

A Commentary from Mimetic Theory to Ian Buruma's "Enlightenment Wars"

In general I am very much in agreement with Ian Buruma's keynote lecture of today. I will therefore apply mimetic theory on the problems raised by Ian Buruma supporting his perspective. My commentary consists of three thesis. First I will show that not religion as such leads automatically towards violence but mimetic rivalry. This first thesis will address human beings as mimetic beings. Secondly, I will ask what role religion plays in human life. Human beings are not only mimetic they are religious beings, too. Thirdly I will deal with the relationship between religion and the Enlightenment showing how much the Abrahamic overcoming of the scapegoat mechanism embodies the true spirit of the enlightenment.

1. Mimetic Rivalry, not Religion Causes Violence

Not religion as such leads frequently towards violence but mimetic rivalry that is unleashed today on a planetary scale. In an important interview that René Girard gave to the French newspaper *Le Monde* about two month after 9/11 he emphasized this connection very clearly.¹ Global competition contributes much more to violence in our world than cultural or religious differences. And he also underlined how much the enemies of the West remain mimetically connected to it. Scapegoating religion in our world is therefore nothing but a futile attempt to cover the fact how much rivalry, envy and resentment lead towards violence.²

A somewhat similar view can be found in the book *Occidentalism* that Ian Buruma published together with Avishai Margalit in 2004. The two authors reject the claim that

¹ See René Girard, *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001, 8, 22–25; and Girard, “Ce qui se joue aujourd’hui est une rivalité mimétique à l’échelle planétaire: An interview mit Henri Tincq,” *Le Monde*, 6 November 2001. Also see Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Avions-nous oublié le mal? Penser la politique après le 11 septembre*. Paris: Bayard, 2002, 43–67.

² René Girard, "Violence and Religion: Cause or Effect?" *The Hedgehog Review* 6, no. 1 (2004): 8-20, 20: "The violence we would love to transfer to religion is really our own, and we must confront it directly. To turn religions into the scapegoats of our own violence can only backfire in the end."

"organized religion" is the main problem regarding violence in our world.³ Again and again they show us how critics of the West cannot get rid of the West. An example is the modern Japanese state founded in 1867 by samurai as a defense against being colonized by the West. This type of defense "borrowed heavily from Western ideas" and was a "defense by mimicry".⁴ Occidentalism in general cannot free itself from its enemy: "No Occidentalism, even the most fervent holy warrior, can ever be entirely free of the Occident."⁵ Also Buruma's book on the murder of Theo van Gogh refers to mimetic rivalry where it mentions resentment as an important key to understand the murderer Mohammed Bouyeri. Buruma sees in him a character similar to the "resentful young men" in Dostoevsky's novels.⁶ And also Bouyeri remains bound to Dutch culture even when he has started to revolt against it after he found his new identity in radical Islamism. Buruma highlights this mimetic dependence: "Even in his most ferocious writings there were unmistakable marks of Mohammed's culture, that is to say Dutch culture."⁷

Concerning mimetic rivalry the concluding part of the book on occidentalism is most important. Buruma and Margalit clearly underline that wherever political, religious, and intellectual freedom has been established it must be defended against its enemies with conviction, if necessary even by force. At the same time, however, they are aware how easily one can be forced into mimetic rivalry that ends in a destructive imitation of the adversary one is fighting

³ Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism. The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2004, 148: "The idea that organized religion is the main problem might come naturally to the newly secularized, disenchanted Western intellectual, but that too is off the mark. For some of the most ferocious enemies of the West are secular, or at least pretend to be. Religion is used everywhere, in India no less than in Israel, the United States, and Saudi Arabia, for reprehensible political ends. But it does not have to be. It can be a force for the good. In the Middle East, it might offer the only hope of a peaceful way out of our current mess."

⁴ Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism* 143.

⁵ Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism* 144.

⁶ Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance*. London: Atlantic Books, 2006, 195.

⁷ Buruma, *Murder 216*: "Islam was his new identity, unassailable, secure, a snug shell that would protect him from all the hostile forces around him. It gave him a sense of power, of meaning, of Truth. He would live for Islam alone. And yet even in his most ferocious writings there were unmistakable marks of Mohammed's culture, that is to say Dutch culture."

against. The West should be aware of this mimetic danger the two authors call "cross-contamination" or the "spread of bad ideas":

"This could happen to us now, if we fall for the temptation to fight fire with fire, Islamism with our own forms of intolerance. ... We cannot afford to close our societies as a defense against those who have closed theirs. For then we would all become Occidentalists, and there would be nothing left to defend."⁸

2. Human Beings are Mimetic and Religious Beings

My first point underlined the fact that we have to focus on mimetic rivalry if we want to go to the roots of many violent conflicts. To understand violence means to focus on mimetic man, on *homo mimeticus*. Does this mean that I endorse a secularist view believing in the ultimate disappearance of religion? No, not at all. Human beings are not only mimetic beings, they are also religious beings—if we understand religion in a broad sense. *Homo mimeticus* and *homo religiosus*—mimetic man and religious man—cannot be separated. Plato and Augustine already understood very well that human beings always imitate what they adore. This insight is an important part of mimetic theory. René Girard emphasized it in his first book using Max Scheler's formula that "every finite spirit believes either in God or in idols" as its devise⁹ and showing that the disappearance of vertical transcendence does not result in the elimination of transcendency but its deviation. Men become gods to each other and "the imitation of Christ becomes the

⁸ Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism* 149. Those who celebrated in connection with Pope Benedict XVI's lecture in Regensburg from September 2006 "reciprocity"—replacing "dialogue"—as a better attitude of the Catholic Church towards Islam are also in danger to increase negative mimesis. Barbara Frischmuth, on the contrary, endorses Navid Kermani's view that Europe should show its superiority by allowing Muslims an amount of freedom that many Christians in Muslim countries do not have. See Barbara Frischmuth, "Kann der Glaube Berge versetzen, und wenn ja, wie hoch dürfen sie sein?" *Innsbrucker Diskussionspapiere zu Weltordnung, Religion und Gewalt*, no. 17; http://www.uibk.ac.at/plattform-wrg/idwrg/idwrg_17.pdf

⁹ René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. Paris: Grasset, 1961.

imitation of one's neighbor".¹⁰ In 1994 Girard claimed in an interview with Michel Treguer that religion will not disappear from our world. According to him, secular humanism of today is only a brief interlude between two forms of religion.¹¹

Ian Buruma has made similar observations in his writings. Let me just repeat some of his expressions he used in his lecture:

- "The rebels against religion often turned to new dogmas with all the fervor of recent converts: Marxism, Maoism, Third World Liberationism, multiculturalism, etcetera."
- "Denunciations of Islam per se can become a new form of dogmatism and fundamentalism."
- "dogmatic secularism" (twice)

In his book "Murder in Amsterdam" he gives several examples of quasi-religious attitudes against religion. He does not see, for instance, a real contradiction in labeling people like Ayaan Hirsi Ali an "Enlightenment fundamentalist".¹² He describes her praising enlightenment with a "spark of almost religious fervor in her eyes" and with a attitude of a preacher.¹³ Buruma hints also to religion or quasi-religion where he writes about the general Dutch habit of preaching and how the memory for the dead remains somehow religious: "It is a common feature of the secular age,

¹⁰ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Translated by Y. Freccero. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966, 53-83, here 59.

¹¹ René Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront ... Entretiens avec Michel Treguer*. Paris: arléa, 1994, 178.

¹² Buruma, *Murder* 27. Cf. Timothy Garton Ash, "Islam in Europe." *New York Review* LIII, no. 15 (October 5, 2006): 32-35, 34: "Having in her youth been tempted by Islamist fundamentalism, under the influence of an inspiring schoolteacher, Ayaan Hirsi Ali is now a brave, outspoken, slightly simplistic Enlightenment fundamentalist."

¹³ Buruma, *Murder* 168, 184.

these outbursts of displaced religiosity, often expressed at the funerals of media celebrities: Princess Diana, Pope John Paul II, Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh."¹⁴

3. Religion and Enlightenment

Understanding with Girard and Buruma that there is no easy way of getting rid of religion we may turn finally to the role of the enlightenment in our world of today. Again, I think mimetic theory is in agreement with Ian Buruma. In general, the enlightenment is an important achievement of the modern world strengthening our path towards universalism. But it is also a rather vague and broad term that can be misused to defend a particularistic identification with some Western values emphasized against its apparent enemies, often against Islam. It is in this direction that people today like to identify with enlightenment values as "our"—European, Western—values.¹⁵

One of the main mistakes in our current debate on the enlightenment is the attempt to see the enlightenment and religion as diametrically opposed to each other. But this view, of course is wrong. The enlightenment is itself an offspring of a certain type of religion if we just remember Max Weber's thesis that the disenchantment of the world stems from ancient Jewish prophecy.¹⁶ Girard rightly understands the exposure of the scapegoat mechanism as a true form of enlightenment. Let us take as an example his interpretation of how the disciples of Jesus became able to break out of the mob that crucified Jesus:

"It is not fear alone that makes Peter deny Jesus ..., it is the mimetic contagion of scapegoating which never fails to triumph in mythology and would triumph in the

¹⁴ Buruma, *Murder* 231. Cf. 230: "Memory, especially in ceremonies for the dead, is not about debate, but about shared emotion, often cast in a religious or quasi-religious form. The Netherlands, like the rest of western Europe, may have become a largely secular society in recent decades, but the habits of faith die hard. Preaching still comes naturally to the Dutch, as does the venting of moralizing emotion—that sense of being 'in total rage.'"

¹⁵ Buruma, *Murder* 29.

¹⁶ Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1988, 94-95.

Gospels if the Paraclete, the divine defender of victims, the lawyer for the defence, had not intervened in this affaire, for our global enlightenment, an enlightenment more fundamental than the one of Voltaire and Rousseau."¹⁷

Enlightenment means to side with the victim of collective persecution. In this regard the French philosopher Voltaire was a true representative of it when he defended the Protestant Calas against those members of the Catholic Church in France who executed him by falsely accusing him of having killed his own son. Girard clearly praises Voltaire in this regard.¹⁸ But he criticizes him at the same time for overlooking the fact that his solidarity with the victim was itself inspired by a religious tradition connected to the true spirit defending victims. Everything depends on this unique perspective: The true spirit of the Judaeo-Christian revelation—of the Abrahamic tradition I dare to say—and the true spirit of the enlightenment consist in this concern for victims.

What Ian Buruma justly criticizes as a type of an Enlightenment fundamentalism is a deviation from this true spirit defending victims. In our Europe of today some call themselves representatives of the Enlightenment and identify themselves with Voltaire when they accuse Islam of undoing secularization and its privatization of religion. Buruma is right to question such a position taking into account that most Muslims living in Europe will and cannot accept such a narrow view of religion. It is not up to the true spirit of the Enlightenment to force a minority to give up all forms of public religion.¹⁹ Such an attempt resembles something more like a wolf in sheep's clothing because it pretends to be on the side of the victims but is in reality supporting a discriminating majority:

"To see religion, even religious orthodoxy, as the main enemy of Enlightenment value is misleading. For even though the modern terrorist has latched onto religious faith, he might as well have chosen—and in different times did choose—a radically secular creed

¹⁷ René Girard, *Wissenschaft und christlicher Glaube*. Translated by S. Heath. Edited by E. Herms. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007, 56.

¹⁸ Girard, *Quand* 113.

¹⁹ Cf. Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism." In *Secularism and Its Critics*. Edited by R. Bhargava. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, 31-53, who distinguishes two different types of secularism, and Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "Wie können die Religionen friedlich und frei beisammen leben?" *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (23. Juni 2007), who distinguishes two types of the neutrality of the state.

to justify his thirst for violent death. Besides, there is a difference between the anticlericalism of Voltaire, who was up against one of the two most powerful institutions of eighteenth-century France, and radical secularists today battling a minority within an already embattled minority."²⁰

I think Buruma himself is contrary to the position he is criticizing in touch with the true spirit of Enlightenment. Despite his critical view of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's position on religion—of her version of an Enlightenment fundamentalism—he protests against the fact that she was forced to leave the Netherlands. The last sentences of his postscript to his book "Murder in Amsterdam" show his siding with the victim:

"Theo van Gogh is dead. Mohammad Bouyeri is locked up in prison alone with the words of his holy books. And Ayan Hirsi Ali has had to leave the scene. My country seems smaller without her."²¹

²⁰ Buruma, *Murder* 33f.

²¹ Buruma, *Murder* 264.