pointment that anthropologists since DURKHEIM have tended to dismiss the universality of sacrifice, which “like the sexual act, can be practiced in many ways, but follows an immutable pattern” (p. 243). CALASSO and GIRARD also share the conviction that sacrifice cannot be defined out of existence: “Sacrifice,” argues CALASSO, “is, by definition, something that society will not accept, belonging to an age that is dead and gone forever” (p. 357).

But where Girard sees the gospels as the supreme decoding of the riddle of sacrifice, CALASSO grants that honor to the Vedic literature. In a critique of Sacrifice, his monograph on the Brāhmaṇas, CALASSO uses the word “fallacy” to describe GIRARD’S conclusion that the Brāhmaṇas, while they come close to unmasking the scapegoat mechanism at the heart of sacrifice, are in the end another species of myth designed to conceal its workings. In unmasking “first, Greek tragedy and then, little by little, other literary and religious forms, including finally the speculations of the Brāhmaṇas … Girard was doing nothing more than tracing back the movement in secularized society that can no longer see nature or any other power beyond itself and believes it is itself the answer for everything” (p. 349). This hubris belongs “the religion of our time, the religion of society” (p. 353), which CALASSO in his November 5, 2014 René GIRARD Lecture referred to as “the last superstition.”

“Certain ideas of the Vedic ritualists could be set out without resorting to their categories and reasoning,” CALASSO tells us, “but using words acceptable even in a twenty-first-century university lecture hall” (p. 293). There is however, a deeper layer, belonging to the realm of the esoteric, “an area in which it is increasingly difficult to find parallels in other civilizations” (p. 291-292). It is here that the Brāhmaṇas maintain what CALASSO says GIRARD has lost, namely, the hidden and unstated truth that there exists “a break between the invisible and the visible” such that “the visible ends up suspended over the void” (p. 293).

If there is much in CALASSO’S project that is anthropological in the Girardian sense, there is also something that might be described as Confucian: gathering together the classic works of human intellectual endeavor—in distilled form in his books and in physical form in his fabled library—with the aim of helping his reader to live a fuller, more conscious life, more elevated and at the same time more integrated. Like GIRARD, CALASSO thinks anthropology has as much to learn from STENDHAL as from DARWIN. But CALASSO’S field of inquiry (and what he expects of his reader) is far more expansive than most. And if the reader thinks it sufficient to know MALLARMÉ and PROUST without knowing YĀJñAVALKYA, then she is impoverished by the fact.

Not surprisingly, the attention and respect he gives to the Sanskrit canon has won him admirers in India, where his previous work Ka was published in several Indian languages and where Ardor is set to be published in Hindi. In light of the history of orientalist scholarship and the currently ascendant Hindu nationalism in India, some scholars might accuse CALASSO of privileging and reifying a Vedic past that we can only view through the narrow aperture that is the collected writings of its most elite inhabitants. They would be wrong to do so. CALASSO approaches the Vedic literature with a genuine intellectual humility, assuming it has something to teach him—and us. And if he prefers the rapidly fading world of Vedic ritual to the subsequent proliferation of popular Hinduism, well, he also prefers the Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council.

Brian Collins


What happens when a dedicated young scholar reads a book that puts into words what he himself had been thinking for some time, but wasn’t able to say with the same clarity? Will envy, mimetic rivalry and resentment be the inevitable consequences of such a discovery? And what if the author of this book in his young, committed reader finally finds someone who deeply shares his research interests and his desire to make them known to a greater public? Will he soon perceive him as a potential rival and obstacle to his own success and fame? Although those familiar with mimetic theory might consider such a development very likely,
the book which I gladly introduce here, proves another outcome to be possible.

The book, the recently published volume in the Raymund SCHWAGER Collected Writings-series, provides an exciting insight into the development of Mimetic Theory and Dramatic Theology. But it is also the history of an emerging and intensifying intellectual as well as spiritual friendship of two outstanding scholars of the late 20th century. Titled Briefwechsel mit René Girard [Correspondence with R.G.], it includes more than a hundred letters by Raymund SCHWAGER and René GIRARD, thoroughly edited by Karin PETEER and Nikolaus WANDINGER. The collection provides the original French letters, supplemented by a German translation, which was skillfully done by the young Girardian scholar Simon DE KEUKELAERE in close collaboration with the editors. Thus having the French original on the left pages and the German translation on the right, the reader capable of either the language of STENDHAL, PROUST and FLAUBERT or that of GOETHE, SCHILLER and HöLDERLIN gets a good impression of the development of this exchange of ideas and concepts.

It is fortunate that the correspondence can be traced back to its very beginnings on March 18, 1974. That is the day when Raymund SCHWAGER, by that time editorial journalist of the Swiss theological magazine Orientierung, writes a letter to the 12 years older René GIRARD. He had read an interview with GIRARD about La violence et le sacré in the magazine Esprit and immediately bought the book, which – after having completed its reading – he found “admirable”. Thus, he reviewed it for the Orientierung and also published a translation of the Esprit-interview there. In his first letter he asks GIRARD if he has written anything else on Christianity, and announces that he will try to find a publishing house willing to do a translation of La violence et le sacré. René GIRARD answers within a few days, evidently delighted by the interest of the Swiss Jesuit. It is “with impatience” that he awaits the translation of the Esprit-interview, and he stresses how precious SCHWAGER’s interest is to him, as he feels “fairly isolated – especially in California” (51 [English translations by the author of the review]).

After this jump-start, the correspondence slowly starts to evolve. In his second letter, dated December 1974, SCHWAGER admits his preliminary failure to find a publisher; two publishing houses had shown interest, but then withdrew due to economic reasons. Nevertheless, he says that—counting La violence and le sacré among the few books that really matter in the large tide of scientific production—he would like to stay in contact with Girard. And—almost prophetically—he goes on: “Thus I hope that your hypothesis will once be the subject of a great intellectual, religious and political debate. Perhaps the ground is not well prepared yet, but I on my part will do my very best to attend to it with my very limited means.” (53) And in fact, over the coming months and even years, he proves the pertinacious perseverance of a well-trained Jesuit, trying time and again to find a German publisher for La violence and le sacré. (Despite these efforts it will not be before 1987 that this book will finally appear in German.)

Again, GIRARD responds within a few days, announcing that he will be in Geneva one month later and suggesting that they could meet there if SCHWAGER was perchance passing through. Obviously, as his subsequent letter indicates, this was not possible for SCHWAGER, but it is not long until they finally meet in Avignon for the first time in summer 1975. From this time on, the letters increase in length, frequency and density. Below, a few aspects shall be picked out and highlighted:

A first, more personal one, is the emergence of an intellectual as well as spiritual friendship between two seemingly very different men: they are living on two continents, one a literature scholar, the other a theologian, one a professor, the other a journalist, one a married father of three, the other a celibate Jesuit. But, beyond their differences, they are increasingly united by their common interest in the relevance of mimetic desire, violence and the specific role of the Judeo-Christian tradition in uncovering what GIRARD calls the scapegoat mechanism. In some phases, the correspondence almost resembles that of two lovers, eagerly waiting for the next letter to arrive, for some new information or notice. But of course, with GIRARD and SCHWAGER, it’s their scientific “eros” that becomes noticeable in their correspondence: for example, both of them repeat in several letters how impatiently they are waiting
for the next letter to arrive and how excited they are to read the new books or articles of the other. And step by step this shared scientific commitment also evokes deep mutual appreciation, even affection for each other: While the first letters open formally with “Cher Monsieur”, later ones indicate their cordial connection through phrases like “Très cher ami” to open and “Je t’embrasse”, “en union profonde” (236), “avec toute mon affection” (118) and “Je pense à toi dans ma prière” (394) to close a letter. GIRARD also starts talking about “our common work” (198) and stresses how glad he is that Raymund Schwager is there to—especially among theologians—smooth out misunderstandings and to defend what is true in their common hypothesis. In each other they find an “esprit fraternel”, a like-minded companion, that proves to be all the more important as within their own surroundings they often find themselves isolated or misunderstood. Especially GIRARD complains several times about the lack of interest, or even rejection, which he experiences in the academic field: He talks about the incomprehension when it comes to religious questions (cf. 119) and his appraisal of some of his colleagues is devastating (cf. 273).

But how is such a friendship possible? Very few passages—especially in SCHWAGER’s letters—show that it is not easily or casually accomplished. In one of his early letters he writes towards the end: “I take the liberty of closing with a very personal remark: In my prayers I thank God that he has given you this wisdom. This prayer is for me at the same time ‘the means’ to not fall into a ridiculous rivalry by taking you as a model (master of thought).” (84) This remark, among others, shows how existentially relevant their common research had become for Raymund Schwager: how self-critically aware he was of the pitfalls of rivalrous mimetic desire, and how thoroughly he had started analyzing his whole life and relationships by means of René GIRARD’s mimetic theory. It increasingly served him as a hermeneutic tool to better understand his own—especially academic—relationships and to try to master his proneness to rivalry (183). For SCHWAGER, this was also a spiritual process. In one of his later letters, dated Easter 1984, he refers to the necessity of the divine life-giving power, which is essential for overcoming, at least in part, the violence within humanity and within oneself. And he adds: “I feel the resistance of these powers which want that everything stays a bit in the dark, a bit mixed—a bit of the new life and a lot of the life of this world. I also feel this resistance within me, the in-between stage is more comfortable.” (327) But not only SCHWAGER bears witness to the existential dimension of Mimetic Theory: GIRARD, as well, admits “the presence of sacrificial elements” (149) in his book Des choses cachées. He even mentions envying SCHWAGER for the academic sobriety of his superb presentation of their common hypothesis in Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock? [Must there be Scapegoats?], an emotion GIRARD seems to tame by yielding the field of theology to his Jesuit friend (135). Apart from this impending but mastered rivalry among themselves, they both share the experience of troublesome “mimetic difficulties” at their respective universities: “Nothing is more propitious for this kind of things as academic life” (387), GIRARD notes in one of his letters.

But it is not only their personal friendship, their search for the translation and promulgation of each other’s works and their reflections about the existential dimension of mimetic theory that become visible in the correspondence. Also, the emerging controversial discussion on the understanding of sacrifice in the Christian context, especially the evaluation of the Letter to the Hebrews, is part of this exchange of letters. As Józef NIEWIADOMSKI has retraced this controversy in detail in the current issue of Contagion (Vol. 21), only a few remarks shall be given here: The discussion on the question of sacrifice is started by SCHWAGER in 1977, shortly after he had finished his book Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock? There, in spite of its sacrificial language, he counted the Letter to the Hebrews among the texts with revelatory power concerning the amalgamation of violence with the divine, and he thought that GIRARD would share this perspective from reading La violence et le sacré. GIRARD, however, is confused by this interpretation, and rejects this very letter in Des choses cachées, as he assumes it to be a relapse into the sacrificial logic. He is convinced that his hypothesis goes into the direction of a complete dissolution of the sacrificial, whereby it nevertheless respects and even justifies medieval theology “in a relative and historic man-
ner" (111), although it is still sacrificial. Whereas SCHWAGER wants to retain the notion of sacrifice for Christianity and to use the same word for different, though related things, GIRARD is afraid this will only cause misunderstandings. It is not before 1995 (and thus beyond the correspondence documented in the Briefwechsel), that GIRARD finally in an article titled *Mimetische Theorie und Theologie* recognizes that he “was wrong twice”: Firstly, because a radical separation between sacrificial religions and the Christian religion was not absolutely necessary, and secondly, because the use of the same term to name two different types of sacrifice—bewildering as it may be on a superficial level—can nevertheless bear witness to the paradoxical unity of all religions in human history.

Apart from reflecting their essential controversy on the understanding of sacrifice up to 1991, the correspondence also provides some interesting historical information, as the correspondents mention in passing the disarmament debate, the first encounter with emerging computer technology, and GIRARD’s appraisal of the RATZINGER report—to name but a few. So, to conclude, one may say that this collection, though incomplete (by necessity, as not all letters could be found), provides a deep insight into the emergence of a fascinating way of thought and friendship. Completed by tabular overviews of SCHWAGER’s and GIRARD’s biographies, works and letters, as well as a helpful register of persons and a subject index, *Briefwechsel mit René Girard* turns out to be an indispensable reading for all interested in the theories and personalities of SCHWAGER and GIRARD, but it will also be of note for those interested in models of interdisciplinary research and intellectual friendship.

*Petra Steinmair-Pösel*


J. Denny WEAVER’s 2001 book, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, investigated the Christian doctrine of atonement in the light of recent challenges to the various versions of satisfaction theory that have held sway in the second Christian millennium. Satisfaction theory’s conceptual link between God’s salvific action in the world and the intentional violent death of Jesus has been called into question by new theological lenses, such as the nonviolent hermeneutics of KAUFMANN and YODER, René GIRARD’S exposition of sacralised violence in the production of human community, and the contextual perspectives arising from the struggle for justice and visibility expressed in black, feminist, and liberationist theologies. In that book, WEAVER had worked out of the conclusion that ‘Anselmian atonement was an abstract legal transaction that enabled the Christian believers of Christendom to claim salvation via the death of Christ while actively accommodating the violence of the sword’ (*TNA*, 5). He went on to retrieve and reframe the classical atonement motif of the *Christus Victor*, as popularised by Gustaf AU-LÈN, by outlining the ‘content’ of this motif from the Gospel narratives of Jesus’ nonviolent and socially radical ministry of the reign of God. He gave the term ‘narrative Christus Victor’ to this understanding of atonement.

WEAVER’S call for a paradigm change in the theology of the atonement was met by strong responses, both in agreement and disagreement. For some, WEAVER’S argument that the God revealed in Jesus’s teaching and ministry could in no way be implicated in the violent death of Jesus provided a theological refutation to claims that Christian redemption was founded on a more or less explicit form of ‘divine child abuse’, whereby a dishonoured (or disobeyed) deity required (or tolerated) the death of an only son as the necessary and effective satisfaction for the offence created by human sin. For others, the narrative Christus Victor motif left important theological issues unattended, such as the trinitarian and christological dimensions of salvation, the nature and guilt of human sin, and the requirements of justice in re-establishing broken relationships and social order. WEAVER responded to several critical readers of his book at the Mennonite and Friends Forum at the AAR/SBL Annual Meetings in 2007; these papers were subsequently published in the *Conrad Grebel Review* 27 no. 2 (2009). Agreeing with his critics’ insistence on the correlation of the doctrine of atonement with the trinitarian character of God, WEAVER emphasised that ‘more than an analysis of the life, death, and resurrec-