

RÉGIS DEBRAY AND RENÉ GIRARD: AT LARGE AMONG THE DIALOGICAL DILEMMAS OF POST-SECULAR SOCIETY

BRIAN SUDLOW, Reading

In *Europe: The Faltering Project* (2009), Jürgen Habermas outlined the threat that shared citizenship and cultural difference currently face because of the tensions between secularists and religious organizations (both Christian and non-Christian).¹ This is hardly a new problem, but Habermas's warnings corroborate *prima facie* the anxiety expressed at the end of Régis Debray's latest book, *Le Moment fraternité* (2009), which argues in favour of a renewed sense of solidarity between all constituencies in the face of 'un avenir qui s'annonce carnassier'.² In view of the alarm caused by the failed Islamic terror attack near Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, and the valedictory warnings of the retiring Cardinal Miroslav Vlk of Prague in January 2010 about European secularism's weakness in the face of Islam, it seems that Habermas's and Debray's words join a spectrum of currently heightened anxieties about the tensions of politics and religion, and their points of contact in civil and cultural life.³

Habermas's precise concern focuses on the conditions of a post-secular society, by which he means a liberal democratic society where religious organizations (both Christian and non-Christian) have become significant articulators of minority opinion or are increasingly powerful stakeholders.⁴ He argues, in fact, that believers' resistance to secular progress is mirrored by a diehard secularism or 'a secularistic devaluation of religion' that the project of post-secular society otherwise forbids.⁵ The future of post-secular society calls rather for a learning process which requires moderation among secularists and believers, the latter being free to decide what constitutes genuine reform within their own tradition.

In many ways Régis Debray appears to be among the leaders of this learning process in France. One of the most open-minded, left-wing French intellectuals in matters of religion, he was, for example, the founder of the Institut Européen en Sciences des Religions, and contributed to the 2003 Stasi Commission which advised the Republic to make a nuanced accommodation of religious codes, albeit not of the veil.⁶ In another book published in 2006, he undertook a conversation with Dominican theologian Claude Geffré, discussing the nature of religion, communion, the spiritual and the religious.⁷ Given his most recent call for a renewed sense of fraternity, no one can accuse Debray of not having long since practised what he now preaches.

Or can they? Debray has appeared somewhat less tolerant when it comes to the disputed territory between faith and reason. His analysis of René Girard's anthropology, as outlined in *Le Feu sacré: Fonctions du religieux* (2003), is an example of the difficulties which scientifically-minded religion poses for postmodern and enlightenment sensibilities.⁸ Replying to Debray in the conclusion of *Les Origines de la culture* (2004), Girard issued a thirty-page riposte which blends acerbity and bemused largesse in equal measure.⁹ In this conflict whose parties both lay claim to rational credentials — between Debray, the advocate of fraternité, and Girard, the critic of religious violence — the dialogical dilemmas of the post-secular moment are, if not at their most dramatic, at least at their most chronic. If, moreover, these minds cannot meet, could Habermas's recent call for a learning process between secularists and believers be overly optimistic?

Debray devotes the last fifteen pages of *Le Feu sacré* to a refutation of Girardian theory. His analysis is wide ranging, but in short he rejects Girard's two most important theses: first, that all non-Christian religions achieve a mythically veiled canalization and purification of conflict through the sacrifice of scapegoats; and second, that in Jesus's death and resurrection Christianity parodies, subverts and unveils the violence of all other religions, thus providing a unique hermeneutic of culture which does not scientifically prove Christianity but makes it rationally credible.¹⁰ On behalf of postmodern sensibilities, Debray laments that Girardian theory re-enters the logic of the Church by asserting that Christianity is uniquely true, and by generating absolutes or facilitating superiority.¹¹ Most importantly, Debray finds that Girard's theories defy enlightened anthropology's demystification of religion by claiming objectivity and facticity.¹² Thereby, Debray is only articulating the Enlightenment truism that faith and reason are irreconcilable. *Les Sciences des religions*, Debray argues, cannot accept the claims that religions make about themselves: these sciences distinguish, rather, between propositions of faith and observed faits. Debray is not of course speaking only about Christianity, but crucially he leaves unstated the distinction between this methodology of the sciences des religions and one of the assumptions which it almost always carries. As Girard testily puts it, 'si un raisonnement est, si peu que ce soit, peu importe pour quelles raisons, favorable au christianisme, il ne peut pas être scientifique'.¹³

In other words, Debray finds adherents of 'pie in the sky' thinking perfectly acceptable interlocutors, but clearly not if they claim culinary or astronomical credentials; not if, that is, they insist on relating the exercise of reason to the convictions of faith. Yet in terms of post-secular debate, Debray thereby sidesteps the real problem which Habermas later pointed out: one cannot come to an understanding with an interlocutor by redefining the ground on which they stand. Could Debray's hostility to Girard and his exclusion of Girard's theories from any serious consideration by the sciences des religions be examples of mimetic hostility, the action of Debray the rationalist taking back from Girard the believer the jealously guarded privilege of applying reason to religion?

Girard for his part was reading Debray's *Le Feu sacré* as he undertook the interviews that make up *Les Origines de la culture*. Keen to repel the assault, he added a conclusion to the book in which he refutes Debray's arguments across the board. Christianity, Girard reiterates, is unique because the quasi-universal logic of victimization in human culture is unveiled by the Christian declaration of the victim's innocence. Moreover, Girard argues, his theory is not a scientific proof of Christian doctrine, but rather a paradigm whose scientific capacity to unveil the enigmas of mythology is rationally demonstrated again and again across his oeuvre. For Girard, therefore, the rational credentials of his theories can only be denied by 'le fanatisme antichrétien, l'obscurantisme antireligieux'.¹⁴ In one paradoxical stroke, Girard thus manages to offend the enlightened Debray by attributing a scientific valency to Christian logic, and by labelling Debray's own thinking as obscurantist. If Debray's mutually exclusive distinction between faith and fait only veils enlightened hostility to Christianity, then by Girard's own logic the sciences des religions have become as mythological as the religions they seek to deconstruct.

On the face of things, the Debray–Girard debate is bound by a double difficulty suggestive of the post-secular, dialogical dilemma. Debray and Girard contest the facts of the sciences des religions, and they are separated by a disagreement of principle over the relationship of science and religion. They disagree over the specificities of the world religions and are separated by their opposing views concerning faith and reason. Ironically, if Girard were to concede Debray's argument over faith and

faits, he would at the same time have to concede Debray's arguments over the specificities of world religions, since it is precisely the revelatory potency of Christianity to disclose religious violence which, Girard argues, makes it objectively different from the other religions. Crucially, however, for Christianity to concede an enlightened alienation between faith and reason would be quite unlike its adjustment to democracy or even civil religious liberty — examples which Habermas posits as proof of Catholicism's readiness to dialogue. Rather, it would strike at Catholicism's very self-understanding — a sacrifice which, in the Habermasian logic, secularism must not impose.

If we return to Habermas's dialogical dilemma and the post-secular conversation between believers and secularists, the Debray–Girard debate is not so much a conversation as a flashpoint indicative of the stakes which are set to underpin the post-secular civil project in the short-to-medium term, at least as it is affected by orthodox Christian confidence in the links between reason and faith. As Habermas says, secularistic devaluation of religion is certainly a threat to the post-secular project. Still, of all the challenges to the bonds of fraternité, the renewal of which Debray has so nobly urged, the one most difficult to face might be this tension between faith and reason whose roots in European culture are as long as they are complex.

- 1 Jürgen Habermas, *Europe: The Faltering Project*, trans. by Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).
- 2 Régis Debray, *Le Moment fraternité* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), p. 365.
- 3 See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/07/vatican-cardinal-christianity-islam-europe..> [Last accessed 9 January 2010.] As a priest, Miroslav Vlk had to operate clandestinely for eleven years before the Velvet Revolution of 1989.
- 4 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. by Hella Beister and William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), pp. 101–15.
- 5 Jürgen Habermas, *Europe: The Faltering Project*, p. 76.
- 6 See <http://lesrapports.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/BRP/034000725/0000.pdf> . . [Last accessed 2 February 2010.]
- 7 Régis Debray and Claude Geffré, *Avec ou sans Dieu? Le philosophe et le théologien* (Paris: Bayard, 2006).
- 8 Régis Debray, *Le Feu sacré: Fonctions du religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), pp. 435–51. In René Girard: *Épistémologie du sacré* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), Stéphane Vinolo examines this clash from an epistemological perspective, but I am more interested in what this clash means within the terms of the dialogical dilemma set by Jürgen Habermas.
- 9 René Girard, *Les Origines de la culture: Entretiens avec Pierpaolo Antonello et João Cezar de Castro Rocha* (Paris: Hachette, 2004).
- 10 These theses are to be found respectively in René Girard's *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972) and *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978).
- 11 Debray, *Le Feu sacré*, pp. 446–7.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 449.
- 13 Girard, *Les Origines de la culture*, p. 265.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 271.