

“Girard Behind Bars: Teaching Mimetic Theory to Convicts”  
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According to a recent installment of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “prison studies” is a rapidly expanding field of interest.<sup>1</sup> Recent scholars have assimilated and also gone beyond Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking work: *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

As part of Saint Louis University’s prison initiative, I am teaching a theology course – Jesus and Salvation – to a group of fifteen offenders. The offenders receive college credit for their participation in the course. My course is heavily weighted toward a Girardian approach to the subject of soteriology. Although we are not reading Girard, we will read two of his more astute theological interpreters: James Alison (*Knowing Jesus*) and Sebastian Moore (*The Fire and the Rose are One*).<sup>4</sup> In addition, our study of Augustine and Martin Luther will emphasize their compatibility with Girard.

Each week the students write reflection papers on the material, and the three-hour format affords the opportunity for extensive reflection and interaction. I propose to treat two topics in my paper for the 2010 COVR conference: first to analyze the most recent literature on prison studies against the backdrop of mimetic theory; second, to synthesize

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

<sup>2</sup> Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1994); Sebastian Moore, *The Fire and the Rose Are One*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981).

the students' experience of transformation within prison walls, especially in light of their encounter with Girardian theory and theology.