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*H-France Review* Vol. 14 (March 2014), No. 55

Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming and Joel Hodge, eds., *Violence, Desire, and the Sacred: Girard's Mimetic Theory Across the Disciplines*. Foreword by Wolfgang Palaver. New York and London: Continuum, 2012. xix + 286 pp. Glossary, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4411-9401-5.

Review by Gilles Mongeau, Regis College, University of Toronto.

Most of the essays gathered together in the book, with only a few exceptions, were originally papers presented at the inaugural conference, in 2011, of the Australian Girard Seminar; three-quarters of the authors are Australian, and range from established scholars to doctoral and master's students. Twelve authors represent five disciplines: biblical studies, theology, literary studies, history and political thought. Three more authors, in the final section of the book, offer developments and critiques of Girardian theory from the perspectives of neuroscience, philosophy and theology.

This collection, in the introduction offered by the editors, seeks to take the reader "deep into the mimetic reality of human life, ordered and preserved by scapegoating at the root of culture and religion, with the Judeo-Christian scriptures beginning to tell a different story....[We] hope it is also clear that Girard provides the resources for understanding why things are as they are, as well as prompting us to countenance the idea that the emergence of a new human reality and forms of social order is a genuine possibility--and perhaps even unstoppable" (p. xix).

Girardian mimetic theory is difficult to appropriate as an instrument for scholarship for a combination of reasons, of which two are more important: acquiring the theoretical instruments presented by Girard requires more than understanding the terms and relations he presents, it demands that one verify in one's own intellectual and personal living the dynamics of mimetic desire. On the other hand, Girard's insights are expressed in a language that can be hermetic, and Girardian scholars are not always able to break free of the tendency towards jargon and "inspeak."

With respect to the second of these reasons, nonspecialists seeking an introduction to Girard will be unevenly served by this collection. Many of the essays are well-written and very lucid presentations of mimetic theory as it is expressed in various disciplines; a few are poorly written and/or jargon-laden, making access to Girard's thought difficult and confusing.

The introductory essay by Scott Cowdell is intended to help those not familiar with Girardian mimetic theory to find a way into Girard's thought. Cowdell's summary of Girard's historical analysis is most helpful, combining precision and accuracy of reporting with historical concreteness and a refreshing lack of jargon. One of Cowdell's very helpful contributions is to rearrange Girard's works according to a historically-ordered narrative. Cowdell traces the meaning of history from pre-human and pre-cultural forms to the twenty-first century, showing the increasingly apocalyptic tone of Girard's analysis. He finishes with Girard's meditation on Hölderlin, and the hope to be placed in communities of "nonrivalrous living" that re-present and "help keep nonviolent solidarity alive in the world" (p. 12).

The second part of the book brings together three essays in biblical studies. James Alison, one of the most authoritative interpreters of Girardian thought in theology and biblical exegesis, offers a

Girardian interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. He uses this interpretation of the parable to explore the reality of conversion from the mentality of “sacrifice” to the mentality of mercy, which are defined according to their contrasting relations to victims. Alison shows not only the interpretive power of the mimetic framework, but also suggests a path for the personal intellectual verification and transformation that anchors the appropriation of Girard’s theory for oneself. The second essay, by Drasko Dizdar, offers a narrative and reader-centered approach to biblical exegesis that highlights the manner in which our interpretation of biblical scripture is itself an imitation of the key Girardian figure of Jesus Christ in his humility. The final essay of this section, by Debra Anstis, presents a Girardian typological reading of the Judas-Jesus pair in the passion story of Matthew’s gospel in light of the two appointed goats of Yom Kippur in Leviticus 16.

Part three gathers three essays from the discipline of theology. Anthony J. Kelly seeks to “draw attention to the significance of the Resurrection of the Crucified and his breathing forth the Spirit on his disciples” (p. 69). Kelly points to the revolutionary moral awareness of victims in our age as an expression, in secular history, of the resurrection’s power. This essay proposes a most interesting and genuinely creative retrieval of the classic Christian theological tradition on the spiritual life, specifically on the role of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, through a Girardian lens. Starting from documented evidence of the spiritual experience of the Christians of East Timor, the essay by Joel Hodge shows how relationship with Christ in the midst of violence (in this case, state-sanctioned violence) fosters Christian solidarity with victims, giving rise to personal and collective resources that enable various forms of nonviolent resistance. The final essay by Kevin Linehan takes a more methodological perspective. The author tries to “assess the real value of Girard’s thought for the contemporary tasks of theology,” arguing “for an attitude of both receptivity and critique” (p. 107). The discussion of hermeneutics offers a particularly lucid account of Girard’s understanding of what texts are and what they do, which can help readers grasp what is happening in other essays in the collection. The author also suggests, and I concur, “that consideration of how religious traditions understand and respond to human violence is the richest contribution of Girard’s theory to the tasks of interreligious dialogue” (p. 118).

The fourth part of the book is dedicated to literary studies. Vijay Mishra connects Girard’s foundational research into the novel with Derrida’s work on the gift and sacrifice, and uses this as a framework for reading Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Mishra brings to light Rushdie’s deconstruction of Islamic absolute submission for the sake of a humanist religion where desire finds a socially responsible form. Jeremiah Alberg extends and develops the Girardian understanding of violence through a discussion of Flannery O’Connor’s oeuvre, relying especially on O’Connor’s very careful and nuanced exploration of the proportion between nature and supernature. This results in a most satisfying positioning of Girard within a more realist and less absolute framework.

Part five combines essays in history and political thought. Wolfgang Palaver explores the history of European identity as linked to conflict with the Islamic world, and proposes a new approach to building identity without violence, rooted in the early Christian worldview in which one understood oneself and one’s group as “resident aliens who do not completely identify with any earthly political entity” and which meant that “these small groups were able to open up to universality” (p. 177). Ivan Head studies the emergence of the mimetic twinning of Catholicism and Anglicanism in Renaissance England, showing the historical failure of Christianity to overcome human violence: “Popery was to remain the evil other against whom the nation was to be united” (p. 186). Peter Stork tries to understand the paradox that “human rights enjoy broad, almost universal, recognition as an ethical yardstick” for all nations, and yet “human rights violations still occur often and on a large scale” (p. 205). Using mimetic theory, he brings to light the more radical source of the political misuse of human rights as an institution, and the powerlessness of the human rights system to control humanity’s mimetic imagination. From the beginning, the human rights system has been corrupted by the rivalry of power among nations, the competition among human rights NGOs for influence, and the political manipulation

of human rights language by nations seeking to gain advantage over global rivals. In a “finite world, insistence on rights will necessarily create victims” (p. 213).

Part six presents developments and critiques of Girardian theory. Scott Cowdell provides a short report on advances in neurobiology and neuropsychology that could serve as evidence confirming Girard’s account of desire as mimetic. Chris Fleming and John O’Carroll try to understand Nietzsche with Girard, beginning with Nietzsche’s “anti-Christian ferocity” (p. 229), a starting point no other interpreter seems to take up. This serves to clarify both Girard and Nietzsche by highlighting the profound dialectic that opposes Dionysius and Christ in Nietzsche’s thought, which is the opposition between an archaic and victimizing “sacred” and the Christianity that defends victims. Finally, Neil Ormerod puts Girard’s work in dialogue with that of another thinker of human desire, the Canadian philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan. In so doing, he shows more clearly where Girard’s work can be located within the broad frame of Catholic thought. This final essay makes a most fruitful combination with Alberg’s study of Flannery O’Connor. With these two studies, we can locate Girard within three classic intersecting dialectics of Catholic and Christian thought: grace-nature, nature-supernature, and grace-sin.

The editors will publish a second volume of essays in 2014; this new collection will expand the number of disciplines represented. Overall, the reviewer comes away from this collection of essays with a clear sense of the potential and the limits of Girardian mimetic theory, and one can hope that the expansion into new areas will confirm this impression.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Wolfgang Palaver, “Foreword”

Scott Cowdell, Joel Hodge, and Chris Fleming, “Introduction”

#### Part I: Finding Our Bearings

Scott Cowdell, “René Girard, Modernity, and Apocalypse”

#### Part II: Biblical Studies

James Allison, “‘Like Being Dragged Through a Bush Backwards’: Hints of the Shape of Conversion’s Adventure”

Draško Dizdar, “Finding the Way: How to Study Scripture with the Help of Scripture and the Desert Fathers”

Debra Antis, “Sacred Men and Sacred Goats: Mimetic Theory in Levitical and Passion Intertext”

#### Part III: Theology

Anthony J. Kelly, CSsR, “Beyond Locked Doors: The Breath of the Risen One”

Joel Hodge, “Torture and Faith: The Violent Sacred and Christian Resistance in East Timor”

Kevin Lenehan, "Girard and the Tasks of Theology"

Part IV: Literary Studies

Vijay Mishra, "René Girard, Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, and Salman Rushdie"

Jeremiah Alberg, "Grace Can Be Violent: Flannery's O'Connor's Novelistic Truth"

Part V: History and Political Thought

Wolfgang Palaver, "Europe and Enmity: How Christianity Can Contribute to a Positive Identity"

Ivan Head, "Herodian Aspects of the English Reformation Monarchy: Girardian Insights into Unacknowledged Brutality"

Peter Stork, "Human Rights: Controlling the Uncontrollable?"

Part VI: Developments and Critiques

Scott Cowdell, "Hard Evidence for Girardian Mimetic Theory? Intersubjectivity and Mirror Neurons"

Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll, "Nietzsche, the Last Atheist"

Neil Ormerod, "Is All Desire Mimetic? Lonergan and Girard on the Nature of Desire and Authenticity"

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ISSN 1553-9172