

Reading René Girard and Hans Urs von Balthasar as Theologians of Spiritual Transformation: Setting the Table for a Mutually Illuminating Dialogue

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In 2005 René Girard was elected a member of the prestigious l'Académie Française. Girard received Chair No. 37, which has been held illustrious Catholic theologians such as the Cardinals Jean Daniélou and Eugène Tisserant, and most recently the Dominican spiritual advisor to Pope Paul VI, Robert Ambroise-Marie Carré.¹ In one sense this is unusual company for Girard. He has been reluctant to identify himself as a theologian, preferring instead to consider his work as belonging primarily to cultural anthropology with only secondary relevance to theology as its critical corrective. In giving him Chair No. 37, however, l'Académie Française was simply stating the obvious: Girard *is* a theologian—and he should be read and evaluated as such.² This was evident as early as his 1978 text *Things Hidden from the Foundations of the World* (this title is a quote from Matthew 13:35) in which he attempted to give a “non-sacrificial” reading of the Gospel. His theological agenda has only become increasingly obvious since 1978; his writings have become more concerned with biblical hermeneutics, the uniqueness of Judaism and Christianity among world religions, the nature of the Satanic, and the meaning of the Cross for Christian theologies of grace and redemption. Indeed, he sees

¹ Girard's December 2005 acceptance address to the l'Académie Française, which follows standard procedure by giving an encomium to the writings of his predecessor, Rev. Carré, is published in *Le Tragique et la Pitié: Discours de réception de René Girard à l'Académie Française et réponse de Michel Serres* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2007).

² The reasons for this assertion will be spelled out below. It is interesting to note here that recently, perhaps given that he now has the chair in l'Académie Française once held by Henri de Lubac, Girard has made the following claim: “When I had been accused of not being a Christian, de Lubac told me that everything that I was writing was right and there wasn't anything heretical in it.” See *The J'accuse of René Girard: The Audacious Ideas of a Great Thinker*,” interview with Giulio Meotti in *Il Foglio*, March 20, 2007; available in English translation by Francis R. Hittinger IV at <http://home.uchicago.edu/~frh/girard.html>.

himself as a defender of the orthodox Catholic faith in the contemporary academy. In a 1996 interview he states, “Mine is a search for the anthropology of the Cross, which turns out to rehabilitate orthodox theology.”³

Nevertheless, he resists the suggestion that the rehabilitation could work both ways—he has been reluctant to allow his thought to be read as a form of theology that could be appropriated and mischievously reinterpreted by theologians. In an essay from 2000 responding to several theological reinterpretations and critiques of his work, Girard wrote the following:

Theologians would like mimetic theory to answer many theological questions to which I confess I have no answers. I understand very well that theologians would ask these questions—regarding the church, for instance, and above all the matter of redemption—to understand atonement theories. Their answers interest me greatly. Yet it always takes me by surprise that such questions should be asked before the repercussions of the mimetic theory on our understanding of the relationship between mythology and the Judeo-Christian tradition are really assessed and assimilated.⁴

Later in this same essay Girard dismisses theological critiques of his work by declaring that his mimetic theory has first to be taken as a given before “parochial ecclesiastical interests” can make use of it. He adds: “If the intellectual independence of the mimetic theory is obscured, if it is perceived as mere servant of this or that theology, *ancilla theologiae*, its effectiveness is nullified.”⁵ The clear implication of Girard’s defensive reactions to theological critiques and/or appropriations of his thought is that theologians should refrain from criticizing his theory until they have first allowed it to entirely

³ *The Girard Reader*, 288. Girard has also written, “It should be noted however, that the discovery of this evangelical anthropology in no way contradicts traditional theology. On the contrary, it reinforces its now threatened credibility” (Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, p. xii).

⁴ “Violence Renounced: A Response by René Girard” in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, edited by Willard M. Swartley (Telford, Pennsylvania: Pandora Press U.S.), 311-312.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 315.

reframe their understanding of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition and its relationship to everything outside it.

Few theologians have been willing to grant Girard this sweeping power to transform their discipline.⁶ For example, Jim Fodor sums up a general consensus among theologians when he argues that although there is much in Girard that is theologically useful, “the ore always comes mixed with clay. This means that Girard’s work must be subjected to a good deal of smelting, refining, and purging to be useful” to Christian theologians.⁷ It is difficult to undertake this complex revision, but many have concluded that Girard’s insights are worth theologically appropriating even if they must first be significantly altered.⁸ The late Jesuit theologian Raymund Schwager has been a leader in this process, and there have been many others who have been undertaking similar projects.⁹ The field of Girardian theology is growing, and it is becoming evident that we need some precise criteria with which to make a rigorous analysis of the degree to which Schwager and other Girardian theologians are succeeding in the “smelting, refining, and purging” process.

The most penetrating theological evaluation of Girard’s theology has come from pen another Catholic thinker who, despite its obviousness, refuses to call himself a theologian: Hans Urs Balthasar. This “scholar of German literature” offers an assessment of Girard in his 1980 text *Theodramatik: Dritte Band: Die Handlung* (English translation:

⁶ See Michael Kirwin, *Discovering Girard*, section on Girard and the theologians.* See also collection of essays in *Violence Renounced*.

⁷ Jim Fodor, “Christian Discipleship as Participative Imitation” in *Violence Renounced*, 266.

⁸ Rebecca Adams too has called for a “creative reassessment” and “reconstruction” of Girard’s theory of mimetic desire to free it from its own dichotomous “Manichean” tendencies (*Violence Unveiled*, 277-307). In a more hostile but not entirely unsympathetic approach John Milbank has argued that it is necessary to “rescue” Girard’s best insights from his own theological missteps.

⁹ * note to *Must There be Scapegoats?* and other writings. Note too book *Saved From Sacrifice* by Himes. And Gil Baillie, and Allison’s *The Joy of Being Wrong*. [note too several major theological projects in Girardian theology, including COV&R publications]

Theo-Drama, Volume IV). Balthasar reads Girard with the eye of a theologian, and he sees in him a theologian whose faith is seeking understanding. Although Balthasar finds Girard's thought problematic on a number of levels, he nevertheless presents a constructive and irenic critique of it. Balthasar's appraisal of Girard's thought offers an astute reading of it that, if modified to account for changes in Girard's thinking since 1980, can provide a useful set of protocols for evaluating the many current theological appropriations of Girard's system.

Moreover, Balthasar's reading of Girard points the way also toward a mutually illuminating dialogue between Balthasar and Girard as two theologians of spiritual transformation whose fundamental commitments are not really to German literature and scientific anthropology, but rather to Catholicism's hagiological tradition of saints and martyrs. Both theologians are focused on re-stating in the contemporary world and for the contemporary Church a vision of spirituality that involves the self in a fundamental transformation from egocentric power-mongering to suffering and non-violent love. In this paper I will specifically compare Girard's teachings on "positive mimesis" and Balthasar's teachings on "marian spirituality", arguing that if read together they point in the direction of a Girardian-Balthasarian spirituality of peace.