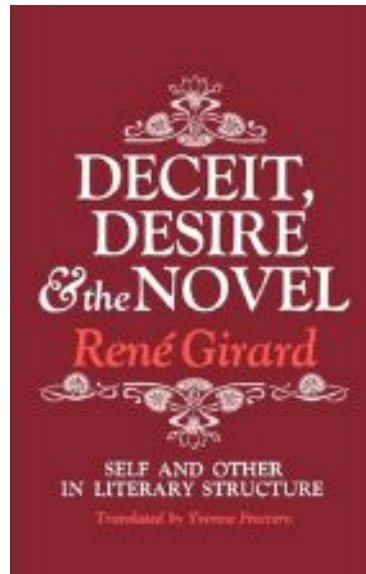


# RENÉ GIRARD

The “Charles Darwin of the Human Sciences”

Michel Serres



## EARLY LIFE

René Girard was born in Avignon, in the south of France, on Christmas Day 1923, into a cultivated middle class family, referred to by Girard himself as “the old impoverished bourgeoisie”. The Girards were typical of many such French families of these times, in that his father, Joseph, was an anti-clerical agnostic; his mother Marie Thérèse was a devout Catholic. René himself abandoned his Catholic faith in his early teens.

## STUDY

After receiving his Baccalaureate in Philosophy at the Lycée of Avignon in 1941, Girard attended the École des Chartres in Paris from 1943 to 1947, graduating as a specialist in medieval studies and documents. Paris at this time was suffering under the yoke of the Nazi occupation, of which interestingly, he observed that the only community which resisted the influence of both the Nazi fascists to the right and the communists to the left, was the Catholic Worker Movement.

## CAREER

In 1947, Girard migrated to the United States, where he obtained a doctorate in history with a thesis entitled “American Opinion of France, 1940-1943”. Although trained as a historian, opportunities opened up for him more in realm of literature and culture. He taught in several universities, including Buffalo and Johns Hopkins, and in 1981 accepted his last post, that of Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language, Literature and Civilisation at Stanford University.

## MIMETIC THEORY

As he began to study primitive religions from the standpoint of the mimetic concept, he saw that mimesis led to a collective violence against a single victim. He turned to the great Greek tragedians. It was early in this first John Hopkins period that he underwent a momentous spiritual change. In the winter of 1959 he experienced a reconversion to his Catholic faith, which had been preceded by a kind of intellectual conversion while working on his first book.

Thirty books followed, through which Girard explored his wide theses on [mimetic theory](#), including desire, rivalry, violence, scapegoating, sacrifice, the sacred, and religion. His first book was “Deceit, Desire and the Novel” in 1966. When “Violence and the Sacred” was published in French in 1971, Le Monde wrote that “the year should be marked with a white cross.”

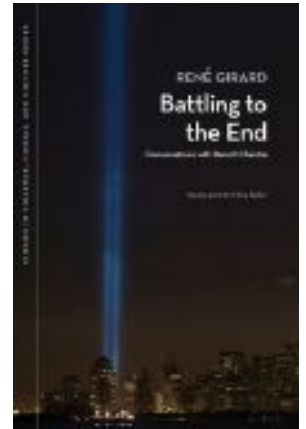


This humble, brilliant and charming man, arguably one of the greatest Catholic thinkers of our times, died peacefully in his sleep on November 4th, 2015.

In 1987 Girard published “Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World”, a dialogue between Girard and two psychiatrists who explore with him violence, mimetic desire and the scapegoat in the history of society and religion. A highly acclaimed book, it assembles his ideas to that point in time, and engages with Judeo-Christian texts.

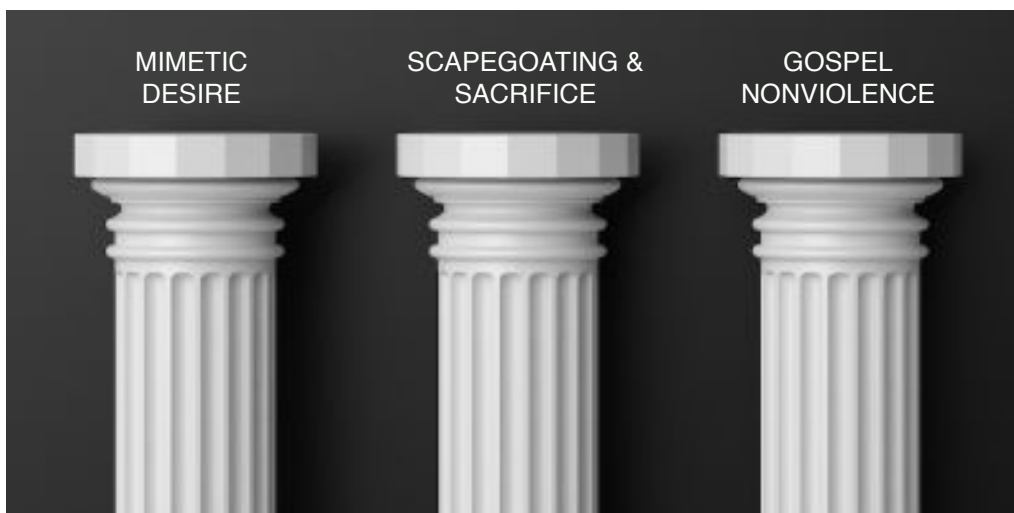
René Girard was elected to the [Académie française](#) in 2005, becoming one of “the immortals”.

“Battling to the End” was his last book in 2009, where he discusses the acceleration of violence. Girard warns about the apocalyptic threats facing the world of our time, applying the scholarship of his life’s work to interpreting the situation using the mimetic laws of violence.



In 1990, scholars interested in Girard’s insights founded the [Colloquium on Violence and Religion](#) (COV&R) with Girard as Honorary Chair and Raymund Schwager SJ as first president. Its members are “dedicated to developing, critiquing, and applying René Girard’s mimetic theory”. COV&R convenes an annual conference devoted to topics related to mimetic theory.

## THREE PILLARS OF GIRARD’S WORK



More: [“The Charles Darwin of the Human Sciences: René Girard, a Theological Retrospective”](#)

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