

Violence and Non-Violence: French Catholic Writers between the Mimetic Crisis and the Crucified

Brian J. Sudlow

University of Reading

This article explores the hypothesis that using René Girard's literary and anthropological theories of mimesis, violence, and Christianity to analyse some of the works of the French Catholic literary revival could challenge interpretations which have hitherto characterized such writings as 'reactionary'.

A preliminary exploration of Girard's theory traces its three main branches. Girardian mimesis redefines desire as essentially imitative in nature; the scapegoat mechanism describes a cathartic process which provides the resolution of mimetic conflict through the religious victimization of some individual or group; the Gospel alternative to the scapegoat stems from Girard's rereading of the Bible in which he finds non-violent solutions for mimetic conflict.

*These theoretical tools are then applied to Paul Bourget's novel *Le Sens de la mort* (1915) and Georges Bernanos's political pamphlet *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* (1938). Bourget's novel presents a clear case of mimetic conflict. Jealous of an apparent rival, an older man tests his young wife's love in a suicide pact. His apparent rival undermines this hostility by sacrificing his genuine but controlled affection for the older man's wife. Bernanos's pamphlet depicts the ills of French and Spanish conservatives, lamenting their mimetic cupidity and attacking the nationalists' involvement in the Spanish Civil War as an outbreak of mimetic violence. He proposes the espousal of Franciscan poverty as a cure for mimetic cupidity and the rediscovery of evangelical childhood as a cure for mimetic violence.*

The discoveries made by undertaking a Girardian reading of these works suggest the potential for a more comprehensive Girardian rereading of the French Catholic literary revival to challenge our understanding of their reactionary character. They also point to new sources and perspectives from which to explore Girardian paradigms.

In the conclusion of *Les Origines de la culture* René Girard answers certain criticisms made in Régis Debray's *Le Feu sacré* against Girard's theory of desire and its evangelical resolution.¹ Notably, Girard attacks Debray's assumption that '*si un raisonnement est, si peu que ce soit, peu importe pour quelles raisons, favorable au christianisme, il ne peut pas être scientifique*' [if an argument is favourable to Christianity, no matter how little and regardless of the reason, it cannot be scientific].² Girard associates Debray with a tradition of secularist

¹ René Girard, *Les Origines de la culture* (Paris: Hachette, 2003); Régis Debray, *Le Feu Sacré: fonctions du Religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

² Girard, *Les Origines de la culture*, p. 265. All translations in this essay are by the author.

anthropology which goes back to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France.³ This tradition generally saw Christianity as one religious myth among many, and correlates with other intellectual trends of the period, including positivism and scientism, which often exhibited hostility to the Christian religion.⁴

By complaining, however, about anthropologists' attitudes to Christianity, Girard joins a line of French Catholic intellectuals who, since the late nineteenth century, have reacted against the constraints placed on the Gospel by secular ideologies. From the novels of Léon Bloy and J.K. Huysmans to the poetry of Paul Verlaine and Francis Jammes, from the pamphlets of Charles Péguy and Georges Bernanos to the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel and Jacques Maritain, the history of the period is awash with Christian reflection on the ideological dilemmas of which secularizing reforms in France were but the political denotation. These writings have rightly been seen as a reactionary *cri de coeur*, violently rejecting the secular worldview.⁵ Might it be possible, however, to find among these Catholic intellectuals a resolution to problems of desire and conflict which correlates with Girard's discovery of a paradigm of non-violence in the Christian scriptures?⁶

To explore this hypothesis, I propose to consider two contrasting works – Paul Bourget's *Le Sens de la mort* (1915) and Bernanos's *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* (1938) – and to analyse them through the tensions which Girard has identified between mimetic violence and the Gospel.⁷ First, however, we must review the principal lines of Girard's theory of mimesis, scapegoating, and the Gospel to set the analysis of Bourget's and Bernanos's works in a theoretical context.

Girard's thought can be schematized into three main areas: literary commentary, cultural anthropology, and biblical studies. In opposition to the Romantic tradition in which desire expresses the autonomous and authentic self, Girard's initial theoretical insight was that desire is mimetic or imitative. In his 1961 work *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* he argued that a particular canon of Western literature, including works of Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, and Proust, demonstrates that a subject's desires are aroused by the mediation

³ See, for example, Emile Bournouf, *La Science des religions* (Paris: Delagrave, 1885); and Emile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Alcan, 1912).

⁴ Juliette Lalouette, *La Libre Pensée en France 1848-1940* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997). Of course, some positivists, such as Charles Maurras, believed in the social utility of Christianity (see *La Politique religieuse* (Paris: Nouvelle librairie nationale, 1912)).

⁵ See Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The French Catholic Literary Revival 1870-1914* (London: Constable, 1966).

⁶ See René Girard, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (1978; repr. Paris: Grasset, 2007).

⁷ Paul Bourget, *Le Sens de la mort* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1915); Georges Bernanos, 'Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune', in *Essais et écrits de combat*, ed. by Jacques Chabot and Michel Estève, 2 vols. (1938; repr. Paris: Gallimard, 1971), I, pp. 351-575.

of a model whose own desires indicate the desirability of an object.⁸ The model could be a person or indeed an institution capable of possessing some object or desirable quality; for Girard, the model's possession/desire of the object is imitated by the subject. In this triangulation of subject, object, and model the distance between subject and model is crucial. In older, hierarchical societies, social or cultural barriers provided what Girard calls external mediation, preventing conflict between subject and model. In the modern period, the decline of such barriers leaves internal mediation as the only obstacle to acquisitive mimesis (where the object desired is something concrete or material) or metaphysical desire (where the object desired is something abstract).

From these literary beginnings, Girard drew conclusions which passed into the field of social and cultural theories. In *La Violence et le sacré* Girard meditated on the rivalry that arose from mimetic desire, and began to understand ordinary social mechanisms, notably taboos and sacrifices, as ways of controlling the aggression provoked by mimetic rivalry.⁹ Still, the escalation of that rivalry can lead to a crisis in which rivals become reflections of each other, fixed in reciprocal hostility, their true selves distorted and exhibiting indifferently human and bestial characteristics. Ultimately, Girard argued that this aggression was not solved historically by contractual models of society, but rather by a process of scapegoating, restoring the unity disturbed in mimetic conflict by pouring communal aggression onto a selected victim, or by directing that aggression against an exterior enemy. The new harmony experienced after the scapegoat is rejected leads the community to treat the scapegoat as something evil and good; evil because deserving of victimization, good because a resolver of the mimetic crisis. Fundamentally, then, Girard's theory makes violence the 'secret heart and soul of the sacred' as his chief English commentator, Michael Kirwan, has observed.¹⁰

In the 1970s, nevertheless, while rereading the Bible Girard perceived a different cultural pattern which led him to the conclusion that Christianity, and notably the Gospels, represents a discarding of the scapegoat mechanism. Such was the argument of his 1978 work *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*. The drama of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is an acting out of the scapegoat mechanism, but the violence is overcome by God's refusal to work revenge; in this model the way of harmony lies not in violence, nor in the

⁸ René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961).

⁹ René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (1972; repr. Paris: Hachette, 2008).

¹⁰ Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), p. 41.

theodicy of a persecuting deity, but in the self-sacrificing death and resurrection of the Crucified, representing a non-retaliatory resolution of the mimetic crisis.¹¹

Girard's theories raise many questions. For example, does violence always arise from mimesis, and if not, how can it be explained otherwise? Are all victims social scapegoats and why might persecution tend to induce further persecution rather than resolution? Finally, if the Gospels carry the solution to mimetic violence, why has the history of Christianity been marked by violence at various stages? Debate ranges widely on these and other issues.¹² My interest in Girard's theory, however, lies not in answering such queries but in the light it can potentially cast on the French Catholic literary revival referred to at the beginning of this essay.

Bourget and Bernanos are two writers and intellectuals who can be considered representative of the French Catholic literary revival in the twentieth century.¹³ Bourget tends to reflect the intellectualized branch of this revival, in line with the philosophical traditions of Joseph de Maistre or Louis de Bonald.¹⁴ Bernanos can be taken as an example of the strongly imaginative, non-intellectual, or polemical branch, exhibiting the passion of a Léon Bloy or a Charles Péguy.¹⁵ Both Bourget and Bernanos are of course recognized as distinguished Catholic authors, but in what ways can their writing be seen in the light of the Girardian theories outlined above? Moreover, what is the advantage of seeing them in that light? To begin sketching an answer to such questions, I propose here to analyse one work by each of these authors: Bourget's novel *Le Sens de la mort* and Bernanos's political pamphlet *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune*.

Mimetic rivalry appears to be at the heart of the tensions driving Bourget's 1915 novel *Le Sens de la mort*. Bourget places these tensions in the context of World War One and in a quasi-love triangle between Michel Ortègue, a brilliant surgeon, director of a clinic and an ideological secularist; Catherine, Ortègue's wife and twenty years his junior; and Ernest Le Gallic, a soldier, a devout Catholic and cousin of Catherine. Gallic is secretly, and in spite of

¹¹ In this work, Girard argued that Christ's death was not sacrificial, but he modified this theory through his dialogue with Swiss theologian Raymund Schwager S.J. to embrace a concept of Christ's crucifixion which was sacrificial but not punitive (see Raymund Schwager, *Jesus im Heildrama: Entwurf einer biblischen Erlösungslehre* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1992)).

¹² See Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, pp. 87-111.

¹³ While the two works analysed here date from the twentieth century, the French Catholic literary revival proper stretches back into the nineteenth century, encompassing writers active in the 1880s and 1890s. Griffiths's study only goes up to the First World War, but he alludes to various writers, including Bernanos and François Mauriac, whose creative periods stretch into the interwar years and beyond.

¹⁴ See Paul Bourget, *Pages de critique et de doctrine* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1912).

¹⁵ See Bernanos, *Essais et écrits*. For a discussion of the intellectual and non-intellectual trends among French Catholic writers, see Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, pp. 20-22.

his best efforts, in love with Catherine, and, subsequently, during his military service on the Western Front he is badly injured and evacuated to Paris where he is treated at Ortège's clinic. This circumstance brings the three protagonists before the watchful eye of Dr Marsal, who narrates their tragic story.

Bourget was less polemical than some French Catholic authors, but behind this plot, and behind so many of Bourget's novels, run incessant hostilities between secularism and Catholicism. For example, the ideology of scientism which makes everything subject to science's power of explanation resembles religion mimetically in promising a total explanation of the world. The dynamics of this conflict are epitomized by Ortège who points out that while the pivotal point of religion is '*la destinée de la personne humaine*' [the destiny of the human person], the pivotal point for science (or rather, scientism) is '*la conception de la loi sans finalité*' [the conception of law without finality].¹⁶ This tension provides as it were the background against which the principal characters of this novel enter into romantic hostilities.

When these hostilities break out, however, they are directed mainly by Ortège at Le Gallic and Catherine. Early in the novel Ortège is merely annoyed by Le Gallic's visit to the clinic, but when Le Gallic comes back later as a patient Ortège's hostility develops into hatred as he correctly divines Le Gallic's love for Catherine.¹⁷ Yet Ortège's worst violence is directed at himself and at Catherine. Diagnosed secretly with terminal pancreatic cancer, Ortège thinks about killing Catherine to take her with him to the grave, but, ultimately, they make a suicide pact in which Catherine's death will provide the aging, insecure Ortège with a guarantee of her love.¹⁸ A contagion of violence – which, according to Girard, arises in the context of unresolved desire – breaks out, as Catherine embraces self-destruction as a means of solving the dilemma of disunity arising from Ortège's death. Catherine becomes a Girardian scapegoat whose life (as evil) means disunity with the dying Ortège and whose death (as good) will bring about unity in what they both believe is the sleep of non-existence.

As Ortège's hostility to Le Gallic reaches its height, however, Le Gallic offers a different resolution to Ortège's hostility as he swears on his death bed he has fought every feeling of attraction to Catherine. This claim overcomes the hostility of Ortège and promises to recover the unity of their erstwhile friendship, not through violent rivalry but through Le

¹⁶ Bourget, *Le Sens de la mort*, pp. 175-76.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

Gallic's self-sacrifice.¹⁹ Likewise, convinced of the self-centredness of a suicide pact in a time of war, Catherine steps back from offering herself as a scapegoat as she realizes her union with Ortègue is not the only source of meaning in her life. Ortègue then commits suicide alone.

Bourget's 'sense of death' presents two rival options: a scapegoating or violent action which leads to meaningless isolation, or a self-sacrificial death, akin to that of the Crucified, which leads to purposeful unity. Thus Dr Marsal concludes, '[i]l a vécu dans la communion. Il est mort dans la communion. Il repose dans la communion. Mon pauvre maître reste solitaire dans la mort' [[Le Gallic] lived in communion. He died in communion. He rests in communion. My poor master [Ortègue] remains solitary in death].²⁰ Catherine's refusal to accept the exigencies of scapegoating appears also as a rejection of violence, even if Ortègue chooses to answer this by his own suicide. The fact that Le Gallic must in a sense do violence to himself by restraining his own desires correlates with the Girardian insight that avoidance of social violence requires in fact individual renunciation.

In Bourget's *Le Sens de la mort*, Le Gallic's self-sacrifice represents a non-violent solution to Ortègue's hostility. In this way it presents us with a paradigm similar to that underpinning Bernanos's *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune*. This pamphlet was written by Bernanos during the Spanish Civil War, which he had witnessed firsthand in Majorca. A French Catholic monarchist and man of the Right, Bernanos initially supported Franco's *pronunciamento*, but on seeing the violence which accompanied the nationalists' campaign on Majorca, he felt disgust not only for the bestial atrocities before him, but also, and perhaps more importantly, for the French conservatives who were potential imitators of Franco's forces. Indeed, in *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* the Spanish Civil War provides an ongoing parable for the political ills of the French Right. Bernanos's analysis thus raises two questions: to what extent were the actions of the Spanish nationalists and French conservatives a sign of mimetic rivalry and violence, and what solution did Bernanos see to the violent dilemmas thus created?

Reflecting the Girardian theory of rivals, Bernanos's analysis identifies the polarization characterizing the hostility of French and Spanish conservatives to the communists: it is a case of the 'us' and 'them' of mimetic rivalry. Bernanos attributes such polarity to the conservatives' stupidity but instantly connects their stupidity to a love for violent destruction, facilitated by advances in armament technologies: '*En attendant la*

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 270.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 313.

machine à penser qu'ils attendent, qu'ils exigent, qui va venir, ils se contenteront très bien de la machine à tuer, elle leur va même comme un gant [As they wait for the thinking machine, which they expect, which they demand and which will come, they will make do very happily with the killing machine, which suits them just like a glove].²¹ The Girardian process of monstrous doubles in which rivals become a horror to each other corresponds to Bernanos's description of the Spanish nationalists who institute a blind 'Terror' to persecute their communist rivals (their Girardian model) who contend with them over Spanish sovereignty (the object desired).²² Bernanos's immediate fear for the French Right is that they will mimic the Spaniards' violent tactics. His ultimate fear is that this spectacle of violence could unleash '*la Guerre absolue*' [absolute war] in which the most predatory sentiments – vanity, cupidity, envy – would express the basest forms of collective life.²³ In other words, Bernanos's 'absolute war' represents a society in which the forces of mimetic rivalry are the constant violent driving force guiding the dynamics of the community through acquisitive conquest. Here, there appears in fact to be no scapegoat mechanism available.

Bernanos does, however, offer the French Right – and by extension the Spaniards – another option. In his view, among the causes of the war is a neglect of Christ's love of poverty. The grasping pursuit of money and profit which drives capitalist society (through cupidity and envy) and feeds the fires of socialist revolution is both a symptom of its own abandonment of Christianity and a sign of the necessary cure. Thus Bernanos proposes two solutions: as a cure for mimetic desire, the example of the champion of poverty St Francis of Assisi, and as a cure for mimetic violence, the way of St Theresa of the Child Jesus: '*[r]edevenez, donc, des enfants*' [become, then, children once more].²⁴ And he continues to explain what this Christian fight must now involve: '*[i]ls ont trouvé le joint de l'armure, vous ne désarmerez leur ironie qu'à force de simplicité, de franchise, d'audace*' [they have found the chink in [your] armour [but] you will not disarm their irony except by simplicity, openness and boldness].²⁵ Bernanos was avowedly a man of violence – as a student with the *Camelots du roi*, the street fighting foot soldiers of Charles Maurras's royalist league Action Française, he was censured by Maurras for trying to become involved in a royalist coup in Portugal – and his call for a revival of Christian sanctity appears to sit awkwardly alongside

²¹ Bernanos, '*Les Grands Cimetières*', p. 362.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 431-32.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

²⁴ The Carmelite nun also known as Saint Thérèse de Lisieux.

²⁵ Bernanos, '*Les Grands Cimetières*', p. 518.

his call for a renewal of French *chevalerie*.²⁶ Still, this *chevalerie* is not principally martial but moral. At its heart is the practice of honour which Bernanos saw precisely as the freedom-giving antidote to a society driven by vanity, cupidity, and envy. Like Bourget's *Le Gallic*, Bernanos's *chevaliers* will achieve their goals not through a violent grasping of power levers, but through fidelity to evangelical sources; not through a mimetic mirroring of their aggressors, but through an appropriation of the virtues of the Christian saints.

There are two advantages in reading these works from the perspective of Girardian theory. First, it suggests the possibility of reappraising the polemical character of some writings associated with the French Catholic literary revival. If their proclivities for polemical violence are justifiably noted, especially with regard to secularism and secularists, does the way in which they subvert aggression against secularism (by portraying evangelical non-violence imaginatively or rhetorically in their writings) not deserve equal attention? In this light, the label of 'reactionary' as applied to such writers may stand in need not of complete rejection but of careful revision.

Secondly, analysing other French Catholic writers from this perspective could uncover more literary adumbrations of Girard's theory of mimesis, scapegoating and the Gospel solution. If, after all, Girard's theory has identified important paradigms in culture, literature, and Christianity, can their presence in self-consciously Christian writings not be reasonably predicted? Moreover, might not their discovery further the elaboration of Girardian theory, not only regarding mimetic conflict but also regarding evangelical solutions, both paradoxically at war within one and the same subject as the process of internal mediation unfolds in Christian asceticism?²⁷ Since Girard was not consciously placing himself in this French Catholic literary tradition when he undertook his literary and anthropological investigations, it is all the more curious that his work casts light on, and is in turn illuminated by, some of its writings.

The conclusions arrived at through analysing Bourget's *Le Sens de la mort* and Bernanos's *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* are encouraging enough to invite further Girardian inquiry among the works of the French Catholic literary revival.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 573.

²⁷ Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, pp. 119-23.