

## Panel Proposal

### Colloquium on Religion and Violence

June 30-July 4, 2010

University of Notre Dame

#### Statement of Panel Theme:

This panel includes three papers that will explore the relationship between two theorists, René Girard and Philip Rieff, who share a similar perspective on authority, violence and sacred order in modern culture. After disappearing from the public eye from some years, Philip Rieff published four important works shortly before his death that have interesting parallels to the work of René Girard. Both Rieff and Girard offer critiques of the secularization thesis, according to which the emancipation of desire and the therapeutic lowering of sacred restraints, prohibitions, and taboos will lead to greater rationalization and human happiness. Both share a concern for the disintegration of cultural order, and identify the sources of that order in the sacred traditions of the West. The nuanced differences between each of these theorists, however, are as significant as the themes they share in common. Girard's focus on escalating mimetic desire as both the agent and product of cultural decline is paralleled by Rieff's penetrating but unique analysis of the culture of transgression. The proposed papers will assess the differences between these two thinkers and debate their respective strengths and weaknesses.

**1. Author:** Stephen L. Gardner, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Department Chair of Philosophy and Religion, University of Tulsa.

**Paper Title:** The Return of the Living Dead: Philip Rieff and Rene Girard on Order-In-Divine

#### Abstract:

Philip Rieff and Rene Girard share a rare slant as conservatively-minded thinkers: they are students of *order-in-divine*, the process by which "sacred order" is apparently dismantled with the rise of equality, more through "soft" or cultural revolution than the "hard" or socio-political kind. Rieff sees this through the lens of a sociology of culture, especially of the cultural revolution that has swept the liberal democratic world; Girard, through that of a "fundamental anthropology," an account of human origin and apocalyptic ending through the disintegration of cultural institutions.

This paper will examine a central theme of each, that of the *fraternal rivalry* of the sacred and the profane that structures *modern* order. Rieff and Girard share a common point of reference in Emile Durkheim, whose theories of primitive or archaic religion shape their understanding of social order. Both can be seen as undermining the "secularization" view of modernity that has conventionally prevailed since the Enlightenment (and also as correcting Durkheim too). The problem of modern secularism is not that it eliminates or reduces the sacred—that is out of the question—but that in its relentless, ritual assaults on tradition and religion, it increases their power and corrupts them at the same time. It is the failure of the historic Left to understand this that has rendered it impotent in times of catastrophic political crisis, as the Right mutates from a traditional party of order and

religion into something else. My aim is to tease this analysis out using the works of these two thinkers, showing their contrasts along the way.

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**2. Author:** James Poulos, Doctoral Candidate, Georgetown University.

**Paper Title:** Unrealized Selves: Philip Rieff On Family, Individuality, And The Nature Of Violence.

**Abstract:**

In this paper I will consider the problem of violence in the tension between the family and the individual. Rene Girard and Philip Rieff both argue that the family is the locus of imitation and desire. Further, Girard and Rieff suggest that the continuing destruction of the authority of the family is best understood in terms of the widening scope and the deepening pathology of mimetic desire among individuals. This paper will explore that scope and pathology by focusing on the significance, in Rieff's work, of the overthrow of the ontology of the irreducible individual by the phenomenology of the fullness of individuality.

For Girard, mimetic desire aspires to the being achieved by another; but this being, under scrutiny, is an experience of fullness. For Rieff, the establishment of the singularity of the second person, you, in the image of the singular first person, God, places individual being far higher in sacred order than the experience of individuality. The experience of individuality, as Rieff shows through Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud, is always a pluralistic, *not* individualistic, phenomenon -- one which can violently deconstruct both the ontological singularity of the individual and the authority of the family as established in Jewish and Christian sacred order. The paper will close by briefly considering the broader areas of inquiry to be developed in accordance with its subject. Specifically, it will consider the extent to which the authority of the family may be renovated in a way which does a minimum of violence both to the family and the singular individual.

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**3. Author:** David Humbert, Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Thorneloe College, Laurentian University.

**Title:** Desire and the Politics of Anti-culture: Rene Girard and Philip Rieff on the Mystique of Transgression

**Abstract:**

While some contemporary theorists, following Freud, attribute violence to the repression of desire and recommend the therapeutic lowering of prohibitions and sacred restraints, sociologist Philip Rieff suggests that a vibrant culture requires an ordering of desire through relationship to the sacred, to interdictory truths. For Rieff, the therapeutic lowering of the requirements of guilt and prohibition has generated an “anti-culture” in which the sources of order are attacked, leaving desire to escalate into the struggle for power. The theoretical attack on guilt and the interdictions that sustain it foster a war of all against all, a “deritualizing of intimate relations, the dissolution of all manners and reticence, so that men leap upon one another, to achieve their own persons in the submission, unto death, of another” (Rieff, *Charisma* 19).

Similarly, René Girard identifies taboo, ritual, and prohibition as differing modes by which sacrificial crises and anarchic violence – the war of all against all -- are both tentatively resolved and averted. According to his reading, with the modern critique and dissolution of these modes and their replacement by rational controls of law-court and bureaucracy, de-structuring of social order ensues. Meanwhile, the contagious propagation of desire (mimesis) continues to flourish behind the scenes and in the public sphere. What Girard calls mimetic desire is reflected not only in bizarre outbreaks of violence on the global scale, but is also in cultural products such as literature or film that consistently promote the spontaneity of desire or what he calls “the mystique of transgression” (Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* 287).

This paper will examine the parallels and the contradictions between Rieff’s and Girard’s assessments of the political meaning of transgressive “anti-culture” for an understanding of modernity and violence.

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