# Twitter Thread by Will Martin



**Will Martin**
@will_wtj

## 1. I have just posted a short essay on the thought of René Girard, whose esoteric ideas have a niche but committed following of ‘Girardians’.

## To say that Girard’s ideas are enormous in their scope is an

2. The 2 big ideas at the centre of Girard's work are 'mimetic desire' & 'sacrifice of the scapegoat' from which he weaves extraordinarily rich insights

His profound understandings of philosophical, religious & literary texts repeatedly startle with their lucidity & seriousness

3. Mimesis is fundamental to being human - we copy each other in everything - but Girard’s key concern is ‘mimetic desire’, which sets off competitively reciprocal and escalating cycles which can become socially contagious and violent.

4. For Girard it is fundamental that mankind is “ethologically violent” because of this susceptibility to mimetic contagion.

5. Girard’s second big idea is that religion emerges in the form of rituals and myths around sacrificial scapegoating in order to reconcile violent rivalries and re-bond a community around the ‘othering’ of a victim.

6. Fundamentally, for this scapegoating to work as a stable myth, the victim must be perceived as guilty & deserving their victimisation. A narrative is created among the persecutors wherein their persecution is justified & which they are unable to see as falsely self-serving.

7. Girard sees all social order emerging as resolution of crisis in religious myths & rituals of scapegoating. “The community knows from its own experience that it is incapable of overcoming its divisions by its own means, incapable of patching together its own ‘social contract’”

8. There is a hermetic, fishbowl-like quality to cultural understanding which creates a discourse of ‘othering’ to bind society together, which those on the inside can only see in terms of being necessary or just, and were it not to be seen as such would render it ineffective.

9. The anti-Enlightenment, post-modern currents in Girard's thinking are no accident. Girard was part of the intellectual circles in France and the USA where ideas like phenomenology and post-modernism flourished, although he was soon enough an outsider.

10. While for Girard religions are not 'true', they perform a very real function, and effectively make society and culture possible. But they are intrinsically bound up with the scapegoating and 'othering' that is necessary to contain social violence.

11. The turn that Girard then made, and which accounts for his niche status, was to assert that the message of the Christian gospel, with its insistence on the innocence of the victim, represents a unique piercing of the veil of the persecutory myth-making of culture.

12. His readings of Biblical texts are richly suggestive. From the story of the stoning of the adulterous woman & the Passion itself he says "The crowd precedes the individual. Only he who escapes violent unanimity by detaching himself from the crowd truly becomes an individual"

13. Girard says that Jesus' teaching is "aimed entirely against mimetic contagion & violent escalation." In the Gospels "Satan is the whole mimetic system. Satan is temptation & rivalry that turns against itself. The mimetic system, in its eternal return, enslaves humanity."

14. The grand-ness of Girard's central claim is no less than the following: "The Gospels become the hermeneutical key that allows us to rethink both mythology and ancient texts as the progressive coming-to-terms of humanity with the violent matrix of the cultural order."

15. Girard was fascinated by Nietzsche, and in a sense his entire project sets out to be a refutation of Nietzsche, of whom Girard says that "he is so wrong that he is right" and that "he is always talking about the right subjects."

16. Nietzsche too was dismissive of the claims the Enlightenment made for itself, and understood how deeply Christianity was embedded in Western culture, and that it could not simply be detached from it.

17. In a diametric reversal of Nietzsche, Girard sees in Christianity the emergence of the individual as heroic exception to the crowd. For glorifying the myth-making of 'othering', Girard says in no uncertain words "Nietzsche is the only true, and the only, Nazi thinker"

18. But the uncomfortable idea at the heart of Girard's thought is that the progressive assimilation of Christ's message, & its 'uncovering' of the victimary principle, undermines the cultural narratives that have maintained social order.

19. Girard's profound & difficult answer is 'conversion': to "become aware that we are persecutors" & also choose "a Christlike individual as model for our desires." Conversion is 'heroic exception' that stands against "the instinct of imitation and the absence of courage."

20. Girard avowed he was Catholic & Christianity was not merely metaphorical. "I am in favour of an ontological understanding of God. However, this is a God with a pedagogical strategy, so to speak, starting from archaic religion and moving towards the Christian revelation."

21. Christian revelation of innocence of the victim for Girard is the unique ‘truth’ in human history, and therefore the development of the West has special sociohistorical status. Science & individualism emerged only there due to “desacralisation” of the real and of the social

22. Girard is clear that “modern society is facing a new experimental phase” as institutions & narratives hitherto foundational to civilization and prosperity whose efficacy has been based on ‘othering’ are challenged by the continued uncovering of the victimological principle

23. Girard takes very seriously the apocalyptic forebodings in the Gospels, and he sees that throughout human history ‘othering’ has always come back to re-establish order, often delivering an ‘elation’ of peaceful release in the wake of cataclysmic upheaval.

24. Girard observed ominously of the future: “The ‘remaining time’ is going to be more of the same increasing complexity, but there will be dialectical turns so astonishing that they are going to take everybody by surprise. There must be things in store.”