

“Girard Behind Bars: Teaching Mimetic Theory to Convicts”
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The topic of “Transforming Violence” dovetails nicely with an analysis of prison culture and with my experience teaching fifteen students doing hard time at a maximum security prison in Missouri. What I would like to do in my paper is outline four topics: first, to explain the course that I taught; second, to review some of the prison literature – ranging from depictions in film, to Foucault’s classic treatment, to a recent study of prison culture; third, I would like to highlight two elements of Girard’s thought that would bear on both the field of prison studies, and my own experience of teaching inmates (anti-Romanticism and the scapegoat mechanism); fourth, I will give some anecdotal testimony and relay a few stories about the experience of teaching theology – specifically soteriology – behind bars.

As part of Saint Louis University’s pilot prison initiative, I was the fifth and final professor to teach a theology course – this one titled “Jesus and Salvation” – to a group of fifteen offenders. The pilot program has now concluded, but I am happy to announce that Saint Louis University was the recipient of a \$250,000 Hearst Foundation Grant to expand the initiative so that both inmates and staff could receive an associate’s degree. The offenders receive college credit for their participation and completion of the course. My course was heavily weighted toward a Girardian approach to the subject of soteriology. Although we did not read Girard, we read two of his more astute theological interpreters: James Alison (*Knowing Jesus*) and Sebastian Moore (*The Fire and the Rose*

are One).¹ In addition, we studied Walter Wink (*The Powers that Be*),² Augustine (*Confessions* and *City of God*) and Martin Luther (“Freedom of a Christian,” “Preface to Romans,” and “Two Kinds of Righteousness”).

Unfortunately the prison staff placed severe limit on our interaction, which I was not made aware of when I proposed this paper. A document titled, “Ground Rules for Interaction with the Professor,” states, among other things, that: 1) Conversations beyond to scope of the course are not possible (this includes private interactions about a student’s case, or internal affairs of the institution); 2) Written communication between class meetings must be via the Education Office and limited to questions about assignments. The professor must (by regulation) turn over all correspondence via postal service to IAC and must refuse all telephone contacts; 3) Communication of any kind with student’s friends, relatives, and significant others is prohibited by the rules of the Missouri correctional system; 4) Course related assignments will ordinarily be graded on site and not taken off the premises. 5) Regulations strictly limit handshakes and prohibit “pats on the back” and hugs. These restrictions made the kind of conversations I had hoped to have very difficult.

Each week the class met from 7:30-10:30am, roughly one hour south of my home in St. Louis. The students wrote one-two page reflection papers on the given material. Unfortunately, I could not get to know the students outside the classroom: there were no office hours, no emails, and virtually no way for the spontaneous interactions of campus life that form so much of the context of high school and university teaching.

¹ James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1994); Sebastian Moore, *The Fire and the Rose Are One*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981).

² Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Galilee, 1998).

My orientation for volunteers attempted to inculcate as much fear and suspicion as possible of the prisoners. We were discouraged from seeing inmates as fellow human beings through the recounting of stories in which prisoners manipulated naïve and trusting volunteers or staff people. Several times I was warned that the prison environment produced a breed of hyper-sexualized homosexuality that should not be given a chance to breathe. I was drug tested twice, once before beginning, and once randomly after a class. Still, the semester did afford several nice opportunities for interaction, including a site visit from the Hearst Foundation and a commencement ceremony after the final class, the highlight of which was a beautiful reflection by one of the many talented students in the class.

II. Prison Literature

As recent literature shows and general observation confirms, Americans have a fascination with prison life. The prison is often considered a microcosm for society writ large – a confining and oppressive edifice that stunts individualism and suffocates freedom. We Americans become enamored with the idea of a prisoner whose indefatigable spirit rises above the social edifice and *escapes*. This story usually ends with an actual escape. Nowhere does this myth shine more brightly than in *The Shawshank Redemption*, -- one of the most popular films in American cinematic history. The very title evokes a religious transformation and – despite an admitted self-awareness about the negative effects of prison on its subjects – ends with a hero shedding his prison clothes (as if they were a social construct) and raising his hands triumphantly in the rain. *This* is what redemption looks like – individual ingenuity triumphing over circumstance.

In this model the prison is a microcosm for life in society. Various walls and restrictions truncate the natural and intended freedom of the individual. Nature is good and liberating, but society erects arbitrary barriers that imprison the individual. Nowhere is this imprisonment more acute than in an actual prison, hence the fascination with escape – one recalls another cinematic classic: *Escape from Alcatraz*. Of course there are other kinds of liberation of the Romantic stripe: these include the intellectual, moral, and sometimes religious conversion: one thinks here of the critically acclaimed *American History X* and of course of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Prison allows the venues for the hero to see how his or her thinking before prison was imprisoning, making the true liberation internal, and the remission into society a consequence and not the climax of the conversion.

According to a recent installment of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “prison studies” is a rapidly expanding field of interest.³ 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.⁴ One such study is Stephen Cox’s *The Big House*.⁵ Cox provides a helpful overview of the history of American prisons, including a chapters on architecture and sex. Cox echoes Foucault in stating that the institution of incarceration represented a reforming effort, which saw prison as a civilized alternative to the public display of the whipping post and the gallows. For the most part, American prisons have been poorly run, and generally

³ Peter Monaghan, “Prison Studies,” and Jay Parini, “Behind Bars” in *Chronicle of Higher Education* 56/11 (1 November 2009): 6-11.

⁴ 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). According to Cox, 1/1600 citizens were incarcerated in 1880; 1/800 in 1960; 1/200 in 2000.

⁵ Stephen Cox, *The Big House: Image and Reality of the American Prison* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009).

dangerous places in which ill-trained guards and unfortunate wardens often met sad fates. The kind of surveillance and control imagined by many prison architects and wardens has been almost impossible to achieve.

The most effective warden in Cox's tale was Joseph Ragen, who ran Stateville (Illinois) state prison beginning in 1935. He introduced professionalism into the guard ranks and enforced rules and discipline unlike his predecessors. According to Cox, Ragen, "controlled his Big House as well as any large institution has ever been controlled, and far better than any other Big House. He came as close as anyone could to fulfilling Foucault's theories about universal control."⁶ Yet this total control was only realized in the minds of reformers, and while Ragen produced a recognizable simulacrum, he was the exception to the rule of poorly run and chaotic prisons.

Cox manifests a certain conservatism toward the end of his book, by which I mean suspicion about attempts at reform that aim to eliminate or curtail social problems but often end up exacerbating them. Of course the prison itself is a relatively recent experiment in reform. His chapter on "Rajabs and Reformers," relates tales of "prison officials who thought they were duty-bound to upset the institutions they were hired to govern."⁷ Attempts at self-governing prisons, authority sharing, and leveling of difference end poorly. As a microcosm, prison allows reformers the possibility for social engineering, which, if implemented on a larger scale, would eradicate the problems. Prison reformers worked from an assumption "that crime results from environment, and environment can be closely controlled and engineered." Yet this mentality often leads to greater brutalization, exemplified by reformers who thought that prison sentences should

⁶ Cox, *The Big House*, 126.

⁷ Cox, *The Big House*, 140.

last until the prisoner was reformed, regardless of the crime. Cox adds: “The problem was one that naturally arises in a welfare state: the authorities who are commissioned to plan other people’s lives can never seem to get enough reliable information to justify their decisions.” Prisons that sought to do more than merely confine prisoners, were prisons that “could not be adequately monitored and controlled.”⁸

Michel Foucault shares with Girard both an anti-Romanticism and a concern with conversion. Although recent prison studies have been less content with his theory of the prison, his shadow still looms large over the attempt to understand the Western system of incarceration. Foucault’s central historical point is that pre-modern (or pre-18th century) versions of punishment focused on the body, whereas modern punishments focus on the soul or the mind of the prisoner. This explains why and how the locus of punishment has shifted from the scaffold to the penitentiary. He writes, “The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations.”⁹ As such, a study of the development of the modern prison belongs to a wider *psychology* in the classical sense. It also supports Foucault’s thesis about the intense increase in disciplinary measures that marks modernity from pre-modern society.

We do not need an entire recapitulation of Foucault’s daring but now nearly four decade old series of claims about the role of surveillance, the compartmentalization of time, the invention of the panopticon, the place of the prison alongside such other disciplinary arenas as the school, the office, and the barracks, and how the monastery

⁸ Cox, *The Big House*, 153.

⁹ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 16. Subsequent parenthetical remarks refer to this text.

foresaw all of these institutions. Instead we can focus our attention on Foucault's emphasis on the prison as a locus of conversion. In his chapter, "The Gentle Way in Punishment," Foucault explains that prison reformers sought to rehabilitate the soul of the prisoner. The prison, he explains, "will be a machine for altering minds." (125) Further, her release depends on the authenticity of regret, sorrow, and remorse that the parole board judges to stem from the offender's heart. Yet the desired conversion, from a modern society particularly concerned with productivity, aims low: it wants individuals to become "useful" or beneficial to society (210). In short, we want prisons to do what we want our other institutions to do: make us like the *Radiohead* song, "Fitter, Happier."¹⁰ Foucault sees prisons as part and parcel of a wider project, and thus de-emphasizes their uniqueness, and the uniqueness of their inhabitants:

The practice of placing individuals under 'observation' is a natural extension of a justice imbued with disciplinary methods and examination procedures. Is it surprising that the cellular prison, with its regular chronologies, forced labor, its authorities of surveillance and registration, its experts in normality, who continue and multiply the functions of the judge, should have become the modern instrument of penalty? Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prison (227-28)?

¹⁰ "Fitter, happier, more productive, comfortable, not drinking too much, regular exercise at the gym (3 days a week), getting on better with your associate employee contemporaries, at ease, eating well (no more microwave dinners and saturated fats), a patient better driver, a safer car (baby smiling in back seat), sleeping well (no bad dreams), no paranoia, careful to all animals (never washing spiders down the plughole), keep in contact with old friends (enjoy a drink now and then), will frequently check credit at (moral) bank (hole in the wall), favors for favors, fond but not in love, charity standing orders, on Sundays ring road supermarket (no killing moths or putting boiling water on the ants), car wash (also on Sundays), no longer afraid of the dark or midday shadows nothing so ridiculously teenage and desperate, nothing so childish - at a better pace, slower and more calculated, no chance of escape, now self-employed, concerned (but powerless), an empowered and informed member of society (pragmatism not idealism), will not cry in public, less chance of illness, tires that grip in the wet (shot of baby strapped in back seat), a good memory, still cries at a good film, still kisses with saliva, no longer empty and frantic like a cat tied to a stick, that's driven into frozen winter shit (the ability to laugh at weakness), calm, fitter, healthier and more productive a pig in a cage on antibiotics." From "OK Computer" (1997).

Therefore it is no surprise that criminology has advanced very little from the nineteenth century. For Foucault, prison intends conversion, but it wants citizens converted so that they comply with the norms of the larger, social prison, which he calls “the carceral archipelago.” He overlaps to some degree with Girard in that both are unsatisfied with what they see as false conversions, although for Girard the false conversion is the Romantic one, and for Foucault it is a conversion into social utility.

If Foucault is rather tepid about the authentic conversion of individuals or of groups of prisoners, what about reform of the entire system? Should stern wardens yield to understanding social workers, should uneducated guards yield to liberal professors bringing Hegel and Dostoevsky to underprivileged youth? Foucault issues an incredible pessimism about the project of prison reform. For Foucault, prison is just an intensification of the conversion that late modern society wants to impose on its subjects: “Prison continues, on those who are entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline. [...] In its function the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating” (302-3). Prison reform, then, is a bogus question. Although the prison itself was a relatively recent social experiment, Foucault argues, “it is not even [a question of] whether we should have prison or something other than prison. At present, the problem lies rather in the steep rise in the use of these mechanisms of normalization and the wide-ranging powers which, through the proliferation of new disciplines, they bring with them” (306). The modern world employs a variety of mechanisms of “incarceration” and a bevy of “petty cruelties” that fabricate the “disciplinary individual”

(308). One wonders whether, if all of this is true, then it might provide another Ivan Karamazov another perfectly sensible reason to “return one’s ticket” to modern life.

Conversion does happen in prison, and it seems to happen with greater regularity than on the outside. Reasons are obvious. And there are many remarkable prison accounts and writings: starting with those Pauline and Johannine texts from the New Testament, and continuing to Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*.

From my experience the past semester, I can say that prison conversion is authentic. In my class were violent criminals, including a murderer who conspired with two others to bind and kidnap a woman before throwing her into a river and thus killing her. Yet among this group I have never witnessed such an intense desire to learn about Jesus and salvation. And when discussions became personal, these men did by and large did not shy away from the enormity of their crimes and their culpability.

III. Anti-Romanticism and Scapegoating

Among other things, Girard’s mimetic theory undercuts Romanticism and the myth of the romantic hero. According to the myth, social structures present an imposing but not insurmountable obstacle to the pure and unsullied will of the true hero. Romantic liberation – envisioned by Rousseau and embodied in such American literary icons as Thoreau and Holden Caulfield – entails an escape from these structures into the purity that Rousseau called “nature.” Given how deep this myth runs in the American consciousness, it is not surprising that extends to the social imaginary of the prison.

Girardian theory does not eschew transformation, conversion, and the freedom of individuals. But it tells a different story of liberation. Instead of the false romantic conversion that seeks to abandon society’s desires in order to attain purer, more

autonomous desires, the novelistic, Christian conversion aims much lower, at least from the modern perspective. Girard explains this near his conclusion to *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*: “This time it is not a false but a genuine conversion. The hero triumphs in defeat; he triumphs because he is at the end of his resources: for the first time he has to look his despair and his nothingness in the face. But this look which he has dreaded, which is the defeat of his pride, is his salvation.”¹¹ As converted, the loved-sinner realizes that the problem was never simply out there, on the far side, but in his own messy self, which is deeply involved in what is wrong.

Part of Girard’s novelistic or Christian understanding of conversion means that one cannot continue to employ the scapegoat mechanism. Or as James Alison puts it, this *is* the intelligence of the victim. So if one had previously been a rabid, Rush Limbaugh loving, Sarah Palin poster buying, Glenn Beck book schilling conservative, and then becomes a fanatical, Keith Olbermann watching, Michael Moore documentary supporting liberal, one has not really experienced any conversion. There’s still an enemy who ruins or threatens to spoil all that is good and worth saving on the planet; the only thing that has changed is the target. So tracking any sort of conversion of prisoners must not mean doing so at the expense of the warden, the staff, or the other, less intellectually inclined prisoners if it is to be conversion in Girard’s sense of the term.

IV. Girard Behind Bars

I began and ended my encounter with teaching felonious students with a sense of urgency and hope. It is difficult to imagine the level of intellectual hunger that my students displayed. Or the total lack of trepidation I had in their presence. Without

¹¹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 294.

exaggeration I can say that it would be more likely for a violent incident to occur in my home Jesuit undergraduate classroom, than it would at Bonne Terre prison. I would like to tell you about all of the amazing encounters, but I can only tell you a few.

When discussion Alison's *Knowing Jesus* we talked about the problem of scapegoating, even when one has been terribly mistreated. I asked the prisoners about the hypothetical situation of abusive guards or staff. Ray replied, "I used to really hate the guards for what they did and how they treated me. But then I just felt sorry for them." We talked a lot about repentance. In a reflection paper, Paul, who is dying to somehow make a thirty-day retreat, wrote, "I pray for forgiveness to God. Not only to God but also to my victim." On the uselessness the 85% violent sentencing rule, Cory stated, "What I did was horrible, and I would gladly give up my own life to undo it. But there's nothing about the system that encourages me to be a better person. I could should dope and spend half my time in the hole, or I could try to better myself and prepare myself for the outside world, but it would make little difference in my release date." Chris, who had been put on death row as a teenage for a truly brutal crime, knows that he will probably die in prison. But he wants to do what he can in his station in life to help at-risk youth, and to serve his fellow inmates. Chris never wrote about what he suffered, or wallowed in self-pity. He seemed more accepting of his fate than I do of mine. It was only through the Internet that I learned how brutally his step-father beat him, tied him to trees as a young boy so that his step-father could drink and fish in peace, and how he was forced to imbibe at the age of eight to amuse his father's bar friends. Jim relayed a story of his medical condition that made it impossible for him to urinate in front of staff during drug testing. His repeatedly "failed" drug tests resulted in him spending over a year in solitary

confinement, in order to protect the integrity of the system. Yet I encountered Jim not as a hardened man, but as a man softened by forgiveness and in love with Jesus.

It is not surprising that our experience the past semester produced a solidarity greater than any I had ever known in ten years of teaching. Or that I often drove home in tears. Our reading of Girardian theology, however, made me aware that our solidarity would be compromised by scapegoating the cruel and insensitive educational supervisor who felt none of the solidarity with the men that I felt so strongly. Solidarity minus one is not the solidarity that the Gospel promises.

The conclusion of the Pilot program enabled a short but moving commencement ceremony in which Ray provided the keynote address. He began by recalling how he had to tell his son what he “did for a living”—pick up cigarette butts. In Ray’s words, this exchange was the culmination of a sense of utter failure, and it left him feeling “stripped of his dignity.” He applied to the prison program because he wanted to be able to tell his son that he did what he could behind bars to get educated, so that his son might imitate him. Not only Ray, but all of the men conveyed a palpable sense of awareness that they had been removed from society, like a cancer or a contagion. One did not need to strip away inflated sense of ego or privilege from these men. When I encountered them, they had already been broken. And healed by Christ.

So I would like to end by suggesting that Girard helped me behind bars more than it seemed to help the murderers and violent criminals that I taught. Real transformation can and does happen, to those inside and outside prison walls. And for myself I can say that I have never felt such a strong sense of kinship with my students, such a strong sense that we all belonged together. And my prayer is to know the grace that extends this

kinship to the rest of my students, and colleagues, and parish members, and yes, even to my enemies.