Cruelty, Religion, and the Public Sphere at Stanford: Rorty and Girard

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Abstract

Richard Rorty and René Girard illuminate the relationships between cruelty, religion, and moral life at Stanford. Rorty treats cruelty as the central public evil and hopes secular liberal culture can reduce it through democratic habits, sympathy, and public justification. Girard offers a darker account, arguing that rivalry, scapegoating, and collective violence recur even in enlightened communities. The essay argues that Rorty's secular pragmatism is too abstract to explain how people are formed against cruelty, while Girard more powerfully diagnoses the social pressures of ambitious institutions. Yet Girard's anthropology remains in tension with Augustinian and Thomistic Christianity, which treats cruelty as a fallen choice rather than human nature.

Introduction

Questions of faith remain alive in a secular university, especially when students are trying to understand cruelty, exclusion, moral obligation, and the grounds of human equality. Stanford prizes pluralism, openness, and public reason. It also gathers people into an intensely ambitious environment where rivalry, humiliation, and moral injury shape everyday college life. In that setting, religion explains cruelty and offers forms of goodness independent of the consensus of the moment. Richard Rorty and René Girard illuminate this problem from profoundly different directions. Rorty designates cruelty as the ultimate evil in moral and political life and hopes a secular liberal culture can mitigate it through democratic habits, public justification, and language that helps people see suffering more clearly. Girard offers a darker account of human communities, arguing that rivalry, scapegoating, and violence recur with disturbing regularity and that religion exposes those patterns and provides alternatives. Both thinkers help explain why cruelty persists in modern institutions, but Girard speaks more directly to the moral and social pressures students actually encounter. This essay argues that Rorty rightly identifies cruelty as the central moral problem, but that his solution of secular pragmatism fails to cultivate the habits of character needed to resist it. Moreover, his account underestimates the social resources of religious traditions and the need for models of goodness independent of any immediate social consensus. Girard speaks more directly to ambitious communities because he explains how rivalry, accusation, and exclusion reproduce themselves even among people who understand themselves as enlightened. Yet Girard is less persuasive when he extends that insight into a universal claim about violent human nature. He is strongest in showing how cruelty takes hold in communities and why religion remains essential to university life.

Richard Rorty at Stanford

Richard Rorty challenged philosophy's traditional search for certainty and redirected attention toward language, history, culture, and democratic life. Born in New York City in 1931 to left-wing intellectual parents, Rorty grew up amid political argument and moral ambition. At Stanford, Rorty became an important intellectual presence whose work reached beyond philosophy into literature, politics, and religion. He was known for wit, range, and accessibility as a teacher. He often said that many students arrived from conservative religious backgrounds and that the university's task was to help form them into good secular citizens. Having heard this lore, we first assumed Rorty meant that he had been on a crusade against people of faith and that for Rorty being "smart" or "intellectual" in college meant we had to give up our faith. Long before we heard of Rorty, we often encountered the insistence that secularism was the path to learning and success at Stanford. Rorty, however, meant something else, namely that higher education should prepare students for participation in a pluralist democratic culture where people with different ultimate commitments learn responsibility for a shared public world. His own life reflected that distinction: though he was a committed atheist, he was married to Mary Varney Rorty, a Stanford bioethicist and practicing Mormon, and they raised their children in the church, which he never joined.

Rorty's suspicion of religion follows directly from his anti-foundationalism: if no appeal to God, nature, or metaphysical truth can claim public authority, then moral and political life must rest on human practices of persuasion and shared justification. For him, the desire for "universality, unconditionality, and necessity" leads away from "the practical problems of democratic politics" into "a never-never land of theory" (Rorty, 2000, p. 4). Neiman argues that a Rortyan education should prefer "Deweyan irony over Deweyan 'first philosophy'" (Neiman, 1996, p. 126). Peter Reason likewise emphasizes Rorty's non-foundationalism and his refusal to "put principles above practice," reading him as a thinker of redescription, open encounter, and freedom rather than metaphysical grounding (Reason, 2003, pp. 115, 118). Following John Dewey, he treats inquiry as a human practice of persuasion, revision, and justification rather than a search for metaphysical certainty (Neiman, 1996). In "Universality and Truth," Rorty identifies himself explicitly as a pragmatist and writes that beliefs are "habits of action rather than attempts to correspond to reality" (Rorty, 2000, p. 4). Political language should merely help citizens build a freer, more inclusive, and more self-correcting common life.

For Rorty, a democratic culture becomes more humane when it abandons every authority beyond the judgments of fellow citizens and accepts that moral language is historically contingent rather than eternally grounded. In "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism," he argues that pragmatism resists the demand that human beings humble themselves before any nonhuman authority, whether "the Will of God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality" (Rorty, 1999, p. 7). He presents Dewey as

the thinker who gave this impulse a democratic form: “whole-hearted pursuit of the democratic ideal requires us to set aside any authority save that of a consensus of our fellow humans” (p. 7). Citizens must justify norms to one another rather than appeal to revelation, metaphysics, or nature if they hope to reduce cruelty and live together on fair terms (Reason, 2003; McKenna, 2003). If norms are human and historical inventions, the question arises of how people remain morally committed to them without treating them as eternal truths. Rorty addresses that question in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. There he defines an ironist as someone who recognizes that even her deepest beliefs and moral language are historically shaped rather than guaranteed by God, nature, or metaphysical truth. Acceptance of uncertainty demands political engagement.

Rorty argues that a liberal culture can remain morally serious by treating cruelty and humiliation as its central public evils. He even defines liberals as those who think “cruelty is the worst thing we do,” and says that liberal ironists hope “that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease” (Rorty, 1989, p. xv). Because there is “no noncircular theoretical backup” for this belief, the task of a liberal society is not to prove why cruelty is wrong, but to build institutions, habits, and forms of moral imagination that make people less willing to humiliate one another and more able to recognize strangers as fellow sufferers (Rorty, 1989, p. xv).

Judith Shklar helps show both the force and the limit of Rorty’s position: once cruelty becomes the worst evil, liberalism gains a clear enemy, but not necessarily a rich account of the virtues and institutions needed to prevent cruelty from reappearing. Borrowing from Shklar, he treats liberalism less as a theory of ultimate justice than as a politics of vigilance against fear, humiliation, and the abuse of power. In “Putting Cruelty First,” Shklar defines cruelty as “the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear” and argues that, once cruelty is treated as the *summum malum*, it is condemned “in and of itself,” not because it violates a higher norm (Shklar, 1982, p. 17). She goes on to connect cruelty to hypocrisy, zeal, and inequality, warning that “fear makes the latter cruel and increases the suffering of the former” (p. 22). Understood through Shklar, Rorty’s hostility to organized religion becomes easier to understand. He makes clear his target is institutions that sanctify hierarchy, enforce obedience, and generate exclusion in the name of moral authority. From that perspective, the question religion raises for liberal politics is whether it becomes a vehicle for cruelty.

Cruelty and religion remain so tightly bound for Rorty that, even when he apologizes for having dismissed religion too quickly as focused on power, he soon returns to a position that sounds strikingly Nietzschean: organized religion secures authority by cultivating guilt, exclusion, and dependence. In “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” Rorty begins by sounding chastened. He says his earlier response to Stephen Carter was “hasty and insufficiently thoughtful,” and he

distinguishes private congregational faith from what he calls "ecclesiastical organizations" (Rorty, 2003, p. 141). This distinction allows him to present himself as less hostile to religion as such than to hierarchy and clerical power. Yet the essay quickly reveals the narrowness of this concession. Rorty claims that "it is mostly religion above the parish level that does the damage," (p. 141) and he attributes that damage to the institutional production of contempt, exclusivism, and political clout. Ecclesiastical organizations, he says, "typically maintain their existence by deliberately creating ill-will" and thereby create "unnecessary human misery."

Even when he grants that figures such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the side of justice, Rorty insists that they fail to outweigh "the ubiquitous Joseph Ratzingers and Jerry Falwells," since such organizations "will always, on balance, do more harm than good." Read charitably here, Rorty's anti-clerical distinction between faith and institution envisions merely the demise of the latter because the goods they now monopolize, belonging, moral purpose, social hope, even the management of unrest, will be better supplied in a more just democratic society (Grigoriev, 2011). According to his secularist utopia, theists and atheists would stand "shoulder to shoulder" in the "advance of humanity," and religion would survive only in a reduced form, helping individuals find meaning and endure suffering rather than organizing power, orthodoxy, and exclusion. The passage therefore makes sense within Rorty's larger vision: once social justice grows strong enough, religion loses its political function and returns to the parish as consolation rather than authority. Here, Rorty drifts toward a form of "religious individualism" in which spiritual commitment may remain, while organized religion is effectively "checked at the door" (Grigoriev, 2011, pp. 192–193). Rorty's account of moral life remains unable to explain how people are formed against cruelty. Public justification, democratic consensus, and the enlargement of sympathy may help restrain humiliation, but they do not by themselves supply durable models of goodness, repentance, or equal human worth. If cruelty is the worst thing we do, then the deeper question is what kind of communities, stories, and examples make people less likely to do it. On that question, Rorty often seems to assume the answer rather than provide it.

Mary Rorty's recollections complicate this picture of an anti-clerical atheist who reduces religion to private inspiration while neglecting its communal and political force. Religious communities can cultivate patience, decency, discipline, and forms of belonging that are not reducible to clerical domination. She describes a man who was "not antagonistic" toward Mormonism as community, tolerated his daughter's youthful attempts to convert him, admired religious figures such as Desmond Tutu, and judged religions largely by whether they "served the poor and defended the downtrodden" (Cranney, 2010, pp. 109–130). Mary's account confirms Rorty's hope for justice. In *Achieving Our Country*, he writes that "the Left, by definition, is the party of hope. It insists that

our nation remains unachieved" (Rorty, 1998, p. 14), and later argues that intellectual and political work should make "socially acceptable forms of sadism" no longer acceptable (pp. 80–82). His secular liberalism offers a moral project centered on hope, humiliation, cruelty, and democratic reform. Our presentation of Richard Rorty here endeavors to expand the picture of him, who unfortunately remains barely known to Stanford students as the secular leftist, who urged compartmentalizing religion into the private sphere if they hoped to contribute to public discussions at the university. Rorty's limits reveal themselves most clearly when the question shifts from private belief to the life of the community. His secular pragmatism fails to explain why cruelty persists in ambitious institutions, or how people are formed to resist it.

René Girard at Stanford

Because René Girard begins with rivalry, scapegoating, and the production of victims rather than with liberal hopes for decent coexistence, he speaks more directly to Stanford campus culture. Girard rejects the idea that Christianity is merely one optional source of private meaning among others. For Girard, Christianity belongs in public life because it describes forms of collective violence that Rorty's model fails to identify.

Girard (1923–2015) was a French literary critic and theorist whose work ranged across literature, anthropology, religion, psychology, and history. After studying medieval history in France and earning a doctorate in history in the United States, he taught at Indiana, Duke, Bryn Mawr, Johns Hopkins, and Buffalo before joining Stanford in 1981, where he became the Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language, Literature and Civilization. He is most famous for his theory of mimetic desire: the claim that human beings learn what to want by imitating one another, and that this imitation often produces rivalry, violence, and scapegoating (Haven, 2018). Even after his death, Stanford has honored him in many events and groups. The René Girard Lectures at the Stanford Humanities Center were created to bring major intellectual figures to Paris and Stanford, Girard's "two intellectual homes." The student-led Stanford Girard Society has become one of the most active forums on campus for sustained inquiry in philosophy and politics. Its central activity is parliamentary debate, held six times each quarter on Thursday evenings, where members test major questions through argument, questioning, rebuttal, and reply. The Society also includes a reading component, with texts ranging from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Plato's *Gorgias* to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Augustine's *City of God*.

Girard gained his popularity through Stanford because he offered a large, portable explanation of human behavior. He gave students, faculty, and non-specialists a vocabulary for phenomena they already sensed but failed to easily name: envy, prestige imitation, rivalry that grows out of resemblance rather than difference, the thrill of collective accusation, and the strange human tendency to stabilize disorder by finding someone to blame. At a university

full of ambitious people and intense comparison, that account has obvious appeal. Girard speaks to literary scholars, religious thinkers, social theorists, technologists, and undergraduates at once because he promises a unifying theory of desire and violence rather than a local interpretation of one text (Haven, 2018).

Despite Stanford's commitment to liberal education, many general education requirements can feel as theoretical as Rorty's secular pragmatism. After working through courses they often experience as detached from their own moral struggles, students enter highly demanding fields that encourage narrow expertise and cautious claims. In that setting, Girard's sweeping effort to explain rivalry, violence, and victimhood across literature, religion, and social life can feel powerfully synthetic. A thinker who refuses confinement to one lane, he reads novels, myth, scripture, social violence, and modern politics as parts of a single pattern. Even people who balk at every strong claim in mimetic theory often find that Girard characterizes real structures of social life. He explains why proximity intensifies conflict, why prestige spreads desire, and why crowds feel morally purified when they converge on a victim. Those insights impose themselves vividly in elite institutions, where people strive for the same scarce forms of recognition. Explaining how mistaken understandings of desire lead to real violence, his ideas have traveled unusually beyond the university (Haven, 2018).

Girard's early theory of mimetic desire helps explain why rivalry intensifies in communities that imagine themselves modern, free, and equal. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961), his study of Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky, he argues that desire is triangular: people learn what to want through the mediation of others.. Describing the modern collapse of hierarchy after the French Revolution, he writes: "The revolutionaries thought they would be destroying vanity when they destroyed the privileges of the noble. But vanity is like a virulent cancer that spreads in a more serious form throughout the body just when one thinks it has been removed." Like a cancer that grows back stronger every time one tries to remove it, mimetic desire perpetuates itself according to its own diseased logic until "Men will become gods for each other" (Girard, 1976, p. 61). Already in this early work, Girard presents himself as a diagnostician of human cruelty, showing how envy, imitation, and resentment proliferate precisely where liberation was supposed to occur. His central insight is that human beings do not simply desire objects but become trapped in rivalrous desire through one another.

In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard expands mimetic rivalry into a theory of collective violence. As Girard later puts it in the *Diacritics* interview, acquisitive mimesis means that "two hands will reach for the same object simultaneously," so "conflict cannot fail to result" (Girard, 1978, p. 32). Once conflict becomes reciprocal and contagious, violence spreads through the whole community, and sacrifice comes to seem like the only way to restore order. He opens *Violence and the Sacred* by stressing its strange doubleness: sacrifice appears

under "two opposing aspects," at once a sacred obligation and a kind of criminal act (Girard, 1979, p. 1). The victim occupies the same unstable position, since "because the victim is sacred, it is criminal to kill him," yet "the victim is sacred only because he is to be killed" (Girard, 1979, p. 1). This paradox becomes intelligible only if sacrifice is understood as the means by which a community redirects all-against-all violence onto a single victim. What looks like a crime then appears necessary, even holy, because the death or expulsion of one person restores order to the many.

This logic leads to Girard's theory of the scapegoat. In the same interview, he argues that communities saved from mimetic strife by "unanimous victimage" would preserve both prohibitions against renewed conflict and rituals that reenact the violence that ended it. The scapegoat must remain unrecognized as such, since "the only good scapegoats are the ones we are unable to acknowledge as such." In the Oedipus story, the violence of the whole community is displaced onto one man, who becomes "the repository of all the community's ills" (Girard, 1979, p. 77). Myth thus conceals the crowd's violence by narrating it as the guilt of a single polluted person. For Girard, this is the characteristic structure of sacrificial religion: the victim is accused, expelled, or killed, and the peace that follows makes the violence seem justified.

For Girard, Christianity exposes the injustice hidden inside sacrificial order. Where myth ratifies the accusation against the victim, the Gospels disclose the innocence of the victim and the blindness of the crowd. Girard argues that Christianity offers the truth about violence: human communities repeatedly secure order through scapegoating, and biblical revelation exposes that mechanism rather than disguising it as sacred necessity. Once the Christian revelation has unmasked the scapegoat mechanism, myth itself can be reread. Oedipus no longer appears simply as a guilty man whose expulsion saves the city, but as a victim onto whom the city has displaced its own violence. Despite the great popularity of this theory, Girard's arguments about cruelty require no theory of primordial violence, and one need not believe that all culture originates in sacrificial violence to see the power of his diagnosis. Rivalry among near equals, moral purification through accusation, and the crowd's urge to isolate a culprit remain recognizable features of life in ambitious institutions. His appeal at Stanford rests less on the final truth of mimetic theory than on its unusual ability to make recurring cruelty understandable. At Stanford, some Christian students are drawn to Girard because mimetic theory seems to restate Christian teaching about sin, violence, and the victim in modern intellectual terms. But that enthusiasm can obscure an important theological problem. Girard's account often suggests that violence is nearly constitutive of human social life itself. He argues that "beyond a certain threshold of intensity," violence becomes necessary to restore social unity and generate culture through the scapegoat (Girard, 1988, p. 91). Augustine and Aquinas, by contrast, insist that human beings are created good and become cruel through the fall, disordered desire, and the

misuse of freedom. Cruelty and violence result from a privation of the good, not from the deepest truth of human nature. Augustine insists that human nature is "good in itself," even though from that good nature there can arise either "a good or an evil will" (Augustine, 1955/1887, chap. 4). In *City of God*, he explains social disorder not through mimetic inevitability but through pride and the *libido dominandi*, the lust to dominate that corrupts human relations (Augustine, 1998). Aquinas likewise argues that evil is "not a habit nor a pure negation, but a privation," and that in voluntary things moral evil results from a defect of will rather than from nature as such (Aquinas, 1947, I, q. 49, a. 2; I, q. 49, a. 1, reply obj. 3). Recent scholarship helps clarify the force of this tradition. Lee (2025) shows that Augustine remains realist about sin and political violence while still subordinating action to mercy and love, and Case (2023) argues that Thomistic Christianity cannot finally justify willing harm to another as an end in itself. Girard therefore proves more illuminating as a diagnostician of recurring rivalry, scapegoating, and exclusion than as a guide to classical Christian anthropology.

Still, even if Girard's theory is more Hobbesian than Christian, Christianity is central to his solution. In "René Girard without the Cross?" James G. Williams criticizes attempts to preserve Girard's insights while abandoning Christianity, arguing that without religion "there is no need for revelation or transformation from some source outside the human self or the human social order" (Williams, 1996, p. 1). He describes Girard's real subject as "the mimetic predicament of humanity and the revelation of this predicament" (Williams, 1996, p. 1). For Girard, Christianity is the tradition that most fully reveals the scapegoat mechanism and the innocence of the victim. Although some critics claim that Silicon Valley Girard enthusiasts fail to understand Girard's sympathy with the victim and overlook the Christian answer to violence (Leslie, 2025), Girard's Christianity offers Stanford students something more meaningful than Rorty's secular hope that a better society will reduce religious longing. He offers Stanford students a language for recognizing the cruelty generated by prestige, exclusion, and collective blame, while also insisting that the crowd's judgment is not morally final. In a hypercompetitive learning environment, that claim gives religion a public significance Rorty's liberalism fails to fully match.

Girard's core insight, that the only way to escape rivalry is to imitate Christ, also strikes us as incomplete. Christ was, by trade, a carpenter and itinerant rabbi living in a socioeconomic context that can seem incompatible with a modern elite university. The quest to imitate Christ at Stanford demands a robust theology of excellence and work, which Girard does not present. One place to build this understanding is the Parable of the Talents, in which Christ explicitly identifies (1) the imperative to cultivate and apply one's talents, and that (2) genuine gaps in ability are to be expected, and do not change the moral worth of an individual. To Christ, ambition is an act of stewardship rather than competition. Girard can certainly help one avoid automatically pursuing the most competitive and prized professional opportunities on campus like

tech, finance, and consulting. But there still remains the question of how one should invest their talents, and Girard presents no clear answers here.

The question at Stanford remains whether it can confront cruelty without thicker accounts of judgment, obligation, and human worth. Rorty offers a serious answer when he places cruelty at the center of moral life and asks citizens to justify themselves to one another without metaphysical agreement. Yet Girard speaks more directly to Stanford because he shows how rivalry and blame flourish even in communities that see themselves as enlightened. He is most persuasive when he shows how cruelty recurs in group life and that religion still offers a way to identify and resist it.

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