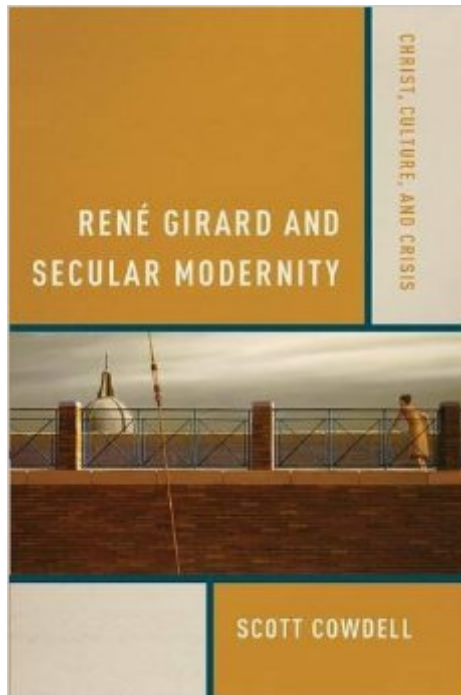


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# René Girard And Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, And Crisis



## Synopsis

In *René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis*, Scott Cowdell provides the first systematic interpretation of René Girard's controversial approach to secular modernity. Cowdell identifies the scope, development, and implications of Girard's thought, the centrality of Christ in Girard's thinking, and, in particular, Girard's distinctive take on the uniqueness and finality of Christ in terms of his impact on Western culture. In Girard's singular vision, according to Cowdell, secular modernity has emerged thanks to the Bible's exposure of the cathartic violence that is at the root of religious prohibitions, myths, and rituals. In the literature, the psychology, and most recently the military history of modernity, Girard discerns a consistent slide into an apocalypse that challenges modern ideas of romanticism, individualism, and progressivism. In the first three chapters, Cowdell examines the three elements of Girard's basic intellectual vision (mimesis, sacrifice, biblical hermeneutics) and brings this vision to a constructive interpretation of 'secularization' and 'modernity,' as these terms are understood in the broadest sense today. Chapter 4 focuses on modern institutions, chiefly the nation state and the market, that function to restrain the outbreak of violence. And finally, Cowdell discusses the apocalyptic dimension of Girard's theory in relation to modern warfare and terrorism. Here, Cowdell engages with the most recent writings of Girard (particularly his *Battling to the End*) and applies them to further conversations in cultural theology, political science, and philosophy. Cowdell takes up and extends Girard's own warning concerning an alternative to a future apocalypse: 'What sort of conversion must humans undergo, before it is too late?' "Scott Cowdell's book is the first comprehensive study of modernity and secularity in René Girard's thought. Cowdell brings Girard's theory into a fruitful dialogue with leading approaches on secularization like those of Max Weber, Hans Blumenberg, Peter Berger, and Charles Taylor. Scholars and students of theology, philosophy, and sociology will benefit from this wide-ranging overview of the relationship between religion, modernity, and secularization." —Wolfgang Palaver, Institute of Systematic Theology, University of Innsbruck "In a stunning analysis, Cowdell shows that Girard's sustained intellectual pursuit, which began in the 1960s with his mimetic analysis of modern realist fiction, has always been about the (Durkheimian) religiosity of the modern and postmodern social condition, even when it has dealt explicitly with the religious origins of antique culture. Cowdell demonstrates the 'highly explanatory and predictive' quality of Girard's cultural anthropology, within which the 'secular' does not (and indeed cannot) escape the 'religious.' This is a powerful book." —Ann W. Astell, University of Notre Dame "Scott Cowdell is one of the most interesting theological voices of his generation. The themes in Cowdell's work are always cosmic and vast in scope. This

is a remarkable reading of our contemporary situation through the lens of René Girard. Accurate, informed, and illuminating, Cowdell has written a fabulous book. For the person needing a way into Girard and for the person who is already using Girard's work, Cowdell brings out the implications of Girard for the moment in which we live. An absolutely essential addition to your personal library." [The Very Rev Dr. Ian Markham, Virginia Theological Seminary](#)

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

René Girard's take on the role of Christianity in modern secularism has been commented on in many books discussing Girard's ideas as well they should since the dismantling of the primitive sacred through the Gospel's revealing the truth of sacred violence is a major element in his thought. This book, however, is the most thorough that I know of in evaluating modern so-called secular culture through Girard's thinking. As with most books on Girard, Cowdell introduces and explains the three pillars of Girard: mimetic desire, unveiling sacred violence & the Gospel as the primary unveiler of the first two. However, throughout these explications, the effect of these ideas on modernity is noted time and again. The last two chapters are more focused on the present time, noting how the breakdown of hierarchy has loosened mimetic rivalry to epidemic proportions. Cowdell describes the institutions that have been serving as a "katechon" in modern times but with diminishing success. ("Kathechon" is a New Testament word for imposed restraint.) Government and law have served as such with ambiguity as both act violently in many cases with capital punishment, for example, being a modern mode of sacred violence. Moreover, as Thomas Cavanaugh has argued, states create a sacred aura and a false transcendence that make the ersatz sacred

institutions. Moreover, the state is abdicating its restraining power to the capitalist market more and more. The capitalist market has also served as a "katechon" through trying to create plenitude so that there are more haves than have nots who would be envious. The built-in mimetic rivalry of the capitalist system makes this unstable and this instability is increasing as mimetic issues intensify to the point where the powerful are creating scarcity for more and more people.

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