

Introduction

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This first section of the Handbook on Mimetic Theory and Religion addresses the question of the violence of our origins according to mimetic theory: the origin of religion, the origin of culture, and the origin of humankind. Mimetic theory argues that religion, or more precisely that the social process—the scapegoat mechanism—that is at the origin of religion, is also at the origin of culture and that it was this that began the process of hominization leading to modern *homo sapiens sapiens*. According to mimetic theory, the sacred, a self-regulating mechanism of violence, protected our ancestors against their own violence and progressively transformed them into humans.¹ Furthermore, this theory of the origin of religion is naturalistic and presupposes no transcendent deity. It is proposed as a purely scientific hypothesis concerning the origin of religion and culture, the place of religion in human culture, and the central importance of violence in human affairs, as well as of the close relationship which has always existed between religion and violence.

These are powerful and controversial claims that need to be explicated, and they will be throughout this handbook. In this section, they will be assessed in relation to three issues. First, how does this theory of the origin fare, how does it compare with, and what does it add to our current understanding of the origin of our species and of symbolic language? Is the mimetic hypothesis consistent with our present knowledge? And what can it contribute to that expanding field of research? What does the fact that the institution of the sacred is the beginning

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of human thought mean for our understanding of human consciousness? The second important issue is to relate mimetic theory to other theories of origin, especially Freud's, which also posits a close relationship between religion, culture, and the structure of the human mind. There is, as a matter of fact, enough proximity between Girard's theory of the founding murder and Freud's theses in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* to warrant a sustained inquiry into their similarities and differences.

The third issue, which occupies the second half of this first section, concerns what may be called the traces of the origin. What is the relation of mimetic theory with approaches in anthropology, archeology, and history of religion? How does Girard's hypothesis differ from other hypotheses in the history of religion that also recognize the fundamental role of violence in early religion, and in particular the hypothesis of Walter Burkert? How does it stand up to what anthropologists tell us concerning the place and importance of vengeance and sacrifice—two fundamental institutions of the sacred according to mimetic theory—in different non-modern societies?

Finally, does Neolithic archeology support the claim of mimetic theory concerning the importance of violence in early societies? The place of violence in prehistory has recently been a hotly debated issue.² A theory that places violence at the origin is hardly compatible with what for many years has been the dominant view of prehistory as "the pacified past."³ Yet there are signs, as readers of this handbook will discover, that contemporary researchers in the field are now less satisfied with the dominant view than were those of a previous generation. All in all, the centrality to modern investigations of the range of questions and arguments being posed by mimetic theory is coming into clearer and clearer focus, a focus that is witnessed to by the chapters in this section.

NOTES

1. Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford, ed., *Can We Survive Our Origins?* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).
2. Stephen A. LeBlanc and Katherine E. Register, *Constant Battles: Why We Fight* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003).
3. Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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