

Matthew Erdel

MTS Student

Department of Theology

University of Notre Dame

[merdel@nd.edu](mailto:merdel@nd.edu)

Title: The Christian and Punishment in a Violent World: John Howard Yoder's Interaction with Girardian Theory in *The Case for Punishment*

Abstract: In the recently published *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder makes use of the mimetic theory of Rene Girard to describe the anthropological pattern of mimetic violence. Yet, it is in an unpublished collection of essays entitled *The Case for Punishment* that Yoder significantly interacts with the work of Girard. While Yoder is convinced that too much has been asked of Girard's work (e.g., he rejects the understanding of Girardian theory as a kind of Einsteinian "general field theory" that is able to explain everything), he acknowledges the great contribution Girard's theory has made across many disciplines. Yoder turns to Girardian theory particularly because of what it contributes to understanding why people and cultures punish. He finds Girardian theory to possess resources that the sociological tradition of Durkheim and others lacks in its treatment of punitive social activity. But Yoder also finds gaps in Girard's thought concerning punitive cultural practice; particularly, does Girard's mimetic theory really account for *why* people feel the need to punish in addition to describing the mimetic form of the desire? Yoder seeks an etiologic account of human belief in the punitive imperative, but finds that this account must go with and beyond Girard. He also probes whether and how the Christian should accept the punitive character of our world's structures. This reading of Yoder's reading of Girard finds that Girardian theory does not undermine the case for punishment, but rather it is through a post-Girardian understanding of the punitive imperative that the Christian committed to nonviolence can relate himself or herself rightly to the punitive structures of the world.