

**The Metaphysics of Violence:  
Comparative Reflections on the Thought  
of René Girard and Mahatma Gandhi**

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**Abstract**

This is not an essay on the acts of violence, but on violence per se. The purpose is to expose violence for what it is *in its essence*, so as to renounce it, and thus make room for genuine peace. It is widely acknowledged that violence is the very opposite of peace, and thus obviously threatens it, but most discussions of violence remain at the level of acts of violence and rarely attempt to probe the essence lying beneath its outward manifestations. The same could be said of peace. This is understandable, as both concepts entail highly enigmatic subtleties that are difficult to pin down, and therefore require the work of arduous metaphysical analysis. Nonetheless, such work must be carried out, for if discussions of violence do not attempt to probe the inner depths of what it is in itself, we are apt to end up defining certain activities as non-violent, when in fact they are simply different forms of violence, masquerading as non-violence. This may lead to the further identification of peace with these deceptive definitions of non-violence, which ultimately amounts to calling violence peace, as, for instance, when so-called non-violent demonstrators, short of inflicting bodily harm upon the other, are nonetheless filled with passionate hatred, with no intention of transforming the other. To adequately understand that non-violence is not automatically to be equated with peace, it is first necessary to get at the core of what violence really is. René Girard and Mahatma Gandhi are two exemplary contemporary thinkers, coming from dissimilar academic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, who do explore the metaphysics

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of violence profoundly, and whose conclusions are stunningly commensurate. Though their approaches are quite different, they both conclude that violence is an invisible, ambiguously transcendent, disordered force that feeds upon itself by parasitically taking advantage of the whole range of immoral human *desire*. To renounce it is nothing short of renouncing all evil and immorality through a hyper-conscious decision to strive daily to know the truth and to do the good, precisely by loving the beautiful—the very place where the good and true meet—and that one sacred space where violence dares not show its hideous face.

**Keywords:** Metaphysics of violence, Peace, René Girard, Mahatma Gandhi, Mythological and religious traditions.

## I. Introduction

This is not an essay on the acts of violence, but on violence per se. The purpose is to expose violence for what it is *in its essence*, so as to renounce it, and thus make room for genuine peace. It is widely acknowledged that violence is the very opposite of peace, and thus obviously threatens it, but many discussions of violence remain at the level of acts of violence and rarely attempt to probe the essence lying beneath its outward manifestations. The same could be said of peace. This is understandable, as both concepts entail highly enigmatic subtleties that are difficult to pin down, and therefore require the work of arduous metaphysical analysis. Nonetheless, such work must be carried out, for if discussions of violence do not attempt to probe the inner depths of what it is in itself, we are apt to end up defining certain activities as non-violent, when in fact they are simply different forms of violence, masquerading as non-violence. This may lead to the further identification of peace with these deceptive definitions of non-violence, which ultimately amounts to calling violence peace, as, for instance, when so-called non-violent demonstrators, short of inflicting bodily harm upon the other, are nonetheless filled with passionate hatred, with no intention of transforming the other. To adequately understand that non-violence is not automatically to be equated with peace, it is first necessary to get at the core of what violence really is.

Among contemporary thinkers, René Girard and Mahatma Gandhi stand out here since they both explore the metaphysics of violence profoundly. One reason why these two thinkers are particularly important, in addition to their obvious achievements, is that they come from quite different academic, cultural,

and religious backgrounds, but their conclusions are stunningly commensurate, and because of this, bear more weight.

This article is structured as follows. Section II focuses on the review of Gandhi's exploration of the metaphysics of violence. Through an intellectual journey, the reader will look into the complicated frameworks of Ahimsa, absence of an absence and Himsa (violence or injury). By drawing a sensible picture, this article is trying to prove via a comparable struggle, the Gandhi was also like Arjuna straining to understand Krishna's instructions on the eve of battle. Section III deals with the essence of violence through the rational eyes of Rene Girard, an expert of vast knowledge on Cultural Anthropology. A noble understanding on an inexplicable human power called desire is introduced by developing another insight in Aristotle's *Poetics* concerning the centrality of *imitation* for the human animal. Section IV focuses mainly on mythological traditions by Girard in an attempt to show how the false gods of myth are produced by the cycle of Satanic violence. Girard's fascinating and convincing arguments, as he gives one example after the other from the mythological tradition, showing how, over time, the process of "double transference" became recognized and religiously ritualized in human and animal sacrifice. Finally, the essay leads to the conclusion derived from the philosophical judgments of Girard and spiritual reasoning of Gandhi that the Buddhism and Islam contain resources for repudiating violence and for cultivating life-structures that are free from the contagious violence of mimetic rivalry as for both Gandhi and Girard, violence is an invisible, ambiguously transcendent, disordered force that feeds upon itself by parasitically taking advantage of the whole range of immoral human *desire*.

## **II. Mahatma Gandhi: an expedition to absence of an absence**

Let's begin with Gandhi. And let's begin at the very end of his *Autobiography*, subtitled *The Story of My Experiments With Truth* wherein he writes, "a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realization of *Ahimsa*...[i]n bidding farewell to the reader...I ask him to join with me in prayer to the God of Truth that He may grant me the boon of *Ahimsa* in mind, word and deed."<sup>1</sup> This is enough to show not only how central *Ahimsa* was in the thought and life of the Mahatma, but, more importantly, how solidly metaphysical it was for him as well. And even a cursory search of its traditional meaning in Hindu thought,

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<sup>1</sup> M. K. Gandhi (1927) *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments With Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House) 420.

reveals these metaphysical and ethical associations. We might say that after Gandhi there was a popularization of *Ahimsa* expressed in the English translation, *non-violence*. But this does not capture the depth of *Ahimsa*. For one thing, the Sanskrit term is a positive term in that it is a negation of a negation; this is lost in the English translation. *Himsa* is a Sanskrit word which refers simply to the *absence* of any and all harmonious or helpful behavior; the prefix ‘a’ is a negation of this negation. Thus, *Ahimsa* is much more profound than mere non-violence; it is the absence of an absence, which translates into a presence, an active reparation, it is restorative compassion; even redemptive action. To associate *Ahimsa* in the first instance simply with an absence of war is to really miss the point. Just a few days before Gandhi’s assassination, it was a military man, in fact, General K. M. Cariappa, who personally asked Gandhi how he could teach the “spirit of non-violence to his troops without endangering their sense of duty to train themselves as professional soldiers;” Gandhi answered with “I am still groping in the dark for the answer. I will find it and I will give it to you some day.”<sup>2</sup>

Like Arjuna, Gandhi was struggling to understand Krishna’s instructions on the eve of battle. And like Arjuna, he listened with attentive reverence to Krishna’s account of the true essence of the human person in relation to society, of how diverse human actions and reactions emerge from the different categories and delicate dispositions of the mind. Like Arjuna, he contemplated Krishna’s elucidations on existence, God, and death—all in the context of the central and sacred call to know and perform one’s duty in a detached spirit of devotion and perseverance.<sup>3</sup> My reading of Gandhi’s answer to the General about groping in the dark, and of his plea in his autobiography (quoted above) wherein he asks the reader to join him in petitioning the God of Truth to give him the blessing of *Ahimsa*, is that Gandhi was on the verge of receiving the same kind of grand and mystical vision that Krishna finally bestowed upon the irresolute Arjuna—a vision which immediately dispelled all doubt and fear and hesitation—enabling him to pick up his weapon and face the impending battle. The violence of this battle described by the Gita gives us an insight into the very nature of violence, as well as the way to overcome it; insights which Gandhi spent the last years of his life, perhaps, trying to internalize. Paradoxically,

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<sup>2</sup> M. K. Gandhi (2001) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India) 100 volumes. Volume 97, 454.

<sup>3</sup> I am paraphrasing R. K. Narayan’s summary of the Bhagavad-Gita in his *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) 147-148.

*Ahimsa* is achieved through the battle and to retreat from this violent battle is to lose all hope of ever overcoming the essence of violence.

Let's take a closer look at the epic. Once Arjuna's chariot is strategically stationed on the front line of the battle, he is able to finally get a close and direct view of his enemies. His enemies, of course, are among those closest to him in blood, his grandfather, his uncle, his cousins, and even in spirit, his spiritual guru. It is at this moment that Arjuna grows weak and loses heart, and asks Krishna in desperation "how can I slaughter my very own family?" What is implied here is profound indeed, as he seems to be saying that to slaughter those nearest and dearest would be to slaughter his very own self.

Krishna's answer to Arjuna regarding the immortality of the soul seems to confirm this by implying that his real enemies are not those that appear on the surface, but indeed are those evil tendencies that are *closest* to him and that dwell invisibly deep within his soul. These must be courageously confronted, according to the wisdom of the Gita, at all costs—a kind of death to self, to selfishness, to lust, to greed, to injustice, to corruption—all represented in the figures before him who have given themselves over to vice rather than virtue. Arjuna then realizes that he must do violence to the violent disharmonies of the deep self.<sup>4</sup> It is in this context, perhaps, that we should consider Gandhi's own spiritual battle against one of these enemies, say, against the vice of lust, for instance, in his decision to take a vow of perpetual celibacy. We very rarely hear about this today, even from those most loyal to Gandhi's teachings. Why would he take upon himself such a vow? I think we can say with confidence that it had nothing to do with some kind of Victorian-inspired horror of the body and sex, but, on the contrary, with recognition of the goodness and truth that emerges in the harmonious *unity* between man and woman, wherein sex is conceived primarily as *gift*, and not as *right*. To demand sex from another as a right springs from the violent disharmonies of the soul, which need to be overcome in a spiritual battle with one's self. Gandhi began to see, perhaps, just as Arjuna saw, once Krishna revealed to him the grand unity of all things from the perspective of eternity, that all being is one and related, and that his own personal harmony and individual purity contributed to the harmony and purity of his own family, community, city, and even to his beloved India. He finally

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<sup>4</sup> Echos of this are found in Meister Eckhart's spirituality. In a sermon on the spiritual birth of the soul, he writes: "A man cannot attain to this birth except by withdrawing his sense from all things. And that requires a mighty effort to drive back the powers of the soul and inhibit their functioning. This must be done with force, without force it cannot be done. As Christ said: 'The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force' (Matt. 11:12)."

realized that the very first thing he must do to bring harmony, dignity, purity, and peace to India, was to achieve these virtues in his self. He also eventually saw that the majority of Indians, even many who followed him in the name of non-violence, had no genuine understanding of what non-violence really meant. In a remarkably revealing passage, Gandhi states:

*There was no real appreciation of non-violence in the thirty-year of struggle against British Raj. Therefore, the peace the masses maintained during that struggle of a generation with exemplary patience had not come from within. The pent-up fury found an outlet when British Raj was gone. It naturally vented itself in communal violence which was never fully absent and which was kept under suppression by the British Bayonet.*<sup>5</sup>

By *peace* here, it is clear that Gandhi is referring merely to external constraint, and contrasts it with what we could call *genuine peace*—a joyful harmony that comes from within the deep self or from the soul. This is confirmed by what he goes on to say about violence, implying that violence has a life of its own that dwells deep within the soul and leaves no room there for genuine peace. It is here that we begin to see what we could call metaphysics of violence in Gandhi's thought, which, it seems, he only gradually developed and then expressed in his later writings.

As some experts on Gandhi's thought have put it, "Gandhiji" tended to progressively assert the intrinsic moral value of non-violence rather than its extrinsic instrumental value."<sup>6</sup> I would go even further than this and say that although fasting, celibacy, and non-violence were initially employed by Gandhi as the strategic tools of social and political action, they eventually became charged with profound moral, metaphysical, and religious meaning. This is not to say that he lost interest in the social and political realms, but that he began to see how these realms were ultimately intertwined with the metaphysical and religious realms. He himself says that "[v]iolence can be overcome by non-violence. This is as clear to me as the proposition that two and two make four. But for this one must have *faith*."<sup>7</sup> And to fully appreciate what he means by faith here, we must go back to the last words of his autobiography with which

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<sup>5</sup> Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma*, 279. This particular quote, and the two that immediately follow here, were brought to my attention by K. Ramakrishna Rao, chairman of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, this past summer (July, 2008) when he presented his paper, "Colors Of Violence: A Psycho-Social analysis and a Gandhian Perspective" at the World Congress of Philosophy in Seoul, South Korea. I hereby acknowledge the substantial influence of his research upon mine while working on the present paper.

<sup>6</sup> See K. Ramakrishna Rao's above mentioned paper soon to be published in the International Proceedings of the World Congress of Philosophy

<sup>7</sup> Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma*, 453 (Emphasis in italics is mine).

we began wherein he writes: “I ask [the reader] to join with me in prayer to the God of Truth that He may grant me the boon of *Ahimsa* in mind, word and deed.” Faith here is faith in the substance of *Ahimsa*, which is understood as a gift from God, and he implores his readers to join him in asking God to grant him this gift. Gandhi’s vision has become here an all-encompassing religious and metaphysical vision, as he seems to be glimpsing something of what Arjuna saw when “Krishna...suddenly stood transformed [as] God himself, multidimensional and all-pervading [wherein] [t]ime, creatures, friends and foes alike were absorbed in the great being [the God of Truth] whose stature spanned the space between sky and earth, and extended from horizon to horizon.”<sup>8</sup> With Arjuna, Gandhi seems to be crying out “Now I understand” as he begins to see the great unity of God wherein “[c]reation, destruction, activity and inactivity all formed a part and parcel of [his] grand being,”<sup>9</sup> and beyond which nothing existed.

It is this vision which allows Gandhi to uncover and expose what he calls the “tricks” of violence thereby revealing that for him violence is an intelligent, metaphysical force with a strategy—a distorted and twisted strategy to be sure—but a strategy nonetheless. Gandhi came to believe that one of man’s greatest *duties* today was to understand, confront, and defeat the perverted strategy of violence by exposing it through the truth of non-violence, by the power of *Ahimsa*, a force that necessarily entailed a pure love expressed in and through innocent and redemptive suffering. Gandhi refused to talk about human rights without also talking about human duties, implying that man has rights precisely because he has duties, and for him, again, one of man’s greatest duties was to achieve *Ahimsa* through innocent suffering. Gandhi often spoke about the death of Christ in this vein, and likewise, his sayings regarding the innocent suffering of Imam Hussein, which I shall address in the conclusion of this paper, are well known<sup>10</sup> “In the age of the Atom bomb,” says Gandhi, “unadulterated non-violence is the only force that can confound all the tricks...of violence.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Narayan, *The Mahabharata*, 148.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “I learned from Hussein how to achieve victory while being oppressed.” “My faith is that the progress of Islam does not depend on the use of the sword by its believers, but the result of the supreme sacrifice of Hussain, the great saint.” See <http://www.islamicwisdom.net/index.php/imam-hussain-views-of-non-muslim-scholars>. Accessed on June, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Gandhi *The Collected Works of Mahatma*, 249.

### III. René Girard: the role of violence in the genesis of culture

With this reference to the “tricks” of violence, it is appropriate now to turn attention to the other contemporary thinker under consideration in this paper, the well-known anthropologist, René Girard, who brings to this discussion not only his expert knowledge of Cultural Anthropology, but also his proficiency in the disciplines of Psychoanalysis, Literary Criticism and Scriptural Exegesis. As I stated in the introduction, one reason why these two thinkers are particularly important is that their conclusions on the essence of violence are stunningly commensurate, even though they come from vastly different academic, cultural, and religious backgrounds; this, in my judgment, gives their conclusions more force.

As one of the world’s foremost theorists on the role of violence in the genesis of culture, Girard has focused attention on two central and related themes: imitation and desire. Though many classical philosophers pay attention to the importance of these terms, they take on new significance in the hands of a contemporary cultural anthropologist like Girard. The relation of these concepts to each other, in particular, takes on fascinating proportions as Girard speculates on the mystery of human origins and the nature of the human being. For him, something profoundly intense happened millions of years ago to the pre-human creature on the threshold of becoming human. This pre-human creature, according to Girard *lost* something precisely to gain access to something else. What is lost was *part* of its animal instinct; what it gained was an access to *desire*.<sup>12</sup> Once this potential was activated, the pre-human creature became human.

Girard does not claim that the pre-human creature loses all of its animal instincts, but only some of them. Moreover, the retained instincts are somewhat diminished to make space as it were for a radically new and inexplicable and properly human power called *desire*. What makes it new and inexplicable is precisely that it has no essential or ultimate goal; human desire, unlike mere instinct, is without an obvious and fixed object. Girard draws this insight out of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and then justifies the move, as it were, by developing another insight in Aristotle’s *Poetics* concerning the centrality of *imitation* for the human animal. Girard then claims that since human desire has no object per se, human beings must *borrow* their desires from others; these others are called role models. The term he coins here is “mimesis” or “mimetic desire”—a *desire*

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<sup>12</sup> See René Girard (2001) *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, tr. James G. Williams (New York: Orbis Books) 15.

that emerges through the *imitation* of the desires of others.<sup>13</sup> As a cultural anthropologist, Girard is most interested in how, what he calls the “mimetic nature of human desire”, is the cause of violence, and how violence operates in the genesis of human culture. He claims that when the desire to be like our role model becomes so intense that we desire to not only have what the model has, but even to be what the model is, then we become rivals of our role models. Now the energy of this rivalry phenomenon on the individual level is compounded on the societal level and can lead any given society, if not constrained, to all out competition and eventually violent chaos. The constraint usually comes by way of religious taboos and cultural activities that regulate the competitive energy through ritual and controlled sport and games. This had led many to conclude that Girard considers mimetic desire to be an intrinsically evil power that inevitably leads to violence, but a careful reading of his work shows this not to be the case. He clearly states, in fact, in his book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, that:

*Even if the Mimetic Nature of human desire is responsible for most of the violent acts that distress us, we should not conclude that mimetic desire is bad in itself. If our desires were not mimetic, they would be forever fixed on predetermined objects; they would be a particular form of instinct. Human beings could no more change their desire than cows their appetite for grass. Without mimetic desire there would be neither freedom nor humanity. Mimetic desire is intrinsically good.*<sup>14</sup>

Though intrinsically good, the accumulative power of mimetic desire tends to create dangerous situations in society when people are prevented from obtaining what they desire, whether it be that which the model possesses, or that which the model is. Since this power becomes contagious in groups or crowds, a situation arises wherein intense and complex rivalries threaten to destroy the entire social order. It is at this moment, precisely, that the evil “tricks” of violence can be detected in what Girard speaks about as the “single victim mechanism”—an unconscious process of singling out and accusing one person as the cause of the growing frustration. In reality, this person may be innocent and is certainly not the cause of the tension; the real cause of the collective frustration is the inability to satisfy individual mimetic desire—a problem compounded in groups because of the contagion of mimetic desire—but the group is oblivious to the innocence of the victim and violently eliminates it. The

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<sup>13</sup> For a precise summary of Girard’s thought see the ‘Foreword’ by James G. Williams in Girard *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*.

<sup>14</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 15.

chosen victim, says Girard, is usually set apart from the rest of society; the group knows (perhaps unconsciously) that there will be no reprisal for eliminating the vulnerable victim since there is a consensus that the chosen victim embodies evil, and the anonymity of the “mob” precludes any one person from being blamed.

Girard speaks about the intrinsic violence of the entire single victim process not only as the work of Satan, but *as* Satan, “who” has lost all real “whoness”—a “person,” as it were, without personality, a “being” without any being left, that “exists” as a spiritual parasite “on the being of humankind...[and] on the being of God.”<sup>15</sup> Satan’s “trick” is to expel the impending violence through violence in order to prevent all out destruction, since all out destruction would deprive the spiritual parasite from feeding on the very thing that gives it existence, namely, violence against the innocent. Once the innocent victim is destroyed, a certain calm ensues, a pseudo *peace* emerges which simply allows the mechanism of violence to continue—a kind of temporary “constraint”—similar to Gandhi’s description of the pseudo peace in India during the thirty-years’ struggle, which later exploded as a “pent-up” fury once the British Raj was gone.

#### **IV. Recourse to Mythological Traditions of the World**

At this point, Girard has recourse to the world’s mythological tradition to back up his theory, and attempts to show how the false gods of myth are produced by the cycle of Satanic violence. The term he uses to describe this cyclical process is “double transference”. It refers to the realization on the part of the society that eliminated the innocent victim, that the evil victim was also responsible in some way for the relief and “peace” that came as a result of being violently accused and destroyed. His arguments are fascinating and convincing, even if somewhat overstated, as he gives one example after the other from the mythological tradition, carefully helping his reader through the texts, and showing how, over time, this process became recognized and religiously ritualized in human and animal sacrifice:

*Now if the victim could cause all their troubles and yet also produce such peace and prosperity, he or she must be a different sort of being, a higher more powerful sort. This is the birth of the gods. It was not a conscious process but began reflexively and developed and crystallized eventually into ritual representation of what had worked in the past. By the time the*

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<sup>15</sup> See the Foreword by James G. Williams in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. xii.

*human ability to think critically had emerged in prophetic preaching or philosophical criticism, the origins of religion and culture were screened, covered, concealed, disguised...[a]s the victim dedicated for sacrifice became more important to human communities, the fact that the victim was “sacred,” set aside to be offered up for the community, special attention was drawn to this designated person.*<sup>16</sup>

The first transference, then, refers to the demonization of the victim, who is falsely blamed for the tension that threatens to destroy the society, but once the victim is expelled, and a certain degree of peace results, a second transference takes place wherein the victim is sacralized as the supernatural cause of the calm that saved the society from total destruction. For Girard, this explains the birth of the gods of mythology.

Having argued for the “double transference” process as the key to understanding mythology, Girard goes on to argue for the uniqueness of the biblical tradition, which, he claims, has much in common with mythology, but also differs significantly. He begins with the biblical story of Joseph, son of Jacob, in the Old Testament (The Torah) to show that the roots of all religions, except Judaism and Christianity, are rooted in efforts to control violence and “establish social order by channeling violence onto surrogate victims or scapegoats [in order to] justify and sacralize violence in the name of God or the gods.”<sup>17</sup> In a brilliant comparative exposition of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* with the story of Joseph, he convincingly shows how the biblical story transcends the Greek myth in that God takes the side of the innocent victim. Girard claims that in all other mythological traditions, and indeed in all other religions, again, except in Judaism and Christianity, violence against the innocent goes unpunished, and is even justified and sacralized.

Whereas Girard’s insights are fascinating, and his contributions to anthropology, theology, and social theory indisputable, I think he overstates his case when he suggests that the “single (or surrogate) victim mechanism” and “double transference” processes are the sole and entire explanations of *all* human institutions, cultures, and religions.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, although his penetrating comparative analysis of the biblical story of Joseph with Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* does clearly show how the biblical material exposes those “tricks” of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., xvi—xvii.

<sup>17</sup> Leo D. Lefebure (2000) *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence* (New York: Orbis Books) 16. Lefebure also provides evidence in this work (p.30-31) which suggests that the biblical story of Joseph has antecedents going back centuries before Israel in the Egyptian *Tale of the Two Brothers*.

<sup>18</sup> I follow closely here the insightful and objective criticisms raised by Lefebure, *Ibid.*, 20-23.

violence that are so cleverly concealed in many mythological and religious traditions, he limits this exposing power to Judaism and Christianity. To be sure, as a Christian, I am convinced that the full power of exposing the cycle of mimetic violence is to be found in the death and resurrection of Christ, foreshadowed, as it were, in the biblical story of Joseph; but I am also convinced that other religious traditions, besides Judaism and Christianity, also provide resources for renouncing the mimetic cycle of violence and rivalry. One goal of this paper, in fact, has been to show that the Hindu tradition, in the hands of a devout Hindu, such as Gandhi, yields results that are similar to mainline Christian approaches to violence and peace. Nonetheless, the Bhagavad-Gita does certainly lend itself to a Girardian reading since Krishna, who is an incarnation (avatar) of the great and supreme God, Vishnu, finally succeeds in convincing Arjuna to slaughter his enemies—not all of whom are guilty; some of those Arjuna will have to slaughter are, in fact, noble and innocent. Furthermore, the decisive turning point for Arjuna comes precisely when Krishna reveals himself in a mystical vision as an incarnation of Vishnu wherein order and disorder, “[c]reation, destruction, activity and inactivity” are all revealed as integral parts of his divine being. This can easily be interpreted, following Girard, as one of the classical “tricks” of violence since violence casts out violence. Or to put it in Girard’s biblical terms, “Satan casts out Satan:”

*Satan as the “prince” or “first one” of this world is the “principle” or “first thing” of both order and disorder: of disorder because he is a figure representing rivalry and scandal, of order because he represents the mechanism that is triggered at the height of the disorder. “Satan casts out Satan” [just] at [the right] moment...just before the community explodes.<sup>19</sup>*

Is a Girardian reading of the Bhagavad-Gita justified then? Of course the question cannot be settled here, but it is interesting to note that there is a growing tendency among many Indians “uncomfortable with the violence demanded by Krishna in the text, [to take] the Bhagavad-Gita out of its original context in the *Mahabharata* and interpret it as a spiritual struggle with the human soul,”<sup>20</sup> as we saw above with Gandhi. In the words of a contemporary leading expert on the relation between religion and violence,

*[i]t is one of the great ironies [and surprises] of the history of religious thought that Gandhi could take a text that explicitly urges violence in obedience to duty, interpret it as a text of nonviolence, relate this text to*

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<sup>19</sup> James G. Williams in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. xii.

<sup>20</sup> Lefebure, *Revelation, Revelation, the Religions, and Violence*, 150.

*the teaching of Jesus on nonviolence in the Sermon on the Mount, and demonstrate the practical effectiveness of nonviolent tactics on an unprecedented scale.*<sup>21</sup>

In addition to Hinduism, then, I would also suggest that Buddhism and Islam contain resources for repudiating violence and for cultivating life-structures that are free from the contagious violence of mimetic rivalry. In Islam, especially, considering that the biblical story of Joseph also appears in the Quran, we find a very powerful exposure of mimetic rivalry and a clear refusal to perpetrate the contagious violence of the Satanic single victim mechanism, which Girard so brilliantly depicts. In the Surah Yusuf, verse 78, we read about the way the brothers of Joseph refuse to victimize their innocent brother, when he is accused of theft by the Egyptians, since they have come to realize their previous guilt in victimizing their brother Joseph—the very one they are unknowingly in the presence of and addressing—and the very one who, now in a position of power in Egypt, has staged the whole ordeal. Not willing to grieve their innocent father, Jacob, once again, the brothers offer themselves to be taken in the place of their brother. The Quranic verse reads:

قَالُوا يَا أَيُّهَا الْعَزِيزُ إِنَّ لَهُ أَبًا شَيْخًا كَبِيرًا فَخُذْ أَحَدَنَا مَكَانَهُ إِنَّا نَرَاكَ مِنَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

“Take one of us in his place,” they proclaim, thus refusing to allow the violent cycle of the single victim mechanism to deceive and trick them once again. At this, Joseph is moved to reveal his true identity, and the story ends happily ever after, with the cycle of violence broken and exposed. Within the long and complex history of the various strands of development in Islam, it is, perhaps, in Shiite Islam, and particularly among Shiite communities in modern India, that a most interesting cultivation of the insights of this particular Surah has been achieved. I refer to a movement of non-violence initiated primarily by Indian Shiites, mostly women, mostly poets, (although there were important Christian and Hindus associated with the movement) who were inspired by the spirit of non-violence advocated by Gandhi, but who connected this spirit to commensurate inspirations emerging in their own Shiite tradition—relating it in one way or another to the mystical tragedy at Karbala. I have not the time to explore this movement here, but as this is so relevant to my topic, I would at least like to provide one example of this movement, embodied in a short poem by Sarojini Naidu, titled *The Imam Bara*, which reads:

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Out of the somber Shadow

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 151.

Over the sunlit grass,  
Slow in a sad procession  
The shadowy pageants pass  
Mournful, majestic and solemn,  
Stricken and pale and dumb,  
Crowned in their peerless anguish  
The Sacred Martyrs come.  
Hark, from the brooding silence  
Breaks the wild cry of pain  
Wrung from the heart of the ages  
Ali! Hassan! Hussain!

## II

Come from this tomb of shadows,  
Come from this tragic shrine  
That throbs with the deathless sorrow  
Of a long-dead martyr line.  
Love! Let the living sunlight  
Kindle your splendid eyes  
Ablaze with the steadfast triumph  
Of the spirit which never dies.  
So may the hope of new ages  
Comfort the mystic pain  
That cries from the ancient silence  
Ali! Hassan! Husain!<sup>22</sup>

## V. Concluding remarks

At any rate, and returning to the main focus of this paper, I want to assert by way of conclusion that for both Gandhi and Girard, violence is an invisible, ambiguously transcendent, disordered force that feeds upon itself by parasitically taking advantage of the whole range of immoral human *desire*. To renounce it, its tricks must be exposed, which involves at the personal level, nothing short of renouncing all evil and immorality through a hyper-conscious decision to strive daily to know the truth and to do the good, precisely by loving the beautiful—the very place where the good and true meet—and that one sacred space where violence dares not show its hideous face.

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<sup>22</sup> See Muhammad-Reza Fakhri-Rohani (2007) *Ashura: Poems in English* (Karbala: Imam al-Husain's Sacred Sanctuary) 35-36.