“Girard Behind Bars: Teaching Mimetic Theory to Convicts”
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According to a recent installment of the Chronicle of Higher Education, “prison studies” is a rapidly expanding field of interest.¹ Recent scholars have assimilated and also gone beyond Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking work: Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.² These studies constitute shift from the past generation of criminology, which focused on the prevention of crime, to analyze the effects of incarceration on a growing segment of the American population.³

As part of Saint Louis University’s prison initiative, I am teaching a theology course – Jesus and Salvation – to a group of fifteen offenders. The offenders receive college credit for their participation in the course. My course is heavily weighted toward a Girardian approach to the subject of soteriology. Although we are not reading Girard, we will read two of his more astute theological interpreters: James Alison (Knowing Jesus) and Sebastian Moore (The Fire and the Rose are One).⁴ In addition, our study of Augustine and Martin Luther will emphasize their compatibility with Girard.

Each week the students write reflection papers on the material, and the three-hour format affords the opportunity for extensive reflection and interaction. I propose to treat two topics in my paper for the 2010 COVR conference: first to analyze the most recent literature on prison studies against the backdrop of mimetic theory; second, to synthesize

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³ According to Monaghan, the number of incarcerated subjects has increased from 110 per 100,000, to 760 per 100,000 American citizens (“Prison Studies, 8).
the students’ experience of transformation within prison walls, especially in light of their
encounter with Girardian theory and theology.