and blood letting – is to control violence. Girard understands this process as "purifying" violence, a method to "trick" violence onto objects lacking the capacity for reprisal (1977, 16). Underlying Girard's ideas is the notion that violence is infectious and must be managed with more violence – the disease is the cure (*ibid*). A fundamental principle of Girard's mimetic desire theory is that humans are capable of sharing an enemy, but incapable of sharing an object of desire. Girard's reasoning is that, unlike an object of desire, an enemy can be shared through its collective destruction (1987, 128), thus removing the threat of uncontrolled or mass violence.

According to Girard, displacement of violence onto a scapegoat is not a conscious choice, nor is it a known process (1987, 74). However, he is careful not to conflate this process with Freud's notion of unconscious processes, even though Girard's description of the scapegoat process seems synonymous with unconscious processes (i.e. unobservable to conscious awareness). Therefore, to distinguish his theory from Freud, Girard chooses to label the process 'nonconscious' instead of 'unconscious' processes (1987, 78). Still, Girard asserts that individuals involved are unaware and unable to realize the scapegoat mechanism, thus, in a sense, delusion is what makes the mechanism, or process, so effective (1987, 74 & 78).

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[1] Girard: "…any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat. Its members instinctively seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can easily be disposed of" (1977, 80).

Girard regards conflict as an inherent part of human social interaction and a by-product of mimetic desire. Thus, sacrificing a scapegoat is an essential process within the origins of community as it "interrupts" cyclical conflict and maintains society as a whole (1987, 121). Once the scapegoat is chosen and the sacrifice is performed, the scapegoat comes to represent the essence of the sacred in its transformation from victim to idol of reverence. "The sacred is the sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis" (Girard as quoted in McBride 2003, 309). McBride interprets Girard's notion of the sacred "[as] the sign of the transcendence of individuation and the unanimity of the community, the holy is grounded in the violent death of the victim that reconciles the community's members, one with another" (2003, 309). Furthermore, collective violence against the scapegoat dismantles "all memory of the past" (nonconscious). Due to this collective amnesia, a "sacrificial crisis" is never accurately described in myth and ritual: "Men cannot confront the naked truth of their own violence without the risk of abandoning themselves to it entirely" (Girard 1977, 82 & 83). Thus, the scapegoat prevents reciprocal violence and embodies an expulsion of violent urges from the conscious mind.

Similar to Girard's scapegoat theory, Freud proposed that sacrifice involves a surrogate victim acting as a channel to direct violent urges, thus, violent energy is released onto a chosen victim to prevent chaos. Influenced by Robertson Smith[2], Freud interpreted sacrificial ritual as easing social taboos and social norms, allowing individuals to engage in acts not normally permitted. Conversely, Girard considers sacrifice a necessary aspect of the mimetic desire process. Despite these differences,

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[2] The communal sacrifice of the clan animal, as described by Robertson Smith (1899), established bonds within the clan. Similar to Durkheim's (1912) later theory, Smith theorized the origins of communal emanate from sacrifice. Building on the belief that sacrifice was an act of killing by the entire community, typically forbidden under normal circumstances, Smith asserted that the clan members have a "conscious realization" they are engaged in a prohibited act, which can only be justified through the entire communities involvement (quoted in Freud 1913, 180). Thus, the communal killing and consumption of the sacrifice – "the unchaining of every impulse and the permission of every gratification" – is proceeded by mourning (Freud 1913, 181). Freud added that sacrifice is full of emotional ambivalence.

Girard and Freud claim sacrificial rituals are performative remembrances of the initial act of murder. For Freud, sacrificial rituals were performed to remember the primordial father; the sacrificed victim – whether animal or human – always acts as surrogate for the father. Girard, on the other hand, considers the scapegoat the focal point of the sacrifice. In its transformation from victim to sacred, the scapegoat becomes the object of remembrance; it is transformed into an object of respect, desire, fear, hostility, and finally, reverence. Furthermore, Girard rejects Freud's theory of sacrifice and ritual in stating that the process described by Freud is "purely personal", and not a collective process (1977, 101). However, Girard misconstrues Freud's thesis. Freud actually connected both the individual *and* the collective to ritual processes. According to Freud's notion of object relations, throughout individual development every male will develop the Oedipal complex when negotiating their relationship with their caregivers (i.e.: mother and father). Freud considered the collective aspect of ritual as relating to evolutionary antiquity and the origins of socio-cultural formation: overthrowing the despotic father of the primal horde and renouncing instinctual urges. Despite Girard's assumptions, then, Freud saw ritual as mirroring the negotiation of desires on both the individual and the collective level.

With respect to the origins of religion, Freud said that "god is in every case modelled after the father" (1913, 190). His hypothesis was that in all likelihood totemism became the first substitute for the father, and all successive religions came to evolve from an ambivalent relationship with the father. Totems established incest taboos and portrayed ambivalent attitudes toward the father to reconcile the guilt from patricide. It also allowed for the sublimation of murderous desires through totemic sacrifice. Freud discerned totemism and exogamy to be inherently connected. He interpreted religion as evolving from totemism and considered totemism the projection and expression of imposed moral restrictions deriving from incest urges (Oedipus complex) and its associated guilt. Originating from totemism, religion became an attempt to reconcile emotional ambivalence: ritual represents a remembrance and repentance of overthrowing the father. The history of religion, then, is nothing more than a replication of its own origins (Freud in Ricoeur 1970, 243).

Interestingly, Girard's interpretation of Freud's theory as a process of "individualization" is actually the opposite of what Freud proposed. According to Freud, socio-cultural origins are a process of *de-individualization*, an attempt to control narcissism: "All ties upon which a group depends are of the character of instincts that are inhibited in their aims" (Freud 1921, 140). He believed man experienced a constant desire to commit the act (overthrow of the father) – man is anarchic – and social institutions repress and dissuade males from engaging in patricide; thus, Freud interpreted religion as a commemoration of patricide. Girard accuses Freud of failing to understand the process of the surrogate victim as the *modus operandi* (1977, 197). "If Freud's explanation of sacrifice must be adjusted in favour of the surrogate victim, then we must assume that the same will apply to his account of incest prohibitions" (Girard 1977, 215). According to Girard, this collective murder is forgotten, though the creation of myths provides insight into the murder. Thus, religious and cultural practices are manifestations of the collective murder: "the sacrificial rite as a commemoration of a real event" (1977, 92 & 103). Although Girard is in accordance with Freud's ethnology, he rejects Freud's interpretation: "A fresh and constructive reading of the work should lead us to reject almost all the elements that psychoanalysts recognize as valid and to acknowledge the validity of those very elements that psychoanalysts reject" (Girard 1977, 216).

Sacrifice as a Social Contract

Freud's theory of patricide was created out of his own conviction that savages lacked the capacity for dissociation, or that they lacked the ability to substitute thought with action because they were unable to grasp the notion of the self-conscious (1913, 207). In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud concluded: "…though without vouching for the absolute certainty of the decision, that 'In the beginning was the deed'" (1913, 207). For Freud, the "deed", whether through patricide or dismounting the tyrannical father, involved a historical evolutionary shift in socio-cultural formation, including the origin of religion.

According to Freud, whether this discussion of patricide is literal or figurative, its importance lies in it giving birth to the

fraternal clan. Although Freud questioned whether the murder is "historically true" or "explanatory fiction", he nevertheless considered it a psychical reality: "the causal chain leading from murder to civilized religion and morality is unbroken" (Davis 2000, 195). Freud's patricide narrative functioned as an *unverifiable* "explanatory grid" (Davis 2000, 196). Despite this, Freud would continue the narrative by theorizing a shift from the primal horde state with a tyrannical father to a fraternal clan comprised of brothers renouncing their instinctual desires. This process is the birth of the conscious: the establishment of a system of codes, rituals, and beliefs denoting the origins of civilization (Davis 2000, 195). The establishment of incest prohibitions (taboos) through totemic organization (ambivalence) is the progenitor to overcoming the primal horde state of nature in the socio-cultural evolution of humans, and in the origin of religion (Freud 1913, 187).

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud posited the potential for civil war following the overthrow of the father. The fraternal rivalry was a decisive moment in his social contract theory, as it was the beginning of political society (Reiff 1959, 216). The brothers' desire for instinctual sovereignty, which led to the overthrowing of the father and his monopolization of the clan females, was followed by the implementation of inhibitions to prevent civil warfare, dominance, and the regeneration of the primal horde (*ibid*). Thus, the "essential element of civilization" is a social contract between the brothers and a renunciation of instinctual gratification (Freud 1930, 59). Patricide symbolizes the achievement of culture and the origin of the conscious. Furthermore, emotional ambivalence towards the father is a key component in the origin of society and culture beyond the primal horde (Freud 1913, 184). The removal of the father involved abhorring him, while at the same time feeling remorse and guilt. Taboos reflect emotional ambivalence: unconscious desires to transgress prohibitions are accompanied by a stronger terror of breaking the laws to achieve pleasure (Freud 1913, 44). Freud postulated that emotional ambivalence expressed through social taboos (the institutionalization of repression) is akin to the earliest forms of conscience. Ambivalence requires that individuals have the capacity to comprehend their actions and intentions, and taboos exist to rule the conscience by emanating guilty sentiments (Freud 1913, 90). Thus, the creation of taboos and their accompanying sense of ambivalence are preceded by

some form of conscious consideration, whether positive or negative.

It is important to note that Girard and Freud consented on two particular fronts. First, within the primal state humans would act without conscious consideration – actions were impulsive and without reproach. Second, in the earliest formations of society and culture, humans were eventually "governed" by restrictions (1987, 128). Despite such agreements, Girard rejects Freud's theory of emotional ambivalence. Girard replaces psychical processes with physical causes in his theory of mimetic desire and rivalry. The entire process of maintaining human civilization involves various forms of sacrifice, which are upheld and justified by sacrificing a scapegoat:

> …in all human institutions it is necessary to reproduce a reconciliatory murder by means of new victims. The original victim is endowed with superhuman, terrifying prestige because it is seen as the source of all disorder and order. Subsequent victims inherit some of this prestige. One must look to this prestige for the source of all political and religious sovereignty (Girard 1977, 53).

Symbolic patterns, including language and ritual, emerge from the initial mob murder and lessen the potential of mimetic rivalry to cause societal Armageddon (Girard 1987, 125).

Thus, sacrificial rituals are curative and preventative performances as they reinforce social cohesion by both controlling violence (preventing uncontrolled violence) and encouraging self-awareness (curing mob mentality): "In order to perceive the implications of an infinitely mobile mimesis we must realize that the boundless potentiality of violence can only be contained by the operation of the surrogate victim" (Girard 1977, 218). Socio-cultural order, then, is the process of differentiating individuals through the sacrifice of the scapegoat, and allowing individuals to formulate their own self-identity (Girard 1977, 49).

Controlling Violence

Through a literary account of mimesis, Girard argues the Bible is *the* resolution to violence: "The Bible knows about sacrifice and the sacrificial crisis" (1987, 22). He extends this belief in asserting that Judeo-Christian scripture reveals the essence of the

scapegoat theory: "The collectively murdered victim [of the New Testament] is the one who teaches…" (1987, 119). Furthermore, Girard claims Christianity has an ascendancy over all non-Christian religions; mimetic desire and rivalry are concealed throughout religions and literature, though the New Testament "discloses" this process (1987, 118 & 141). Such statements give the impression that Girard's mimetic desire theory evolves into an act of ecumenical proselytizing. He claims the survival of society depends on religion, that is, religion as described within the Christian tradition: "Only the transcendental quality of the system, acknowledged by all, can assure the prevention or cure of violence" (1977, 24). However, the following statement is intriguing: "[t]here is no society without religion because without religion society cannot exist" (Girard 1977, 221). It would seem that Girard is arguing for a pluralistic religious ethic, though in reality, when discussing religion and sacrifice, Girard is talking about Christianity. For Girard, the legitimacy of the scapegoat sacrifice is best represented within the Christian tradition. He warns against the removal of religion from institutions and ethical mandates, and regards the rejection of Christian supremacy over institutions and ethics as anathema (1977, 307). Girard denies evolutionary theory, arguing for the superiority of the surrogate victim theory as described in the New Testament (*ibid*). However, he argues: "[in] order to retain its structuring influence the generative violence must remain hidden; misapprehension is indispensable to all religious or postreligious structuring" (*ibid*).[3] In essence, Girard conveys a mass missionary regime to support the dominance of Christian teachings.

Girard's ideas of religion and the divine are antipodal to Freud's own ideas. Rather than attribute authority to the divine, Freud suggested it was more conducive to acknowledge the human underpinnings of socio-cultural existence (1927, 41). Thus, regulations would be recognized as being created for the prosperity of humanity:

> …it would be an undoubted advantage if we were to leave God out altogether and honestly admit the purely human origin of all the regulations and precepts of

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[3] This leaves Girard sceptical of contemporary legal processes because the structuring of the scapegoat is revealed.

civilization. Along with their pretended sanctity, these commandments and laws would lose their rigidity and unchangeableness as well. People could understand that they are made, not so much to rule them as, on the contrary, to serve their interests; and they would adopt a more friendly attitude to them, and instead of aiming at their abolition, would aim only at their improvement. This would be an important advance along the road which leads to becoming reconciled to the burden of civilization. (Freud 1927, 41)

Freud suggested by rejecting religion the calamities of civilization would largely diminish. He aimed to dismantle religion and reconcile the discontents of civilization through science: "…civilization runs a greater risk if we maintain our present attitude to religion than if we give it up" (Freud 1927, 35). Conversely, Girard claims religion will eventually reconcile violence and create a content civilization. Nevertheless, Freud proposed science as a methodology to discover the world: "We believe that it is possible for scientific work to gain some knowledge about the reality of the world, by means which we can increase our power and in accordance with which we can arrange our life" (1927, 55). He predicted the application of reason as the only way to maintain socio-cultural formations; science and reason were the ultimate system while mythology and religion represented dangerous illusions.

Freud speculated if the prospect of an afterlife was removed and all concentration was centered on earthly existence, it was likely a condition could be attained where "…life will become tolerable for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone" (1927, 50). The absurdities of religious doctrines must be gradually removed from civilization and replaced by intellectual advancement, for "…we have no other means of controlling our instinctual nature but our intelligence" (Freud 1927, 48). This was achieved through an "experimental" process of "*education to reality*" (Freud 1927, 49). Perhaps it is possible that Freud's theory on earthly existence – an education to reality – is a plausible solution for reducing suffering and violence.

Conclusion

In discussing the primal murder, Girard chooses to disassociate from Freud's work. Freud attempted to construct the origins of religion through its socio-cultural history, whereas Girard concerns himself with the "nature of mythology". In his choice to focus on a "generative principle", Girard casts away any desire to form historical insights (1987, 89). Furthermore, while Freud accepted his theory of primal murder as mere postulation, Girard conceives his theory "to be a theory of something; indeed, he wants it to be a theory of everything" (Davis 2000, 202). Although Freud yearned for his theory to be true, he admitted it was a "Just-so" narrative, a perception after the fact attempting to decipher the past (1921, 122). Therefore, the power of *Totem and Taboo* is not its historical validity, but its function as an "organizing hypothesis", a process of Freud's systematization of psychoanalysis (Davis 2000, 198). Girard is averse to competition: "he wants his version of sacrifice to be more firmly grounded, a revealed and revelatory truth of unimpeachable validity" (Davis 2000, 203). As a result, his texts become self-verifying. Notwithstanding his denial of the link between fiction and theory, Girard becomes the victim of his own narrative – he is both the victim and the hero of scapegoating – a martyr imbued with knowledge that others lack and fail to comprehend. Davis considers whether Girard actually has a desire to become a prophet (2000, 201).

While Freud's theories may not be fact – and there is certainly no shortage of critics to support this – he opened a forum for questioning, testing, and revising his theory in accordance with the general trend of scientific endeavours. Girard, on the other hand, argues the truth has already been revealed, and it is up to others to learn the truth or suffer the consequences. Girard is a "theoretical realist", a "pre-post modern thinker" (Davis 2000, 201). He wants to eliminate the possibility that his theory may lack validity by "anchoring his theory in a bedrock of truth" (Davis 2000, 202). Thus, Girard treats Freud's perspective as misguided, replacing Freud's errors with his own accurate vision of the truth. In a way, Girard commits patricide in his desire to become the father and remove Freud from his dominant position as a radical theorist largely influencing modern western thought.

Girard vindicates Christianity, including Christian (scapegoat) violence, instead of engaging in a critical analysis of

how to placate the human tendency for violence. He denies there can be peace without Christianity, though ironically, Girard claims that for peace to exist there must be some form violence: "Violence is the heart and secret soul of the Sacred" (1977, 41). Nonetheless, he claims sacrificial violence is "arbitrary" and inexact (1977, 41). Propagating inexact-sacrificial practices of violence could act as a catalyst for uncontrollable violence. Furthermore, Girard rejects humanism, claiming it to be an illusory approach assuaging violence: "we must acknowledge mankind's thorough dependence on religion" (1977, 218).

Freud deconstructed the human desire and propensity for violence, and conceptualized society as having originated from violence, though tools would have eventually replaced brute muscular strength: "the winner was the one who had the better weapons or who used them the more skilfully" (Freud 1932, 204). With the advent of weapons, Freud conceived "intellectual superiority" replacing brute strength. Nevertheless, the ambition of violence remained the same: to eradicate the other (Freud 1932, 204). According to Freud, the desire for violence, that is, the desire to dominate and become a tyrant remains *ad infinitum* (1932, 205). The purpose of the community is to control, organize, maintain, and regulate individuals in order to achieve some form of equilibrium. Freud claimed the only way to control violent urges was through rationalism and nurturing *uber mensch*, which essentially described the process of overcoming unconscious desires through conscious thought. This process involves a "cultural transformation of individuals", and requires individuals to overcome and suppress their (anti-social) desires to protect and maintain societal equilibrium (Freud 1932, 206). Freud described this is an ongoing process that necessitates a continuous and delicate balance between justice and power (1932, 203).

Endeavours to regulate violence are vital, not only for the preservation of society and culture, but for the preservation of humanity. Christianity has a history of violence, though the same goes for many other religions and non-religious movements. Girard defends Christianity, though he ignores its historical background, thus he is unable to put forth a more holistic theory of many shared answers and possibilities. As Girard argues to protect the (Christian) status quo, Freud's psychoanalytic theory strived to understand the biological rootedness of violence through scientific principles, offering a

response and methodology to control, prevent, and appease violent urges. Thus, Girard's work reflects Orwell's dictum in *1984* "War is Peace", whereas Freud attempted to defeat this maxim and overcome the adage, "Ignorance is Strength."

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