

# The legacy of Girard's thought for understanding modernity

Joel Hodge<sup>1</sup>

Grounded in mimetic theory, this paper provides a way of understanding the worsening problem of political and cultural polarization in modernity and the attendant rise of pseudo-religious dynamics and sacred categories. Contemporary polarization within domestic and international politics is usually centred on a distinctive modern phenomenon: a group's identification with selected victims, which often leads to the semi-sacralization of such victims and the contestation over preferred classes of victims. This paper outlines why the identification with victims is a driving force in modernity and how it results in semi-sacralization and contestation.

## Modernity and the victim

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, President Putin has made a series of impassioned defences of his country's military actions. The central claim of his defence was that Russia is a victim. For example, according to *The Dispatch*, Putin's address on March 16, 2022, "hit all the major points that Russian propaganda has been harping on for weeks: Ukraine is a Western 'anti-Russia' project, Ukraine was creating biological weapons with American help, Ukraine did not obey the Minsk agreements and was preparing a genocide, Ukraine was getting ready to join NATO and develop nuclear weapons, etc."<sup>2</sup> Since March, Putin has crafted an

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is not for distribution or citation without the author's approval. Since this is a draft paper, full citations are not always provided.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Fink, "Putin Plays the Victim Card," *The Dispatch*, March 18, 2022, <https://thedispatch.com/article/putin-plays-the-victim-card/>

explicit narrative of Russian victimhood – in areas of public life from politics to culture – with the West as primary oppressors and aggressors.<sup>3</sup>

On the other side, President Zelensky has claimed Ukraine is a victim of an unprovoked Russian invasion and even attempted genocide: “But they [Russian military] have an order to erase our history. Erase our country. Erase us all.”<sup>4</sup> Zelensky has used Ukraine’s victim status to motivate Western and international support as well as give moral licence for Ukraine’s military and political actions.

Whatever the truth of their respective claims, both Russia and Ukraine have taken the same rhetorical path: to claim victimhood in order to gain political influence, cultural supremacy, moral superiority, and religious righteousness. I want to take note of this discursive strategy because it seems so natural to us, modern people, that such claims to victimhood will command ultimate public sympathy and power. Claire Lehmann, the founder of the online magazine *Quillette*, even argues “a new 21st century victimocracy” has replaced liberal meritocracy, where claims of victim status have become a short-cut to power and prestige.<sup>5</sup>

Psychologists Kurt Gray and Will Blakey neatly summarise the modern situation this way: “there’s a reason why, from Vladimir Putin to Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela to Bashar al-Assad of Syria, we see totalitarian leaders claim they are under attack even when they are clearly the instigators of horrific aggression: psychologically, victim narratives work. ...Psychological

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<sup>3</sup> There is also a strong critique of Western modernity in official Russian justifications for the war, especially from Putin and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill. This anti-modernist critique centres on the deconstruction of modern morality and non-pluralist cultures. Such deconstruction has relied on a certain application of the concern for victims that has cast a “hermeneutic of suspicion” on strong or majority forms of culture.

<sup>4</sup> Agence France-Presse, “‘They (Russia) Want To Erase Our History... Us All’: Ukraine's President,” *NDTV*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/russia-ukraine-war-ukraine-president-volodymyr-zelensky-they-russia-want-to-erase-our-history-country-ukraines-zelensky-2798572>

<sup>5</sup> Claire Lehmann, “Cancel mob thirst for stolen status, not social justice,” *The Australian*, May 13, 2021.

research reveals that in many conflicts — from geopolitical war, to relationship arguments, to workplace fights — the victims have the upper hand.”<sup>6</sup> And why do victims have the upper hand? Because, according to Gray and Blakey, victimhood bestows benefits on those who claim it, especially by being able to avoid blame and gain recognition or supremacy for one’s own claims, particularly over against one’s rivals. As Gray and Blakey state: “It’s the moral trump card.”<sup>7</sup> Bill Gates similarly remarked that: “Everyone knows the problem with creating scapegoats.”<sup>8</sup> For this reason, no one questions the legitimacy of the victimhood discourse. One might question the claims to victimhood of certain parties, such as Putin’s Russia, but no one in modernity really questions the legitimacy and power of victim claims *as such*.

It is important, then, to be aware of the power that victim claims have in our modern context, particularly in relation to our purported rivals or enemies. Victim claims can easily become weapons to gain the upper-hand against enemies, rather than an instrument of freedom and charity. Former US President Barack Obama recently pointed to the status that victimhood claims bestow: “I think where we get into trouble sometimes is where we try to suggest that some groups are more – because they historically have been victimized more – that somehow they have a status that’s different than other people.”<sup>9</sup> These victimhood claims are powerful in forming the social imagination and mobilising people, which recent, prominent examples on both

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<sup>6</sup> Kurt Gray and Will Blakey, “Understanding Putin's Victimhood Narrative,” *RealClear Policy*, March 22, 2022, [https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2022/03/22/understanding\\_putins\\_victimhood\\_narrative\\_822915.html](https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2022/03/22/understanding_putins_victimhood_narrative_822915.html).

<sup>7</sup> Gray and Blakey, “Understanding Putin's Victimhood Narrative.”

<sup>8</sup> <https://time.com/5224618/bill-gates-hans-rosling-factfulness/>

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Reilly, “Barack Obama takes shot at cancel culture, rips ‘buzzkill’ Democrats in interview,” *New York Post*, October 15, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/10/15/barack-obama-blasts-cancel-culture-calls-dems-buzzkill/>. In these remarks, President Obama was speaking of left-wing politics, but victimhood sympathy and claims cut across the political spectrum and also define the right-wing political imagination.

sides of politics have shown.<sup>10</sup> In these remarks, President Obama was speaking of left-wing politics, but victimhood sympathy and claims cut across the political spectrum and also define the right-wing political imagination. There are recent prominent examples such as the global Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd's murder in 2020, the populist appeal of Donald Trump to the "deplorables" and the purported "witch-hunts" against Trump and his supporters, and of social justice movements and so-called "cancel culture" that are driven by concern for certain victims. There are also the grievance narratives against the West about victimisation alleged to have been conducted by the West which drive the claims of totalitarianisms and hyper-nationalism, such as jihadist terrorism and Russia's war in the Ukraine.

I am not suggesting that the rise and power of victimhood claims, including some of the ones I mentioned above, are inherently negative or destructive. Highlighting the place of victims or scapegoats in our social order is crucial for moral, cultural, religious and political development, as the consciousness of both the Holocaust and Gulag have shown.<sup>11</sup> What I want to demonstrate, albeit in a brief manner, is how victimhood claims are pervasive and dominant in modernity.<sup>12</sup> Victimhood claims, moreover, have risen to prominence in a relevantly short period of time (particularly in the modern Western context). Modern sensitivity to the victim contrasts sharply to antiquity. Ancient politics and forms of violence (across various cultures) were not

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<sup>10</sup> Such examples include the global Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd's murder in 2020; the populist appeal of Donald Trump (and other "far right" leaders) to the "deplorables" and the purported "witch-hunts" against Trump and his supporters; and of social justice movements and so-called "cancel culture" that are driven by concern for certain marginalised or oppressed persons. There are also the grievance narratives about victimisation conducted by the West which, in their worst form, drive numerous conspiracies and violent actions by terrorists, totalitarians and hyper-nationalists.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Y. Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 204-5.

<sup>12</sup> René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. J. G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 161.

motivated by moral outrage at victimisation but by such reasons as supernatural commissioning, individual and collective honour and glory, vengeance, or liberation from tyranny.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, modern public discourse is fixated on victims, whose claims usually ensure high levels of public attention and support, contributing to a special status, as President Obama suggested.

Yet, despite the widespread interest in victims and the polemics about “victimhood” politics, the origin and nature of this modern sympathy remains obscure in public discourse and even in academic circles. Some have attempted to fill the gap by connecting the sympathy for victims to the modern discourse of human rights and social justice. While this goes some way to explaining the modern popularity of victim-sympathy, it still begs the question about the origins and causes of the rights and justice discourse. It also fails to account for areas of the political spectrum where social justice discourse is less popular but which still utilize victim-sympathies, such as on the populist right. An application of René Girard’s mimetic theory can address this lacuna.

### **Modernity and mimetic theory**

By forensically tracing the historical, anthropological and theological origins of the modern preoccupation with victims, Girard provides essential insights into our modern cultural and political situation. He does so based on a comprehensive account of culture, religion and violence, based on his understanding of human desire as mimetic and the scapegoat mechanism

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<sup>13</sup> The latter reason seems close to a modern victim discourse, however scapegoating and persecution of innocent victims is not a major reason motivating it. Accusations of tyranny were personally directed against a ruler, often after his defeat, for unjust actions against a whole population or impiety against the gods. They were usually used to justify the ruler’s removal and the collective violence directed against him. See, for example, Nino Luraghi, “The Discourse of Tyranny and the Greek Roots of the Bad King,” in *Evil Lords: Theories and Representations of Tyranny from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, edited by Nikos Panou and Hester Schadee (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11-26.

as the means by which human culture was ordered and developed.<sup>14</sup> In particular (for the subject and aims of this paper), Girard provides an historical account for understanding the status of the victim in modernity. Girard (originally an agnostic) pinpointed the origin of this sympathy in the influence of the biblical religions (while others have analysed major world religions for a similar awareness). In contrast to the many traditional myths he analysed, Girard identified how the biblical stories repeatedly highlighted the vindicated victims of violence such as Abel, Joseph, Job, Isaiah's suffering servant, Susanna, the adulterous woman of John 8, and of course, Jesus himself. The legacy of the biblical religions has, according to Girard, unfolded slowly and haphazardly but inexorably, now reaching a critical level:

“The theme of human rights has become a major sign of our [modern] uniqueness as far as the protection of victims is concerned. Nobody before us had ever asserted that a victim, even someone who was unanimously condemned by his or her community, by institutions with legitimate jurisdiction over him or her, could be right in the face of the

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<sup>14</sup> Girard's theory is conventionally divided into three major parts:

- 1) that human desire is mimetic or imitated (i.e., it is stimulated by others, rather than spontaneously or autonomously produced for pre-determined objects), which has historically resulted in rivalry and violence over common desires;
- 2) that human groups use scapegoats or victims to resolve mimetic rivalry and violence in order to create and maintain cultural unity; and,
- 3) that the biblical revelation reveals the innocence of the victim and the nature of the scapegoat mechanism, and provides a positive and permanent way for fulfilling human desire in divine self-sacrificial love.

I won't reproduce an account of these insights as I assume they are familiar to most or all participants in COV&R. For a comprehensive introduction to Girard's theory, see Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004); Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2005); Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, trans. Gabriel Borrud, *Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013). For a short introduction, see Carly Osborn, *The Theory of René Girard: A Very Simple Introduction* (Australian Girard Seminar, 2017), <https://www.amazon.com.au/Theory-René-Girard-Simple-Introduction/dp/0646960423> and the Appendix and Glossary in the Bloomsbury book series, *Violence, Desire and the Sacred*. For an exploration of some critiques of Girard's theory, see Joel Hodge, *Resisting Violence and Victimisation: Christian Faith and Solidarity in East Timor* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 43-49; “René Girard and His Critics: The Theological Compatibility and Framework of His Early Mimetic Theory,” *Theological Studies* 82, no. 2 (2021): 259–284.

unanimous verdict. This extraordinary attitude can only come from the Passion as interpreted from the vantage point of the Gospels.”<sup>15</sup>

Modernity, according to Girard, is characterised by a positive concern for victims that has generally sought to resist and expose forms of victimization. It has, for example, underpinned the growth of an international legal infrastructure to protect human rights and dignity. It has also resulted in nations and groups re-evaluating their histories with regards to entrenched forms of victimisation. In the latter regard, Paul Dumouchel argues that modern nation-states, increasingly defined by democratic principles and human rights, have cultivated an internal “anti-sacrificial” space, which is meant to protect citizens from victimization.<sup>16</sup> These internal spaces have, however, included scapegoating of certain minority groups (e.g., racial, religious and sexual minorities), requiring expansion of the citizen category on a national basis based on an exposure of local victimisation practices (e.g., lynchings) and growth in a shared sense of equality.

Despite these efforts, rivalries and mob-like behaviours patently still persist in modern states and are even becoming more extreme (as Girard analyses in *Battling to the End*). While the positive concern for victims is distinctive of the modern period, it has made it increasingly difficult for cultural and social unanimity to be achieved. Mass violence based on global rivalries characterized 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, manifesting forms of national, ethnic, religious and ideological extremism. This escalation of rivalries in modernity, according to Girard, occurs because the sensitivity to the victim prevents a cathartic unification around a common scapegoat.

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<sup>15</sup> René Girard, *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 81.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Dumouchel, *The Barren Sacrifice: An Essay on Political Violence*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), xxiii-xiv and 78-9. In Dumouchel’s account, the modern state increasingly promoted forms of social justice and charity amongst citizens, who were treated as “friends”, and protected citizens from being victimised in its “territory.” In this sense, modern states, according to Dumouchel, are actually an effort at renouncing persecutory violence without fully renouncing defensive or external violence.

Instead, political, religious and cultural movements in 21<sup>st</sup> century, increasingly grouped in opposing factions, have become hyper-sensitive to victim claims and are even willing to fight over them.

Wolfgang Palaver argues that this consciousness of the victim can either combine with a non-violent mimetic spirit of forgiveness or a violent mimesis of acquisition and rivalry.<sup>17</sup> In the latter case, sympathy for the victim can mobilize large populations and result in groups fighting over their preferred victims. Such partisan rivalries have escalated under the influence of what Girard argues is the motivating inner force of modernity: “internal mediation”, an intense form of desire in which social distinctions and hierarchies no longer prevent imitation and conflict over common goods. These trends dangerously coalesce in intense partisanship and fundamentalist and totalitarian forms, in which escalating forms of violence are justified against perceived persecutors in defence of select victims.<sup>18</sup> The sympathy for the victim is weaponized to expel accused persecutors in self-righteous moral purges, forming the basis for a covert type of religiosity. It usually results in what appears to be “secularised” or “disenchanted” forms of sacred violence, not motivated by supernatural license but by moral and political absolutes. It is ideological, rather than explicitly religious or theological, by focusing on violent retribution and punishment for accused oppressors or victimizers. In this way, for example, modern warfare becomes distinctively moral in nature (rather than religious, political or ethnic) which, according to Dumouchel, provides the motivation for “*total wars*” that are undertaken to persecute and

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<sup>17</sup> Wolfgang Palaver, “The Abrahamic Revolution,” in *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*, ed. Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 267-73.

<sup>18</sup> For more on this point, I have analysed both state-based and religious-based forms of such totalitarianisms: Joel Hodge, *Resisting Violence and Victimisation: Christian Faith and Solidarity in East Timor* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012); *Violence in the Name of God: The Militant Jihadist Response to Modernity* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).



destroy the enemy in the name of protecting or liberating the victimized.<sup>19</sup> Dumouchel argues that the modern nation-state relies on this kind of common enmity towards enemies/foes who are defined as persecutors.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, such external violence has become less effective at uniting Western populations, especially following de-colonization, the Cold War and the War on Terror. The puritanical, revolutionary impulse of the modern victim-consciousness has turned in on itself in Western countries, especially in the US, where concerns with one's own historic and contemporary forms of persecution predominate. While this inward turn is causing modern societies to rightly investigate their historical patterns of victimization, it is also causing these societies to fragment and polarize along certain "victim-lines", making it difficult to maintain social agreement, bonding and harmony. Disputes over how to address historical victimizations and how to protect one's preferred contemporary victims results in partisan groups battling with each other in the cultural or political spheres. To counter this fragmentation, political ideologies and parties, social movements, nationalisms and totalitarianisms seek to rekindle forms of sacred transcendence through the struggle for "revolutionary justice" for their chosen victims, with their attendant narratives of devilish enemies, original sins and forms of redemption.

### **Modernity and sacred violence to defend victims**

Thus, in modernity, the sympathy for the victim has resulted in a double movement – what Girard called the "best of all worlds" and the "worst" – in which the victim is defended and protected, while also being the source of rivalry and conflict.<sup>20</sup> In the latter case, the concern for

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<sup>19</sup> Dumouchel, *The Barren Sacrifice*, 80. This kind of warfare is exemplified by the French revolutionary wars that spread to the whole of Europe. The nation-state that defends itself against such persecutors is uniquely justified in its defensive violence (as Girard points out in *Battling to the End*).

<sup>20</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, 165.

victims is being weaponised on unprecedented scale to expel accused persecutors in self-righteous moral purges (online and in-person), conflicts, terrorist attacks and wars. This weaponisation usually results in what appears to be “secularized” or “disenchanted” forms of sacred violence, not motivated by supernatural license but by moral and political absolutes centred on concern for the victim. It is ideological, rather than explicitly religious or theological, by focusing on violent retribution and punishment for accused oppressors or victimisers, which provides, for example, the motivation for “*total wars*” (physical or virtual).<sup>21</sup>

The targeting of victimisers or persecutors, according to Girard, provides the most powerful motivation for (sacred) violence in modernity based on a distortion of victim-sympathy.<sup>22</sup> The result of this attitude is two of modernity’s most distinct phenomena: totalitarianism (exemplified by the Gulag) and genocide (exemplified by the Holocaust). Both the Gulag and the Holocaust find their logic – a destructive logic – in the distortion of the biblical (or Abrahamic) revelation of the victim. They create identities that claim to defend the so-called “true” victims of modernity – e.g., the working classes or Aryan race – against perceived persecutors – e.g., the bourgeoisie, the Jewish people.<sup>23</sup> These purported persecutors are then attacked and victimised in turn, covertly creating a new mob that has powerful moral purpose and a fundamentalist self-righteousness.

In modernity, then, the victim has become the centre of a new (semi-)sacred category that, if deployed effectively, affords protection to those who can claim it, defeats counter-claims, and licenses exclusion or violence against those labelled as persecutors. In mainstream US and

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<sup>21</sup> Dumouchel, *The Barren Sacrifice*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, 180-1.

<sup>23</sup> Ironically, the Nazis manipulated the sense of hardship and marginalisation that the German people felt – appealing to their sense of victimisation – by seeking to exalt the Aryan race as superior and then sacrificing those who purportedly opposed, threatened and persecuted them, such as the Jews.

Western politics, semi-sacred movements in defence of select victims – whether in populist nationalism, identity politics, apocalyptic environmentalism, or censorship – have become more powerful and fundamentalist in recent years. This is leading to escalating conflict and division facilitated by an attitude that obsesses over conspiratorial persecutor-enemies. Facilitated by social media, groups across the political spectrum cannot decide on a common enemy or vision and are instead claiming special status for their preferred victims (justified by their ideological and moral arguments). Ironically, as each partisan group claims to be morally righteous in the defence of their select victims and their opponents as morally defective, they increasingly mirror each other. Thus, like any mimetic rivalry, the cultural battle over victims in modernity is moving to the fundamental level of identity, which at its worst becomes apocalyptic in outlook and scope (“all-or-nothing”).<sup>24</sup>

### **Does modernity sacralise the victim?**

Thus, the sympathy for the victim has had a contradictory effect in modernity: defending victims has disrupted sacred violence while also giving a new motivation for such violence. In the latter case, the targeting of victimizers or persecutors provides a powerful motivation based on the concern for victims. The victim even becomes the center of a new sacred category that, if deployed effectively, affords protection to those who can claim it, defeats counter-claims, and licenses exclusion or violence against those labelled as persecutors.

Nevertheless, while the sacralisation of victims in modernity has similarities to the divinisation of victims in pre-modern societies, there are important differences. In archaic cultures, Girard argues that the power of scapegoating violence is projected onto the victim

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<sup>24</sup> See Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 83–112 and 256–99.

through a process of divinization. The victim is claimed by the mob to be a god or demon who was in control of the whole process of violence from the first. The twin power of the mob's violence—to cause and to resolve chaotic violence—results in a “double transference,” where both the pre-scapegoating chaos and post-scapegoating order are ascribed to the victim through supernatural agency.<sup>25</sup> This transference onto the victim is the basis for the construction of what Girard calls “the (violent) sacred,” a variation of which is found across traditional cultures.

The problem that modern cultures face is the inability to unanimously project their violence onto their victims through divinization, and so, externalize their unanimous violence in order to maintain its power. Extraordinary efforts are made to compensate for this loss, with moderns finding that persecuting the persecutors having great unifying power. It covertly creates a new mob that justly persecutes the new “bad guys”, the persecutors, with powerful moral purpose and a fundamentalist self-righteousness.

As Girard argues in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, the modern impulse to defend victims – resulting in an array of different movements across the political spectrum – produces, in some cases, a new type of “paganism” that believes it can defend victims better than the revelation that produced it.<sup>26</sup> This modern form of mob transcendence re-introduces a covert religiosity into modernity, which has its own rituals, appropriates theological categories for its mythological justifications, and becomes increasingly fundamentalist in its legal and social prescriptions. In this way, the lines between implicit and explicit forms of worship are blurred as the sacred remains a hidden, yet driving, force.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 257–64; Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, 71–2.

<sup>26</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, 158 and 180-1.

<sup>27</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011). The sacred is that which is usually not spoken about but implicitly acknowledged as all-powerful.

There is a further dimension to the modern defence of victims that is integral to maintaining its power: the protagonists usually justify their actions in the name of an external agent such as the state, ideology, religion or God that is claimed to commission their defence of victims. Like all mob violence, the unifying transcendence must find a way to externalize, deposit and sacralize itself in order to culturally maintain itself and its power to unify. Thus, modern mobs project the power of their violence onto an external agent – God, ideology or state – which becomes the depository of the sacred violence.<sup>28</sup>

Why does the mob choose such external agents to be the subject of their projections and why does it work? It works because these external agents at some point have been identified with defending victims in the popular imagination, such as the communist ideology that sought to defend the victimized working classes, the nation-state in defence of its victimized citizens, or the Abrahamic God as the origin of the defence of the victim. Thus, the external agent is attributed with the responsibility for the cathartic violence of defending victims and becomes the symbolic embodiment of a morally-pure order that licenses “legitimate” violence to the mob. The mob is entitled to wield violence because its members are morally righteous in their defence of selected innocent victims. Accordingly, the mob becomes the guardian of the sacred will and

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<sup>28</sup> This move looks to similar to the creation of large-scale political institutions in the ancient world such as the Roman Empire (which had victims sacrificed for the emperor) or to sacred monarchies, which had the power of mob violence – initially directed against the monarch himself and then later against a substitute victim – projected onto themselves when they used a substitutionary victim. However, the key differences between the ancient and modern forms of mob projection are that the sacred monarch was initially a victim whose divinity or sacrality is owed directly to unanimous mob violence, while in the modern form, the mob only persecutes persecutors (at least according to their accusatory construction of events), not a random substitute for the monarch. Nevertheless, both the archaic form of sacred kingship and the modern external agent such as the state take on sacred powers and status because it is believed that they can direct effective scapegoating violence. In the archaic form, the sacred monarch is involved in directing the mob, whereas the external agent in the modern form, at least in its origins, is a symbolic projection of the mob who embody the external agent in directing mimetic violence against perceived persecutors (and so, increasingly take on political and cultural power). See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 302-6.

order, meaning that it can target anyone for punishment or praise in the name of the state, ideology or Almighty. In this way, the members of the mob, particularly the leaders, take on a semi-sacred status in association with the sacralized external agent in whose name sacred violence is “legitimately” undertaken.

Before going further, I should note that there is a question about what to call the modern dynamics of mob violence and projection that I have outlined. Is “sacralization” or “semi-sacralization” the best terms for it, especially given the difference with the archaic form of divinization? I have had discussions with Wolfgang Palaver on this point who argues that, at best, we can call it a semi-sacralization, as it is not the full-blown divinization of archaic cultures. Whatever the right terminology is, the key phenomenon to take account of is the type of mob that is formed in modernity that experiences a powerful form of transcendent unanimity, moral purpose and social order as a result of persecuting persecutors, and which is externalized and projected onto an external agent to maintain and justify it.

### **Modernity, rivalry and fraternity**

Western forms of defence of victims – whether in populist nationalism, identity politics or cancel culture – have become more fundamentalist in recent years, especially in the US. Facilitated by social media, groups across the political spectrum cannot decide on a common enemy or vision and are instead claiming special status for their preferred victims (justified by their ideological and moral arguments). This is fueling on-going and intensifying cultural and political battles based on a public imagination and discourse of implacable persecutor-enemies. Ironically, as each group claims to be morally righteous in their defence of victims and their opponents morally defective, they increasingly mirror each other. Thus, like any mimetic rivalry,

the cultural battle over victims in the West is moving to the fundamental level of identity, which at its worst becomes apocalyptic in scope.<sup>29</sup> Often it is argued that the assertion of victim claims is about rivalry for power, but fundamentally it is metaphysical in nature. Those who make such claims seek moral and transcendent meaning in order to fulfil what Girard refers to as “metaphysical desire” or the yearning for being.<sup>30</sup>

The polarising and sacred dimensions of the concern for victims is connected to what Pope Francis calls modernity’s “reductive anthropological visions” and the crisis of metaphysical desire to a lack of unifying “common horizons” that are afflicting modern persons and cultures.<sup>31</sup> At the heart of this fragmentation, Pope Francis is pointing to an underlying spiritual crisis of identity that is related to a contestation over Christian anthropology and eschatology. It fundamentally centres on whether a universal sense of human dignity and the common good can be upheld – either guaranteed by biblical religion (as it has been so in the West up until recently) or some other source – or whether intensifying polarization and fragmentation continues in the long run. Because of this fundamental problem, Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, issues a call for the renewal of fraternal bonds - that underlie politics, culture and religion - through openness, encounter and dialogue oriented to friendship and truth. It seems to me that mimetic theory can contribute to this vision by cultivating a genuine, non-rivalistic solidarity with the victim that is combined with a self-giving spirit and non-violent transcendence

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<sup>29</sup> Apocalyptic in the sense that Girard uses this term in *Battling to the End*. It represents a choice for violent destruction over the non-violent, biblical path. I would suggest that modernity actually seems to be moving in either of two directions: totalitarianism or destruction.

<sup>30</sup> Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 83–112 and 256–99.

<sup>31</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* [Encyclical Letter], Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html), nos. 22 and 26.

grounded in what Girard calls “the holy.”<sup>32</sup> Such a solidarity acknowledges universal complicity in victimization with forgiveness and looks forward with eschatological hope to a victimless society.

In the midst of the fragmentation and extremes of modernity, Girard outlines two ultimate possibilities available to humanity: Christ or apocalypse; that is, a permanent peace without scapegoats, oriented towards vertical transcendence (the holy) or a contradictory, self-destructing (satanic) order that attempts to sacralise horizontal relations but increasingly fails to do so.<sup>33</sup> The first possibility involves a spiritual or ecclesial fraternity built on a vertical transcendence orientated to the holy/God/Christ. This vertical transcendence is centred on the mimetic model who provides space for identity and relationality in friendship, not rivalry, and even embodies self-giving sacrifice as humanity’s forgiving victim.

The alternative (second) possibility is of apocalypse, that is, of on-going and escalating forms of rivalry and conflict, with faltering attempts to resuscitate scapegoating and sacred violence, leading eventually to self-destruction. In particular, the polarising and sacralising dimensions of the concern for victims in modernity is a manifestation of this possibility. The distortion of this concern is not only causing conflict, but is fundamentally altering human self-perception in what Pope Francis calls “reductive anthropological visions.”<sup>34</sup> Fundamentally, the

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<sup>32</sup> René Girard, with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 218; See also Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

<sup>33</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, 186; René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010), ix-xvii. Girard (*Battling to the End*, xi) remarks: “The incredible paradox, which no one can accept, is that the Passion has freed violence at the same time as holiness.”

<sup>34</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* [Encyclical Letter], Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html), nos. 22 and 26.



universal dignity and transcendent vocation of each person is diminished into a political and cultural battle of value defined by persecutors and victims. For example, certain identities or ideas gain general popularity and are pitted against each other in modernity because of their ability to be associated with or advocate for the oppressed and victimized (the “moral trump card”).<sup>35</sup> This conflict is causing a deep fragmentation in modernity resulting in a crisis of “common horizons.”<sup>36</sup> This crisis fundamentally centres on whether a universal sense of human dignity and the common good can be upheld – either guaranteed by biblical religion (as it has been so in the West up until recently) or some other source – or whether intensifying polarisation, fragmentation and conflict continues in the long run.

Because of this fundamental problem, Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, issues a call for the renewal of fraternal bonds that underlie politics and culture.<sup>37</sup> To cultivate a genuine, non-rivalistic fraternity, especially in solidarity with victims, is the challenge of modernity. In the absence of it, people will search in the wrong places, filtered through the lens of some kind of victim-identity that they believe will give them fulfilment, purpose and community. To avoid grasping at desire and identity and becoming unhealthily attached to victimhood requires, according to James Alison, receiving the holy (Christ) as our forgiving victim. This holy victim non-violently approaches humanity from the space of distorted desire

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<sup>35</sup> Gray and Blakey, “Understanding Putin's Victimhood Narrative.” See, for example, the testimony of Ollie Davies in his gender transition journey and the way the marginalised status of gender identity was used to make it attractive: Natasha Robinson, “Gender change agents: when the pressure wins out,” *The Australian*, August 20, 2022, [https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=TAWEB\\_WRE170\\_a\\_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Fscience%2Fgender-change-agents-when-pressure-from-outside-complicates-the-pressures-within%2Fnews-story%2F7b2358f2c932bda4655c53d1384d1aac&metype=registered&mode=premium&v21=dynamic-low-control-score&V21spcbehaviour=append](https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Fscience%2Fgender-change-agents-when-pressure-from-outside-complicates-the-pressures-within%2Fnews-story%2F7b2358f2c932bda4655c53d1384d1aac&metype=registered&mode=premium&v21=dynamic-low-control-score&V21spcbehaviour=append)

<sup>36</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 22 and 26.

<sup>37</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 1-8 and 154-224.

and violence – which humans fear to confront – in order to free them.

In this way, this holy victim offers a safe space of love and forgiveness – gratuitously given, without merit or desert – so that we can embark on “a journey from fake goodness, from a false and insecure self, to relaxing into a goodness and security not your own, but in which you discover yourself held. And it is a journey from a unity that needs to create victims toward a unity received from the risen and forgiving victim in our midst.”<sup>38</sup> Once one can learn to relax into the life and desire of the Other, one can relax into our-own-selves-in-relationship-with-others. Peaceful and loving mimesis, then, is cultivated from within people’s lives and cultures, so to heal the good that is in them and transform that which is distorted.<sup>39</sup> Drawing on St Augustine, Girard identifies this “internal” form of mediation as “innermost mediation” of the Other’s intimate loving presence that is more subtly and deeply present to us than we or others are present to ourselves.<sup>40</sup> Such presence does not loudly pronounce itself in spectacular “hot” desires that lead to grasping and acquisition, but rather, detaches us from such desires in a non-rivalistic consolation and peace that leads to deep acceptance and surrender to the Other’s loving will. The Other quietly and constantly invites us to let go and interiorly relax into his consoling presence, giving rise to holiness (personal integration) and fraternity (communion).<sup>41</sup>

The translation of “innermost mediation” into concrete political and cultural forms is necessary for the health and nature of secular modernity.<sup>42</sup> It will require creative initiatives,

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<sup>38</sup> James Alison, “Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice,” 2020, <https://jamesalison.com/en/books/jesus-the-forgiving-victim/>

<sup>39</sup> Girard, *Battling to the End*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Girard, *Battling to the End*, 133.

<sup>41</sup> St Ignatius gives an incisive spiritual account of how to surrender to God, particularly by discerning the movements of the Spirit (in contrast to much of the spirituality of his time that was more textual, clerical and directive).

<sup>42</sup> By secularity, I do not mean primarily an artificial separation between church and state (though some separation is necessary). I mean a temporal order that is orientated to secular goods and responsibilities. In the secular domain, there needs to be regulated forms of security and authority that use minimal,

such as the international human rights infrastructure (at least in its initial post-WWII formulation<sup>43</sup>) or the anti-communist and civil rights movements. These movements involved Christian leaders (practically and/or symbolically) such as Martin Luther King Jr and Pope John Paul II who lived and witnessed to the self-giving love of Christ that mimetically transformed their context into one of positive solidarity and union.

I came across a recent example of this kind of solidarity during the protests that followed the murder of George Floyd in the US (in the time of the COVID pandemic). During a protest in Kentucky, protesters and police confronted each other, like in so many other cities across the world. However, instead of abuse and violence directed against police, they all prayed together: “It was a beautiful thing,” said one participant, Devine Carama. “Obviously the protestors were down there to protest police violence and [bring] value to Black lives. But it was almost as if the police officers in Lexington were showing solidarity with protestors, as opposed to it being a battle. I don’t think that’s what the protestors expected.”<sup>44</sup> Prayer surprisingly broke the mimetic reciprocity and rivalry between police and protestors, creating social bonds based on a common transcendent orientation and constructive purpose. This purpose was founded on a mimetic desire that sought to build up (for the good of all), rather than take some down. It sought change through peaceful resistance, like that employed by Martin Luther King Jr., to bring about a new consensus and, ultimately, social reconciliation. It is this positive model of solidarity—imbued

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though effective, force against justly identified (and intransigent) victimizers, such as terrorists (what Girard, following St Paul in 2 Thess 2:6-7, refers to as the “katechon”). See Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, 186; Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha in Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 13 and 263.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 22-24.

<sup>44</sup> Ganesh Setty, “A Kentucky police chief knelt with protestors amid peaceful demonstrations of solidarity,” *CNN*, June 2, 2020,

[https://edition.cnn.com/us/live-news/george-floyd-protests-06-01-20/h\\_3fb1b62beb58d779f623328f02cd35a2](https://edition.cnn.com/us/live-news/george-floyd-protests-06-01-20/h_3fb1b62beb58d779f623328f02cd35a2)

with the example and spirit of Christ—that will ultimately open up a space to enable change and address the roots of the crises afflicting modern societies.

## Conclusion

Girard's legacy for understanding modernity is vast. There is much to unpack and develop in terms of socio-cultural, political and religious analysis. As a starting point, this paper has focused on understanding the basis for the victim discourse in modernity, which has become so prominent. I did so to give insight into an increasingly common modern worldview, the dynamics of contemporary, globalising cultures (particularly in the sense of the “planetary culture” of which Girard spoke in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*<sup>45</sup>), and the possible trajectories of modernity. I attempted to broadly sketch how these and other areas would benefit from thinking inside “mimetism” and with the “religious rationality” for which Girard particularly argued in *Battling to the End*.<sup>46</sup> The implications of Girard's way of thinking about and interpreting modernity bear directly on humanity's future.

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<sup>45</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, 178.

<sup>46</sup> Girard, *Battling to the End*, 82.