

MIMETIC THEORY (RENÉ GIRARD) – FIVE-PART VIDEO SERIES

The video series provides a preliminary understanding of human culture from the perspective of mimetic theory, which was first developed by René Girard (1923-2015).

I made the first parts to give an overview of some basic cultural facts. The later parts of the video series deal with mimetic theory's explanation of those facts, ending with the role of the Judeo-Christian heritage in making that type of explanation possible. The last part of the series (PART V) clarifies how the Judeo-Christian traditions result in either a radical atheism or a radically new understanding of "God".

PART I – THE SPELL OF THE SACRED

Part I – The Spell of the Sacred is a general introduction that clarifies how human communities organize themselves in reference to a sacred realm. It uses the example of female circumcision in the culture of the Ethiopian Dassanech tribe to highlight the interplay between taboos, rituals and myths. This reveals how the sacred is experienced as an ambiguous and violent reality that is eventually balanced by sacrifice.

Music for the first part of the video series comes from *Le Sacre du printemps* by Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), more specifically *Introduction* and *Cercles mystérieux des adolescentes* from the second part, *Le Sacrifice*. It seems only appropriate.

PART II – THE DANCE OF THE SACRED (3 VIDEOS)

Part II of the video series on mimetic theory (in 3 videos) further explores how cultural (sacred) taboos, rituals and myths are connected with violence and the (often violent) attempts to control it. Each chapter starts off with a concrete example from around the world.

After every example there are two appendices, one that connects the observed cultural facts with the animal world, and another that explores how traces of age-old cultural customs are present in secular cultures.

Scenes mainly come from BBC & National Geographic documentaries, especially scenes from *Dynasties* (hosted by David Attenborough).

Due to WordPress regulations, the second part had to be cut into 3 videos. Below is an overview of the content of every video.

Chapter I – Food in the Dance of the Sacred

The Tinku Ritual (Aymara People, Bolivia)

Appendix I – The Connection with the Animal World:

Scenes from *Dynasties*, Chimpanzee (David Attenborough)

Appendix II – Secular Cultures:

Restaurant Alchemist 2.0 (Copenhagen, Denmark)

Chapter II – Sexuality in the Dance of the Sacred

The Sagine Ritual with Donga Sticks (Suri People, Ethiopia)

Appendix I – The Connection with the Animal World:

Scenes from *Dynasties*, Chimpanzee (David Attenborough)

Appendix II – Secular Cultures:

Scenes from *Temptation Island 2019*, Kady & Johnny's Journey

Chapter III – Diseases in the Dance of the Sacred

The Sacrificial Ritual of the Khakhua-Kumu (Kombai People, Indonesia – Papua Western New Guinea)

Appendix I – The Connection with the Animal World:

Scenes from *Planet Earth* (David Attenborough)

Appendix II – Secular Cultures:

Baking Gingerbread Cookies

Chapter IV – Adolescence and Leadership in the Dance of the Sacred

Important Rites of Passage (Arnold van Gennep)

Initiation Ritual ULWALUKO (Xhosa People, South Africa)

Initiation Ritual CROCODILE SCARIFICATION (Chambri/Sepik People, Papua New Guinea)

Appendix I – The Connection with the Animal World:

Scenes from *Dynasties*, Chimpanzee (David Attenborough)

Appendix II – Secular Cultures:

Fraternity and Sorority Hazing

Tattoos & Branding

**Chapter V – Mimetic (= Imitative) Phenomena – like Twins and Mirrors –
in the Dance of the Sacred**

Ritual Sacrifice of Twins (Bassa-Komo People, Nigeria)

Appendix I – The Connection with the Animal World:

Scenes from Chimpanzees, Other Animals and Human Babies Confronted with Their Mirror Image

Appendix II – Secular Cultures:

Robotics, Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) and the Uncanny Valley (Masahiro Mori)

PART III – THE MYTHICAL REFLECTION OF THE AMBIGUOUS SACRED (3 VIDEOS)

The third part of the video series on mimetic theory (in 3 videos) heavily relies on the amazing, highly recommended work of the team behind *Crash Course World Mythology* and its video host Mike Rugnetta. There is also one video included from the Mythic Series of TEDEd, *The Myth of Prometheus* (Educator: Iseult Gillespie; Director: Léa Krawczyk).

This part of the series ends with excerpts from interviews with Joseph Campbell and René Girard. The Campbell excerpt comes from the 1988 PBS documentary *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* (with Bill Moyers). The Girard excerpt comes from a 1985 interview on Dutch television (IKON), on the occasion of Girard's honorary doctorate from VU Amsterdam. The 3 videos of *The Mythical Reflection of the Ambiguous Sacred* explore how the beliefs, convictions, taboos and rituals of *Part II – The Dance of the Sacred* are reflected in myths from around the world. It is remarkable, once again, that there are so many similarities between many different cultures.

Due to WordPress regulations, the third part had to be cut into 3 videos. Below is an overview of the content of every video.

Introduction

Chapter I – The Inhabitants of the Mythical Sacred: Creatures of Undifferentiation – An Overview

- The Beneficial or Violently Undifferentiating Power of Nature and its Elements: Air, Fire, Earth and Water
- The Process of Undifferentiation between Male and Female in Sexual Union and Androgynous Appearances (with Instances of Homosexuality)
- The Process of (Monstrous) Undifferentiation between the Human World and the Animal Kingdom
- The Process of Undifferentiation between Allies and Enemies, Old and Young, in Situations of Rivalry and during War
- The State of Undifferentiation in Mirror Images and in the Likeness between Doubles

Chapter II – The Universal Mythical Cycle of *Undifferentiation/Chaos/Crisis – Death/(Self-)Sacrifice – Differentiation/Order/Peace* in Creation Stories

- Sacred Cosmic Egg – The Food of Creation
- Sacred War – The Violence of Creation (Sexuality, Adolescence, Leadership and Sacrificial Cannibalism in the Mythical Dance of the Ambiguous Violent Sacred)

Chapter III – The Universal Mythical Cycle of *Undifferentiation/Chaos/Crisis – Death/(Self-)Sacrifice – Differentiation/Order/Peace* in the Sacred Creatures of Hindu Stories

Chapter IV – The Universal Mythical Cycle of *Undifferentiation/Chaos/Crisis – Death/(Self-)Sacrifice – Differentiation/Order/Peace* in Flood and End Time Stories

**Chapter V – The Universal Mythical Cycle of
Undifferentiation/Chaos/Crisis – Death/(Self-)Sacrifice – Differentiation/Order/Peace
in Stories about Ambiguous Deities in the Process of Dying and Rising**

- The Ambiguous Power of Goddesses
 - o The Story of Persephone (Greece)
 - o The Story of Pele (Hawaii)
 - o The Story of Baba Yaga (Russia)
 - o The Story of the Corn Mother (North America)
- The Ambiguous Power of Gods
 - o The Story of Adonis (Greece)
 - o The Stories of Odin, Balder and Loki (Norway)

**Chapter VI – The Universal Mythical Cycle of
Undifferentiation/Chaos/Crisis – Death/(Self-)Sacrifice – Differentiation/Order/Peace
in Stories about Heroes and their Journeys**

- Excerpt from Interview with Joseph Campbell
- The Story of Prometheus (Greece)
- Excerpt from Interview with René Girard

PART IV – THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF CULTURAL FACTS EXPLAINED (2 VIDEOS)

The fourth part of the video series on mimetic theory (in 2 videos) moves from the level of facts to the level of theory and hypothesis. Human culture is understood as the continuous attempt to establish order against real and imagined sources of violent disasters. Regarding early human culture, the question is how human communities started associating violence with so-called sacred beings (like ghosts and gods).

René Girard argues that instances of escalating intragroup violence, which threatened to destroy human communities, must have been resolved regularly in reuniting collective violence against a single victim. Because of the frequency of this event, humans started making associations between violence and its victims that animals close to humans – like apes and monkeys – do not make, although the latter do have similar experiences. Those associations eventually result in a scapegoat mechanism that forms the foundation for primal cultural customs, like sacrificial rituals and the belief in deities who demand those rituals.

It turns out that a bigger mimetic capacity in humans is the cause of both escalating deadly violence and its resolution in a "single victim mechanism". That is why the name of the theory that explains the origin and evolution of human culture from this type of event is "mimetic theory". The explanation of René Girard is corroborated, among others, by the impressive field work of anthropologist David Watts (Yale University). Watts spent years researching the largest group of chimpanzees ever found in the wild at Ngogo, Uganda. Watts observes:

"Chimpanzees are fascinating animals to compare ourselves to. ... They are more like humans than anything else alive on the planet. ... So what does this tell us about human evolution, and what does this mean for humans?"

To finish these introductory remarks, it is worthwhile to point out that part four also reveals what the opening picture of the video series is all about. It is a telling picture, for sure...

Due to WordPress regulations, the fourth part had to be cut into 2 videos. Below is an overview of the content of every video.

Chapter I – From Facts to Hypothesis

Chapter II – The Role of Mimesis in Human Life

- Learning through imitation; Mimetic Nature Allows for Mimesis in the Realm of Nurture (Box Experiment by Victoria Horner)
- Mirror Neurons and the Mimetic Capacity of the Human Brain
- Vilayanur Ramachandran on the Role of Mirror Neurons and Mimesis in the Course of Human Evolution

Chapter III – The Role of Violence in Human Life; from Mimesis to Rivalry in the Game of Mimetic Desire

- Excerpts from a 1985 interview with René Girard for Dutch television ("IKON")
- Excerpts from Rise of the Warrior Apes Documentary (Research by David Watts on the Ngogo chimpanzees)

**Chapter IV – The Hunt for Common Enemies and Victims;
from Divisive Mimetic Desire to Reuniting Mimesis of Enmity and the Scapegoat Mechanism
in Human Communities**

- Excerpts from a 1985 interview with René Girard for Dutch television ("IKON")
- Excerpts from Rise of the Warrior Apes Documentary
(Research by David Watts on the Ngogo chimpanzees)

PART V – THE GOSPEL REVELATION OF THE MYTHICAL LIE (2 VIDEOS)

The fifth part of the video series on mimetic theory (in 2 videos) examines how the Judeo-Christian Scriptures gradually reveal the lie of the scapegoat mechanism as the universal, ever-recurring foundation of human cultures. The Passion story of the Christ in particular turns out to undermine the mythical justification for sacrifice, and thus makes possible anthropological research like the one undertaken by scholars of mimetic theory and others.

A comparison between the Oedipus story and the Passion of the Christ highlights the crucial differences between "Myth" and "Gospel". Renowned Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (°1949) represents the radically atheist position as a possible outcome of those differences, while René Girard (and theologians like the Protestant Dietrich Bonhoeffer or the Catholic James Alison) represents a certain type of theistic belief as a possible outcome.

All New Testament fragments are read by Johnny Cash (1932-2003).

The epilogue recalls "the spell of the sacred" as described in the first part of the video series and points to the way Jesus, as he is depicted in the New Testament, breaks this spell. The profound implications of this rupture should become clear, even more so when fragments from the movies *Malèna* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2000) and *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) illustrate those implications concerning women as archetypal scapegoats.

Due to WordPress regulations, the fifth part had to be cut into 2 videos. Below is an overview of the content of every video.

Chapter I – The Basic Religious Story or Myth

- An Example of the Basic Religious Myth: The Story of Oedipus in the Tragedy of Sophocles
- Excerpts from *Oedipus Rex* by the Shakespearean Festival Players (Stratford Shakespearean Festival Foundation of Canada, 1957)

Chapter II – The Gospel Revelation of the Mythical Lie

The Myth about Oedipus vs the Gospel about Jesus

- Excerpts from a 1985 interview with René Girard for Dutch television ("IKON")
- Excerpts from "Johnny Cash reads the Complete New Testament: New King James Version"
- Excerpts from Slavoj Žižek *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* In Conversation with Jack Miles (Aloud, Library Foundation of Los Angeles, 2012)
- Excerpts from a 2009 interview with René Girard, *Insights with René Girard* (by Uncommon Knowledge with Peter Robinson)

Epilogue
The Future of Human Culture:
Apocalypse (The Violence of One Sacrificial Peace after the Other)
or
Kingdom of Love (The Peace of Non-Violent Conflict)?

- The Spell of the Sacred in Modern Society
 - Woman as an Archetypal Scapegoat in the Establishment of Sacrificial Peace – Scenes from Malèna (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2000)
- The Spell of the Sacred Broken by the Christ
 - Jesus and the Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8:1-11) – Scenes from The Passion of the Christ (Mel Gibson, 2004)