

From scapegoat to god

The problem that interests me concerns the transformation of the scapegoat, or rather of the sacrificial victim, into a divinity. This process is fundamental in Girard's theory. The thesis that the collective murder that puts an end to the crisis makes the victim sacred plays a central role both in *Violence and the Sacred* and in Girard's interpretation of Christianity. At the heart of this process, according to Girard, is the fact that "the lynching is presented from the point of view of the lynchers themselves." (1978b; 188) Yet some commentators, including myself, who cannot be suspected of being opponents of the mimetic theory have analysed situations where the victim of a sacrificial crisis was not sacralised after its death, for example Dumouchel (1999) or Simonse (1992). In principle, mimetic theory contains a very straightforward explanation for this. The influence of Christianity, it will be claimed, is what explains that the victims of modern day sacrificial crises are not transformed into gods. Unfortunately, there are many reasons to suspect that in the two above cases this blanket explanation will prove insufficient. For one thing Cesareo Bandera (1985) showed some time ago that a Christian context is perfectly consistent with at least a partially sacralised victims. Another reason is that the two cases mentioned earlier, though they refer to facts that are relatively recent, come from cultures where the influence of Christianity is probably not very deep. One is taken from Japan and the other comes from the Bari of Nilotic Soudan. In both cases a scapegoat is put to death at the end of what can only be described as a sacrificial crisis. In both cases the lynching is clearly presented from the point of view of the lynchers. In both cases this restores some degree of order to the community, but in neither cases is the victim sacralised. This is surprising and requires an explanation.

In various passages and particularly in *Des choses cachées* Girard suggest that the mechanism might not always have been efficacious as far as making the victim sacred is concerned. Thus, speaking of the process of hominisation Girard says "Il n'est pas nécessaire de penser que la machine à éveiller l'attention est tout de suite efficace; on peut imaginer un nombre considérable de "coups pour rien" ou *presque rien*." (1978a:109) This is said in response to a question of J.-M. Oughourlian asking him if the victims of the mimetic crises which took place at the beginning of hominisation were already sacred. The two examples quoted earlier and others suggest that not only at the beginning of the process of hominisation is it the case that the scapegoat mechanism does not always lead to sacralisation of the victim. My goal is to enquire into the reasons why in certain cases the mechanism issues into the transformation of the victim into a god and in other it does not.

References:

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