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Title: If Only You Had Eyes to See: The Threat of the “Mythologizing Cross” in the Space of Empire

At a public lecture in Washington, DC in the Fall of 2008, a notable Girard scholar (Gil Bailie) made the claim that the two greatest threats to the world today are Western nihilism and Islamic fundamentalism. This paper will first acknowledge that a certain conceptualization of Girardian theory – one that simultaneously emphasizes both the “veiling” function of traditional religion and the “unveiling” function of the Cross – can be used to support this claim.

However, this paper will then problematize the original claim by noting that such a conceptualization of Girardian theory fails to take into account that the Cross has been, and continues to be, subjugated to imperial theology. As John of Patmos tells his readers in Revelation, one of the cardinal sins of empire is its ability to deceive its constituents. Thus, Christianity subjugated to imperial theology can be aligned more closely with the “veiling” and scapegoating tendencies that Girard associates with traditional religions. Accordingly, this paper will assert that Imperial Christianity is less adequately symbolized by the revelatory light of Christ than it is by the partial, distortive light of the “torches and lanterns” carried by the religio-imperial horde that comes to arrest and crucify Jesus in John’s gospel. Given this reality, one must reappraise where the greatest threats to today’s world originate.

Thus, this paper will conclude by following Martin Luther King Jr. in arguing that it is the empire of the United States – with its position of power in the acquisitive world-economic system, its expansive military presence, its stockpiles of nuclear weapons, and its exportation of arms (both small and large) around the world – that is the “greatest purveyor of violence” in the world today. Accordingly, the threat that Western-imperial theology (perhaps especially when it is cloaked in Christian trappings) poses to the world must be acknowledged.