

# A Tribute to René Girard

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On the last page of his great book *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 1979, René Girard wrote the following lines. According to Martha's wish I will first read it in French so that René's native tongue is heard during this memorial. I regret that I am unable to say it with his beautiful Provençal accent which he kept during all his American life:

Je crois que la vérité n'est pas un vain mot, ou un simple « effet » comme on dit aujourd'hui. Je pense que tout ce qui peut nous détourner de la folie et de la mort, désormais, a partie liée avec cette vérité. Mais je ne sais pas comment parler de ces choses-là. Seuls les textes et les institutions me paraissent abordables, et leur rapprochement me paraît lumineux sous tous les rapports.

An approximate translation could read as follows:

I do not believe that *truth* is a vain word, no more than a sham as many contend today. I believe that from now on everything that can divert us from madness and death is intimately linked to that truth. However I am unable to address these things properly. I am only good at reading texts and analyzing institutions, but this sheds an incredible light on our world.

It is vertiginous to consider that René has now the possibility of contemplating that truth without mediation. At least, that's what he believed when he pondered over Saint Paul's epistle to the Corinthians: "*Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate: For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*" But what do these little words: "now", "then", mean or refer to? And what truth is that?

Once René told his daughter Mary that he had managed—and that is true—to produce the first truly secular account of this fact that should be the central focus of any science of the human: all known human societies are governed by what anthropologists of the old school named the sacred—all societies save one: ours, which we call modernity. And this because our modern world is shaped by the Christian message and the latter is responsible for the de-sacralization of the world.

We know that the truth, human but revealed, that René has been searching for all

his life has to do with the relationship between *violence and the sacred*. I cannot believe that what happened during the night of November 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> of last year was a sheer coincidence. Just a few hours before the first memorial service for René was celebrated in the church of Thomas Aquinas here in Palo Alto, Paris was struck by a series of abominable terrorist attacks. The cruel irony is that René's *hypothesis*, as he liked to call his fundamental insight, provides the best account for this insane deployment of violence.

It's neither the place nor the time to flesh out what René could have said about the wave of terrorist violence that is sweeping the world today. Only this: "They hated me *without reason*" says the Gospel of John that René preferred to quote in this translation. The usual version is "without a cause." But the Greek original (*dôron*) refers to the gratuitousness of God's gift to the world. Isn't it astounding that the violence Christ is victim of should be referred to by the very word that serves to designate the absence of reason that presides over God's love for us? The terrorists' violence certainly has a million causes that have been analyzed by as many scholarly articles. But as far as reason is concerned, this violence doesn't go beyond murderous imbecility. In his last book, the most pessimistic of all, René Girard prophesied that this violence which he called "essential" was about to carry off everything in its path.