

Russell Powell
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Ethics of Hope: Praxis in the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement of 1963 Examined Through Rene Girard's Concept of Mimetic Crisis

By 1963, Birmingham, Alabama, enveloped by the Civil Rights Movement, had become a war zone. Yet the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. refused to utilize any tactics of resistance but nonviolence and public prayer. King lead activists at Kelly Ingram Park on May 2, 1963, where nonviolent protesters were beaten, flung down sidewalks by fire hoses, and attacked by police dogs. Much can be discerned from the nonviolent ethics implemented at Kelly Ingram Park, yet through the prism of Rene Girard's social theory one gains valuable insight into this violent convergence of religion, culture, and conflict. At the junction of Girard's theories and the nonviolent ethics led by Martin Luther King, Jr., I will probe the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement of 1963 as an outlet for Christian ethical praxis that prompted the emergence of recognized social equality for Black Americans. This nonviolent ethic induced the exposure of embedded iniquities within the dominant culture's system of segregation and elucidated the unworkable nature of cultural and corporeal violence. By filtering the protests for civil rights at Kelly Ingram Park through Girard's theoretical paradigm for understanding violent social behavior, this paper will illumine a way to interpret how nonviolent social ethics curtailed the spiral of violence in Birmingham and ultimately transformed African Americans' hope for social equality.