

MIMETIC THEORY AND THEOLOGY

- Topic: "Girardian Anthropology, Sanctification, and Imitation"
 Convener: Grant Kaplan, Saint Louis University
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 Moderator: Mark Miller, University of San Francisco

In the first paper, "Incarnate Meaning and Mimetic Desire: Toward a Theology of the Saints," Randy Rosenberg explored Bernard Lonergan's category of "incarnate meaning" in relation to René Girard's account of "mimetic desire." Acknowledging the contemporary challenge to bridge the gap between the saints and theological discourse with special reference to the work of Michael Buckley, Lawrence Cunningham, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Rosenberg argued that Lonergan's category of incarnate meaning and its manifestation in art offers a way of articulating the saints as symbolic worlds wherein we may dwell for theological and religious inspiration. Furthermore, Girard's emphasis on mimetic desire enables us to envision the saints not only as sites of incarnate meaning, but more specifically as incarnate models of desire for the Christian community. Girard's account of mimetic desire, then, both extends and complements Lonergan's account of incarnate meaning. The paper concluded with the examples of Edith Stein, the Maritains, and St. Ignatius, as a way of illuminating the connection between incarnate meaning and mimetic desire.

In the second paper, "Overcoming Romantic Pelagianism: Mimetic Theory's Contribution to Hagiology," Grant Kaplan began by situating the potential contribution of mimetic theory to hagiology within three separate arenas: first, post-Vatican II Catholic theology of the saints, second, modern and postmodern attitudes about saints, and third, the romantic notion of the hero and the relationship of this notion to sanctity. Kaplan called this "threshing" the field so it might be clearer how mimetic theory, which stems from the work of René Girard, can contribute to a contemporary hagiology.

Kaplan's paper located two areas in Girard's thought—remarkably thin in explicit reference to the saints—that provide the resources for developing a mimetic hagiology: the virtue of humility and Girard's account of the sending of the Holy Spirit in John's gospel. The Christian exaltation of humility highlights the paradox of a virtue that proves elusive—one cannot brag about being humble. Mimetic theory provides an anthropology that deconstructs Romanticism's path to virtue, which envisions overcoming society's sinful force through heroic transcendence and detachment. Mimetic theory, by contrast, highlights the force of society's gravitation and emphasizes how each person is caught up in society's ebb and flow. Conversion leads one to acknowledge one's complicity in this state and thus fosters a humility reflected so powerfully in the lives of holy people.

Kaplan's paper then argued that Girard makes explicit what the gift of the Holy Spirit means. Girard contrasts the Paraclete and the satanic accuser. Whereas the Paraclete acts as a "defense counselor" who stands up for the victim's innocence,

the satanic “accuser” convinces those under his spell to see only culpability in the person accused. In addition, since Jesus revealed the scapegoat mechanism by which we victimize innocents, being given the Holy Spirit, means being given the same spirit that Jesus possessed. This Spirit sides with victims while avoiding the trap of making the accuser into a new victim. As an example of this un-evangelical solidarity, Kaplan offered Gil Baillie’s reading of Daniel 13, in which the fury of the group becomes unleashed on the wicked elders. Kaplan concluded by suggesting that mimetic theory offers a narrative of humility and a description of the sending of the Holy Spirit that makes scapegoating explicit and helps us understand creedal statements about the “communion of saints” and the “holiness” of the Church.

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