Peter Robinson: Uncommon Knowledge. I am Peter Robinson. Be sure to follow us on Twitter at Twitter.com/uncknowledge. Born in Avignon on Christmas Day 1923, Rene Girard is the author of works that have been published in more than two dozen languages including *The Scapegoat* and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. His latest book, *Achever Clausewitz*, will be published in the United States in 2010 as battling the end politics, war and apocalypse. In 2005, Professor Girard received the highest honor in France, induction as one of the 40 members of the Academie Francaise. One source of Rene Girard's thinking, a close reading of *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazier's classic study of ancient myths. Published in 1890, *The Golden Bough* explained that myths throughout the ancient world contained a central element, the periodic sacrifice of a sacred king dying and then resurrected. Christianity, *The Golden Bough* suggested, represented nothing but one more such myth...a point to which we will return.

Rene Girard: “Bienvenue.”

Rene Girard: Thank you. I am very happy to be here.

Peter Robinson: Segment one - insights, mimetic desire. To quote one of your interpreters, Gill Bailey, "Desire as distinguished from animal appetite is always aroused by the desire of another." Explain.

Rene Girard: Well, if in order to event desire, because desire is not natural. Desire is not animal. Is it human? We do not know. If sometimes it is human, and sometimes it seems very inhuman. How is it born? I think desire usually is born out of the contemplation of someone else who is desiring and designates to you the object he is desiring as desirable.

Peter Robinson: So every college student who wants to be an investment banker, obvious, they want to fly around in their own jet and drive a Mazarati. How does this apply to the ancient world?

Rene Girard: Well, to the ancient world it has to apply in the same fashion. The objects are different but the structure of desire, the triangular relationship of desire - object, model and subject - are the same.

Peter Robinson: Serpent, Eve and apple.

Rene Girard: Serpent in the mimetic theory of desire is a symbol, an image, of the mediator. In other words, the one who directs the subject towards the bad desire. There are churches who know what they are talking about much better than most people think. Know that example is the key to bad as well as good behavior, and this is nothing but what I call mimetic desire.

Peter Robinson: So that is why the church uses the phrase, the occasion of sin?

Rene Girard: Yes.
Peter Robinson: Okay. Now, Gill Bailey once again, "The imitative nature of desire leads to conflict."

Rene Girard: It leads to conflict, and this is both something very obvious and which is a bad for most people when they first realize it. If you imitate the desire of someone else, you admire that someone else or that someone else may be your best friend. As soon as you both desire the same object, and the object is really desirable and exists only in one copy.

Peter Robinson: In ones?

Rene Girard: So I should not say copy because it is not a copy, it is the original.

Peter Robinson: There is only one Helen of Troy.

Rene Girard: Yes, there is only one original. Therefore they have to fight. Therefore the real the theatrical situation paradox, is a situation of two people desiring the same object, because they designate that object to each other. Once the imitated subject realizes he is imitated, this reinforces his desire. He said I am certain I selected the right object. As soon as this man saw her he fell in love with her, like I did. Therefore we are right. Therefore I am more convinced than ever that I should desire her. Therefore he is my enemy.

Peter Robinson: I am chuckling, because as the audience will learn, as simple as it sounds it explains everything in a way. Let me quote you yourself Rene, your second basic insight, the violence and the sacred, "If there is a normal order in societies, it must be the fruit of an anterior crisis." Explain.

Rene Girard: It must be the result of an anterior crisis because people polarize around objects of desire. This can be regarded as true even for food, for shelter, for places where you can live, and so forth. So you can be sure that the human population pre-historical time gathered around the same places because they were desirable, because there was water there and so forth. They were united by that same desire, and they were separated because very often there was not enough of whatever was needed, water, shelter, food, and they started to fight. That is why I do not think we should say man is so bad. You know that he will always fight with his fellow man even when the people he associates most closely with are the people he fights most often with. They do because they are both moving towards the same thing. These things are never in sufficient number. Even if they are, you tend to trust your model because you admire him. He has seen in the object something more than I saw, and therefore I must follow him more than ever. This works both ways. As the one who desires first is imitated in his desire, he is confirmed in that desire. The conflictual situation is all over the place and is coming from everywhere.
Peter Robinson: All right. Segment two - the scapegoating mechanism. Let us say we are in the pre-historic world. You are describing the most basic sources of conflict, and now the most basic means of resolving conflict.

Rene Girard: Yeah, because your question is how such conflict is resolved. They have to be resolved at least part of the time for groups of human beings to gather permanently together and so forth.

Peter Robinson: So the question is how do societies manage to exist?

Rene Girard: People imitate each other. People imitate each other in their desire. They also imitate each other in their dislikes, I just said. Therefore, when you have a conflict which is particularly visible and obvious and so forth, there will be a tendency for the neighbors of the people concerned to move with the stronger of the two, the more convincing of the two, and be on his side against the other one. When you have a second one, you have a third one, a fourth one, and it becomes easier and easier because all of this is always mimetic. That is the thing you have to see. There real motor is imitation each time; imitation of friendship, imitation of desire, and imitation of conflict. If it is so there should not be any human society. It should be impossible.

Peter Robinson: Total conflict all of the time.

Rene Girard: Total conflict all of the time. If you have a total conflict, you also have a way in which this conflict is automatically cancelled and replaced.

Peter Robinson: Resolved?

Rene Girard: Resolved. It is when people imitate no longer the choice of the opponent, but also what they feel about everything. They are all going to gather against the same opponent. If one really feels convinced that one of the people there is guiltier than the other one, the notion of guilt will appear in the collective interplay of these people. As soon as this happens, it gathers and feeds and ultimately one victim must be killed or driven out or otherwise gotten rid of. This is what I call, not I but everybody, calls the scapegoat. The word scapegoat comes from the Bible, the Tyndale translation of the Bible in English. In most European languages, they say emissary, who is sent out of the community or who is scared. That is when everybody agrees that there must be one who is more of a culprit than the others. Therefore they unite against that one.

Peter Robinson: And this mechanism is what underlies these myths that Frazier catalogued? Not just Western, not just Greek and Roman myths, although that of course is where he concentrates.

Rene Girard: That is what he does not see. He excludes the West. The West is too high, too intelligent, and too superior to the rest of you. In part, Frazier discovers only archaic or primitive society's scapegoats, African scapegoats.
Peter Robinson: It is your belief that the pattern that underlies myths around the world of the dying and resurrected king reflects actual events in pre-historic society?

Rene Girard: Sure.

Peter Robinson: We have to establish the scope of time we are discussing here. You are actually talking about early homo-sapiens, half a million years? So this goes on for hundreds of thousands of years and becomes ritualized in myth.

Rene Girard: Then finding out the exact time, it is not my business. I may be a theoretician. I say at some point people must have been reconciled in order to create communities, permanent communities, against not a leader directly, but a scapegoat that they all kill together and it united them. If you look at myths, they all have the same shape. It is always the story of a man who was killed by an entire community.

Peter Robinson: Oedipus, mythical kind of Thebes. The plague comes to Thebes and Oedipus discovers that years before, unwittingly, he had killed his father and mother. He is horrified. He blinds himself.

Rene Girard: It is the community that discovers that.

Peter Robinson: All right, that is what I wanted. So we know the Oedipus myth. Explain how that?

Rene Girard: Oedipus is killed, therefore the community gathers around Oedipus because Oedipus has solved the problem. This unity of the community by dying, after the death of Oedipus people find that they have no more enemies. They had a moment where they say, this man divided us but in order to reconcile us, therefore he is a god. Therefore he is the one who is moving us toward some kind of new form of unity, not against him but we should be afraid of him. He is fundamentally good. He is a god.

Peter Robinson: All right. Segment three - the myth that happened; the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke chapter 23 - now when the Centurion saw what was done, he glorified God saying certainly this was a righteous man. The people smote their breasts.

Rene Girard: You hit the right spot there, because you mentioned immediately what myth cannot say. Myth never sees that the victim is innocent.

Peter Robinson: Oedipus really did kill his father and mother. He really did bear guilt.

Rene Girard: That is right. The first interpreters of the myth took it quite seriously because they saw violence as the main business of myth, and therefore they believed it was a real murderer who had been killed. In reality it is an imaginary murderer, a scapegoat.

Peter Robinson: But the community believed in his guilt?
Rene Girard: The community believed in his guilt. That is why the community wanted to repeat the same thought that the god was teaching them to repeat a new, more victims. That is why they invented sacrifice.

Peter Robinson: All right. So when in *The Golden Bough* Frazier suggests that Christianity, and he has as much of a shock on late 19th century the West as did Darwin that it is still that Christianity is nothing but one more myth that takes the pattern of the dying and resurrected god. Frazier believed it and intellectuals to this day believe it. You answer how?

Rene Girard: I answer very simply that Frazier was perfectly right to point to the similarities between myth and Christianity. In both instances you have a victim who is killed by an entire community and who becomes who he is and who has always been, the Christ of the community. What Frazier did not see which is the simplest thing of all and should convince everybody immediately if they were honest that Christianity is very different from mythology while being the same. It is exactly the same situation. Christianity tells you that Christ was innocent, whereas all myths tell you the victim is guilty. The victim is a god, but gods have guilty character. They are vengeful characters. They can be good to you through strange circumstances that are not very easy to understand, but they can also do all sorts of bad things, which is not the case of Christ. Simply, Christianity tells you Christ is innocent. People do not see that it is the first time in the history of mankind that a myth occurs which is read not falsely with the victim guilty, but with the victim innocent sent by God Himself. If God allows scapegoating to happen, it is because He wants humanity to exist and so forth. Of course Christ is very different from any other scapegoat. He is the son of God and He is risen. When people see him, it is exactly the same thing as mythical heroes. He is a mythical hero, but He is innocent.

Peter Robinson: Rene, this is the question of soteriology, if I am pronouncing it correctly, the theologians, and the theology of the cross. What changes when this innocent God-man dies on the cross? How does that affect human understanding? Why is that a saving event?

Rene Girard: Because if you read the mythical situation the way I just did, you can see there is something which is not purely human about it. We are offered all these victims and we take them for culprits, and so forth. In the case of Christianity there are a few disciples who say no, no, He is not guilty; who maintain to the end that He is innocent whatever people may say about it. Therefore they say the truth simply. They say the truth which is anthropological before the religious, which is the same thing.

Peter Robinson: And so Christ's death on the cross frees humankind from this deep, profound, inescapable, and largely hidden cycle of the scapegoating impulse?

Rene Girard: Yes. Potentially it does, and Christianity assures certainly that it does that it
is the only true religion. It says the truth about man and about God. Very few people take this statement seriously, as you well know. You should take that literally.

Peter Robinson: Why? You have said at several points that it is obvious once you see it. It is as simple as Christianity is different, and yet they do not see it. They do not want it.

Rene Girard: They do not want it. You know as much about that as I do. We just have to see the fact that they do not see. The Christians do not dare see the similarity, because they are too committed.

Peter Robinson: They are afraid that Christianity may be one of the myths?

Rene Girard: It might be a myth; therefore they refuse to say the situation is a mythical one. They say the truth about it and there is no more myth. Christianity destroys mythology.

Peter Robinson: All right. Segment four - Rene Girard and the modern world. From your most recent book, *Achever Clausewitz*, to be published in this country under the title, *Battling to the End*, "History, you might say, is a test for mankind. We know very well that mankind is failing that test." Explain that.

Rene Girard: Mankind is failing that test because mankind has the truth and the reality of Christianity, which is there. This truth has been there for 2000 years, and instead of moving ahead and becoming more widespread, today it is becoming more restricted. Christianity is less and less popular everyday and is accused of all sorts of things which smell very much like a scapegoating process.

Peter Robinson: Well, all right. In the contemporary setting we have Christopher Hitchens saying that Christianity is responsible for all kinds of evil. It is the usual catalogue. I do not mean to demean Christopher's argument as he is a man of integrity. This is religious warfare on and on. You say no; that is not Christianity, it is what?

Rene Girard: It is an effort to restore if you want a mythical world, which does not perceive itself as it should.

Peter Robinson: To unite by way of a common antagonism and then to do violence to the other. What we see in the religious warfare, what we see in communism is a re-emergence of the ancient patterns.

Rene Girard: Yes. What we see in human society as a whole in the way people are always united around victims, but in order to unite solidly they must keep believing that these victims are guilty when they are not. In other words, Christianity is the myth that reads all myths; the myth which is read and reads only. People say are you doing anthropology or you are doing mythology? I answer no, I am showing that to read mythology right and to have a true anthropology are on in the same thing.
Peter Robinson: From Battling to the End again, modern world, "Personally I have the impression that Islam has used the Bible that is incorporated elements of the Bible as a support to rebuild an archaic religion. While Christianity eliminates sacrifice wherever it gains a foothold, Islam seems to situate itself prior to that rejection.

Rene Girard: Yeah, Islam is a big problem for Christianity because it comes after Christianity. It is intelligent enough and religious enough in a certain sense to use aspects of Christianity that make it more credible than archaic religion. Therefore, but I think it is very important to realize that it is not the same message really. It seems to be, but it is not the same message. The peace and the refusal of violence of Christianity is not there.

Peter Robinson: Yet you also argue in Battling to the End, that terrorism is something new and alien to the classical Islamic tradition.

Rene Girard: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Where does it come from and what is the correct way for us to think about it?

Rene Girard: I do not know.

Peter Robinson: This is television. Make up an answer!

Rene Girard: No, I do not want to make up an answer.

Peter Robinson: No, of course not.

Rene Girard: It is too serious a question. You are talking about millions and millions of people.

Peter Robinson: Of course.

Rene Girard: These people are honest. As a Christian I would say they are potential Christians. We want to convert each other, and it is a normal thing to do. We want all the Muslims to become Christians, just as the Muslims want all the Christians to become Muslim.

Peter Robinson: Now in Battling to the End, you argue that the modern world finds itself in a peculiar predicament. The archaic pattern no longer works because it has been exposed. It is impossible to be a genuine pagan. After the Christian event, you just cannot go back. It has happened, so it no longer works. This is to say it no longer is genuinely unifying. It no longer is ritualized in myths that people at least half believe. At the same time we have the march of technology making the scapegoating mechanism more and more dangerous.
Rene Girard: Yes, we might simply say that man has become capable of destroying his own world for good to make it unable to support life. We destroy the atmosphere too. Today we live in a very strange period because the great apocalyptic texts for me are not the texts which are entitled Apocalypse of John. They are the texts which are at the end of the synoptic gospels, especially Luke.

Peter Robinson: The reading last Sunday? The end of the world will come, but it is not for you to know the time.

Rene Girard: That is right. In the old days, I remember before the invention of the atom bomb priests in church always talked about these apocalyptic texts. On the last day of the year, of the liturgical year which was the last day of the time after Pentecost, which was a week ago, and the first day of the Advent which was an apocalyptic day too. These texts were read and I remember the time when they were the only thing that impressed me very much in the readings at church. In a way, the inspiration of my whole work is there. I have been talking about these texts all the time.

Peter Robinson: Well, final quotation from *Battling to the End*. "In some way the gospels and scriptures are predicting that mankind will fail the test of history since they end with a scatological theme, literally the end of the world." How do you think about the present age? Is this a time of testing? Is it a time of ultimate doom?

Rene Girard: Well, Luke had the apocalyptic texts in the gospel. One thing which is very characteristic is the mixture of the human and the natural. That is the reason why people consider that they are not serious scientifically, and so forth and so forth. Look at the times we are living today. If there is a new hurricane in New Orleans, is it natural alone or is it natural by man? To be in apocalyptic times, it means precisely that in my view. The time when you no longer know if it is nature which is hurting you, or if it man himself who is helping the apocalyptic forces.

Peter Robinson: Rene, segment five - your personal story. You have been quoted as saying that you have undergone two conversions. The first was intellectual. The intellectual conversion occurred, I am assuming, when reading *The Golden Bough* you recognized that Christianity was different. Am I correct about that?

Rene Girard: Yes, but this is not necessarily Christian. It is the encounter of this text with the gospels which convinced me. Then when I realized, which I say that it is this mixture, you know there will be the sea and the roaring of the waves and so forth. Man will fight man and city against city and so forth. It is always symmetrical, like what I call the doubles. The basic conflictual situation when you realize that these two things are one.

Peter Robinson: I am looking to you for a little cheer here. When I was a teenager, the apocalyptic texts impressed me as well. They scared the wits out of me. In fact, I can remember hearing a country preacher talking about he somehow or other had the hydrogen bomb predicted in the Book of Revelation. That is not.
Rene Girard: People want to be scared today in all their films and so forth.

Peter Robinson: Paranormal Activities is a big hit.

Rene Girard: The only fear they refuse is a good one. The one that says there must be a God there who is in charge and who can reward as well as punish.

Peter Robinson: I have got a question here from a viewer, Todd Jones. Does Rene Girard believe that there is any way to turn the tide?

Rene Girard: Yes. Behaving like Christians.

Peter Robinson: All right. Rene, to conclude, will you indulge me? In concluding this interview I would like to ask you to be my personal guide here and demonstrate to me a close Girardian reading of a text. I will give you a couple of passages and ask you to comment on it. Luke chapter one, "And the angel came unto her and said, 'Hail thou that art highly favored. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women.' When she saw him she was troubled at his saying, and the angel said unto her, 'Fear not Mary, for thou hast found favor with God.'" What is that woman doing in the Christian myth?

Rene Girard: That very important part is Mary, and she is the mother of the child who is Christ, and who is the son of God who is the presence of God on this earth. Therefore it is very important for Protestants and Catholics to give various different importance to Mary. I do not think it is very important.

Peter Robinson: The differences?

Rene Girard: The importance is to see that it justifies, in a way, history in a religious way. History is both human and divine, and the consequences are always manifested by God for the right reasons.

Peter Robinson: There is no stagecraft here. There is no melodrama.

Rene Girard: There is no melodrama.

Peter Robinson: You have a simple girl who is scared witless.

Rene Girard: That is right.

Peter Robinson: All right. Chapter two, "And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world shall be taxed, and Joseph went up from Galilee unto Judea, into the city of David which is called Bethlehem. So it was that while they were there that Mary brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the
inn." This is an odd appearance for the God, the dying and resurrected God to be making.

Rene Girard: True. Well, it is the proof in the statement that what is really going on, on the historical plain, has very little to do with a Roman Empire and what was going on in the world in the second century.

Peter Robinson: So we begin with, in effect, the front page of the New York Times. Caesar Augustus decree, and then the gospel immediately shows us what is important is a secret, ordinary human truth here taking place in a little out-of-the-way.

Rene Girard: Yeah. They are taking place only in one place being unique, being something which has to be discovered. We cannot afford to say okay it is there, it is unimportant. No it is not unimportant. It is the destiny and the duty of our life to look for the truth which is hidden from the point of view of the Roman Empire.

Peter Robinson: Final passage, Luke chapter two. "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. Lo, the angel of the Lord cam upon them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.'" Rene, you remember the Second World War. You lived in occupied Paris. The Second World War with 50 million dead, the Holocaust, the tens of millions killed by the communists, all in your lifetime. How do you make sense of, "and on earth peace, goodwill toward men"?

Rene Girard: The first sense to make is that most men, and especially the most powerful, were not full of peace and good intentions. Human life is essentially drama. Maybe one thing the churches do not emphasize is you notice that human beings like drama. They would like to be part of an immense fight between good and evil, and so forth. What this text says is that in their own way, each one of them is part of that struggle, which I think is very important and very hopeful.

Peter Robinson: All right. What do you make of Benedict the 16th?

Rene Girard: Benedict the 16th? I have great respect for him, and I read his encyclical. I appreciated it. I thought that it was an extremely powerful text in line of the previous popes from before. I feel I am not qualified to say more. I am neither a theologian. I may read the scripture.

Peter Robinson: My last question. He took the name Benedict. Benedict is, of course, the founder of the great monastic tradition. He has spoken about the church becoming, in some way…

Rene Girard: This is very important here.

Peter Robinson: …becoming smaller.
Rene Girard: Benedict was a re-constructor. The world had been totally destroyed, what two-thirds by the Germanic invasion and all the upset. Benedict put people to work, millions of young people that did not know what to do. He created the religious life as the Christians practice it.

Peter Robinson: So this notion that western civilization is ending away, that Europe is gone, is not true?

Rene Girard: It is not true.

Peter Robinson: What do you expect to be the situation in ten years, fifteen years? Do you think in terms of centuries?

Rene Girard: I have no expectations.

Peter Robinson: No expectations? All right. Now, the ordinary Christian is not going to read every word of the Girard Reader or every word of your many books. Can you sum up?

Rene Girard: It is really very unimportant. He may have insights which are more profound than mine, and he should believe, and he should trust that he is a very important man for God, and that his understanding of reality as a religious history is an event that rejoices God.

Peter Robinson: Rene Girard, thank you very much. I should say Joyeux Noël.

Rene Girard: Joyeux Noël. Merry Christmas.

Peter Robinson: I am Peter Robinson for Uncommon Knowledge and the Hoover Institution. Thanks for joining us.