

Abortion and the Drama of Human Motivations:
With Reference to Kenneth Burke and Rene Girard

Charles K. Bellinger
Assoc. Prof. of Theology and Ethics
Brite Divinity School
TCU Box 298400
Fort Worth, TX 76129
817-257-7668

Kenneth Burke directly influenced Rene Girard, though Girard developed Burke's concept of the "scapegoat mechanism" somewhat differently than Burke did himself. It is an intriguing exercise to connect these two thinkers with the abortion debate because they say so little about it, and they both tend to be averse to normative language about ethical topics. Nevertheless, their reflections on the drama of human motivations provide us with important insights that can elevate the philosophical quality of the contemporary debate about abortion. Their ideas challenge all participants in the debate to move beyond simplistic slogans to more substantive philosophical articulations, by taking into account dimensions of reality such as: nature, spirit, individual selfhood and free will, time, and the mimetic pressure of society. How do these dimensions work together or at cross purposes to shape both decision-making regarding abortion and also how the central arguments are usually presented by advocates of "pro-choice" or "pro-life"? Additional puzzlements that spur thought along these lines include: Why do people on both sides of the debate claim to be struggling against tyranny? Why do people use rights language, and why do they think it accomplishes something? Why do people think about time and the personhood of the fetus differently (synchronic vs. diachronic perspectives)? Why are people motivated to attribute nefarious motivations to their opponents in the abortion debate? In addition to Burke and Girard, other thinkers will supplement these reflections, including: Soren Kierkegaard, Eric Voegelin, and Chantal Delsol.