

Polarized Readings of René Girard

Utilizing Girardian Thought to Break a Theological and Philosophical Impasse

Colby Dickinson

ABSTRACT René Girard’s work often seems suspect to liberals, because it appears as a totalizing narrative. Such hesitancy with respect to either dismissing or endorsing it follows from the demise of “grand narratives” that brought with them imperialistic and hegemonic tendencies. Yet if a liberal viewpoint does not embrace Girard, it is for different reasons that conservatives are either fully supportive of his thought as promising a return to religious values *or* hesitant about accepting his theories because they critique a form of violence inherent to any community. Girardian thought, it can be argued, has focused on deconstructing mythological justifications for violent activity at the expense of establishing a fruitful position regarding positive communal formations. The tensions between these juxtaposed liberal and conservative viewpoints, as taken up in this article, illustrate an impasse between deconstructivist-genealogists (representing trends within liberal discourse) and communitarians (representing conservative or orthodox viewpoints)—one that shows up in a variety of contexts today. Highlighting this particular standoff in interpretations of Girard can, nevertheless, yield important insights regarding the ultimate significance of his work.

KEYWORDS communitarian; deconstruction; Girard, René; Milbank, John; Vattimo, Gianni

✉ Colby Dickinson, Loyola University Chicago, Department of Theology, Crown Center 313, 1032 West Sheridan Road, Chicago, IL 60660, USA ✉ cdickinson1@luc.edu 📞 0000-0002-9019-6013

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INTRODUCTION

There can be no doubt that the groundbreaking work of René Girard has far-reaching implications for almost every realm of critical thought. Nearly every field of academic inquiry has the potential to be deeply impacted by his suggestive, and at times controversial, theories on the nature of desire, scapegoating, violence, the aura of sacrality and communal solidarity, all of which function at the micro and macro levels, hence both individually and collectively. But such a sweeping claim, as is undoubtedly also true of his work, also seems suspect for many, precisely because of its grandiose vision. It is perhaps the grand scheme of his thought, in fact, that prompts many working within the academy to be either wholly embracing of his work or wholly dismissive, without much substantial argument being devoted at a detailed level to his actual writings. A good deal of such acceptance or dismissiveness frequently takes place, as well, on the margins of scholarship—a sign, perhaps, of the sense of suspicion which many still entertain when it comes to establishing or refuting “grand narratives” within some larger-scale theoretical universe (e.g. the well-trodden paths of various Marxisms, Freudianisms and so on).¹

From one point of view, Girard’s theory of the scapegoat seems highly suspect to so-called liberals because it seems to smack of being a totalizing or grand narrative—perhaps even indicating or concealing a desire to accede to a sovereign point of view—despite the consistency and persuasiveness of his argument. For those on the left who are sensitized to violence and victimization, any narrative—or monolithic History—represses the many individuals and forms of life that live beyond their ability to be inscribed within a given matrix of representations. As such, there is often only a cautious endorsement from such corners, to the effect that Girard’s work is deserving of further study.² Yet what Girard proposes in his theory of the single-victim mechanism, or theory of scapegoating, is something that seems all at once to respect claims about a sort of nonviolent identity and admit that such an identity is only possible if it focuses almost entirely on deconstructing its own claims to power—what Gianni Vattimo develops through his readings of Girard into a form of weak thought. Vattimo’s work, as we will see, attempts to avoid the violent totalizations that characterize

1. The demise of grand narratives that characterizes the viewpoint of many on the so-called left was brilliantly illustrated in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

2. See the comment made in Susan A. Ross, *Anthropology: Seeking Light and Beauty* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 114–6.

categorical representations while nevertheless maintaining the possibility of a universal point of view.³

Hent de Vries' critique of Girard's work as not "tenable" because, as he elaborates in a footnote with reference to Jean-Luc Nancy's critical comments on Girard, mimesis appropriates the other in a fashion similar to the structures of sacrifice, is one such dismissive commentary emanating from the left.⁴ It is, in turn, however, seemingly countered by Frederic Jameson's tentative endorsement of Girard, also delivered in a footnote, which feels more than a little illustrative of such hesitancy about embracing an all-encompassing narrative, especially as this endorsement arises from a Marxist perspective. As Jameson rather succinctly phrases the matter, "René Girard's discussion of the vendetta in *La Violence et le sacré* ... remains one of the most compelling meditations on the blood feud as a central phenomenon in human history."⁵ We might consider such commentary a part of contemporary efforts to cope with an all-encompassing narrative, hence the appearance of parallel sentiments by those more conservative in their approach, as with Charles Taylor's recommendation that we need to deal "extensively" with the issue of scapegoating by following "the path-breaking work" of Girard—something also only directly gestured towards in a footnote.⁶

Such hesitancy about whether to dismiss or endorse Girard's work is, of course, part and parcel of the fallout surrounding academic thought in the wake of the demise of those "grand narratives," mainly fostered in the West, that brought with them imperialist, colonialist, hegemonic and patriarchal practices and tendencies—agendas typically identified politically with more conservative points of view. In trying to explain why Girard's thesis is so unpopular amongst a fair percentage of scholars in today's (mainly liberal) Western academic circles, we might note how any return to focusing on the West's Judeo-Christian origins, or such a lineage's unique insight into the nature of violence and sacrifice, is still largely viewed as undesirable, given how it has been bound up with devastating and oppressive cultural and political legacies throughout the centuries. To court this legacy is, almost as if by definition, to embrace a more culturally and politically conservative agenda, something toward which academia normally does not gravitate.

3. The pressing issue of universality has been debated on the left for some time, including in a rather insightful foray made by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2011).

4. Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 204, 04–05n. 156.

5. Frederic Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2010), 590n. 33.

6. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 821n. 64.

Yet if a generally liberal viewpoint tends to be hesitant about embracing, or downright dismissive of, Girard's thought, it is for different reasons that conservative voices are typically either fully supportive of it, as apparently promising a return to traditional religious values through its emphasis on scriptural claims, or hesitant about declaring their acceptance of his theories because of their apparently critical stance towards a certain kind of violence seemingly inherent in any communal formation. For those on the right (politically-speaking), the defense of order and community often trumps any salient critique of normative or oppressive representations. There can be no doubt that Girard's work has brought a boost to those advocates of theological points of view that are eager to demonstrate how his reading of the biblical condemnations of violence and scapegoating can prompt a reevaluation of the Jewish and Christian legacies in ways that offer relevant and even vibrant insights to religious thought. His work, from such an angle, even allows him to be perceived as an "unlikely apologist" for faith, as Grant Kaplan has put it.⁷ Yet there is no mistaking the fact that Girardian thought has focused more on deconstructing mythological justifications for violent activity and less on establishing a fruitful position regarding positive communal formations—a point that some conservatives among the more theologically-minded have noted in their attempts to construct ecclesial positions, and as we will see in a moment in the work of John Milbank.

What results, in terms of the tension brought to light by juxtaposing such (more or less) liberal and conservative viewpoints as I will do directly in what follows, is something akin to an illustration of the impasse between, as Alasdair MacIntyre has labeled them, the deconstructivist-genealogists (representing trends within liberal discourse) and the communitarians (representing the conservative or orthodox viewpoint).⁸ This theoretical impasse is one that has played itself out in a variety of practical contexts today, including those of a political, cultural, social, economic and religious kind. As is fairly obvious, given our general understanding of things now, those on the liberal side seek to champion the marginalized and repressed victims

7. Grant Kaplan, *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist: Mimetic Theory and Fundamental Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

8. See the commentary on this impasse offered in William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016). The deconstructivist-genealogical versus communitarian labels are those given by MacIntyre to the so-called liberal, continental philosophers whose critiques of grand narratives seemingly leave them open to the charge that they neglect entirely the concrete communities that actually exist around them. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1990).

of the “machinery” of society, while those on the conservative side tend to defend tradition so that a given order might be maintained going forward. Though both sides engage in reductive caricatures of the other, there is, nevertheless, a certain truth lodged within both perspectives that I hope to illuminate in what follows, especially insofar as the potential impasse between them—one felt acutely during times of crisis throughout history—might be revealed as merely two sides of the same coin, one that Girard is intent on elucidating the inner workings of more thoroughly. That is, I want to discuss both views vis-à-vis their relationship to Girard’s thought, taking note specifically of some illustrative voices on either side, because I believe that highlighting this particular impasse in interpretations of Girard may actually yield a deeper insight into both the ultimate significance of his work and the way forward possible for us, given Girardian insights themselves.

DECONSTRUCTIVIST-GENEALOGICAL READINGS OF GIRARD

The dissolution of the divine—captured in the modern era through and within the “death of God” movement and the various processes of secularization emanating from the West—is, according to the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, precisely the *kenotic* ransom from the false sacred that Girard illustrates through his own work.⁹ It is also the almost inevitable outcome of those modern and postmodern voices that would seek for the deconstruction of a normative order seemingly guaranteed by God, without much thought for what comes afterward—something that characterizes liberalism. Girard’s demonstration that we can only move beyond the mythological through the eradication of the false sacred from our world, as well as his deep sympathy for the revelation of the Jewish and Christian resistances to such mythological attempts to conceal violence, in many ways speaks directly to the negative political theology of the genealogists and deconstructivists—as well as certain hermeneutic nihilists—of contemporary thought. The legacies of both Nietzsche and Heidegger, in their various attempts to portray nihilism and the “death of God” as the death of metaphysics in the West, are therefore, crucially, linked directly by Vattimo to Girard’s critique of the false sacred lodged within the heart of “natural” religion and its historical, and frequent, justifications for violent activity in a given society. As Vattimo will consistently elaborate in his writings, “In my view, Girard has persuasively demonstrated ... that if a ‘divine’ truth is given in Christianity, it is an unmasking of the violence

9. Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 38, 120.

that has given birth to the sacred of natural religion, that is, the sacred that is characteristic of the metaphysical God.”¹⁰ The decline of metaphysics that modern liberalism champions is precisely that which makes possible, a la Girard’s insight, a recovery of the kenotic witness of the biblical legacy and its denunciation of the false sacred in our world. As such, secularization is, for Vattimo, merely the “continuation of the Christian revelation’s saving action,” even if it appears to be the end of religion altogether.¹¹ Though many on the left seem content to let religion wither away in the West, Vattimo’s claims seem to point toward something much deeper active within those religious sentiments Girard draws our attention to.

This is not to suggest, however, that every contemporary philosophy established in the wake of the decline of metaphysics has its finger on the pulse that Girard himself detects. Indeed, much of postmodern thought concerning the divine, in Vattimo’s estimation, misses the mark: “God as the wholly other, toward which much contemporary philosophy inclines, retains too many features of the ‘violent’ God of natural religions.”¹² In addition, he critiques the false theological use of paradox in order to justify one’s Kierkegaardian “leap of faith” toward that which appears to be transcendent, no matter whether such transcendence is discerned apart from our immanent reality, or within it. As he will clarify matters, “The only great paradox and scandal of Christian revelation is the incarnation of God, the kenosis—that is, the removal of all transcendent, incomprehensible, mysterious and even bizarre features that seem to move so many theorists of the leap of faith.”¹³ Vattimo’s concern is that, by striving to reach out to some form of transcendence, such theorist-theologians enter into “a defense of the authoritarianism of the Church and of its many dogmatic and moral positions, bound up as they are with the absolutization of doctrines and contingent historical events.”¹⁴ The most, however, that Vattimo can embrace, much as with the master deconstructivist Jacques Derrida, is “To believe in belief, yet also: hoping to believe,” though not registering belief in an actual transcendent object *per se*.¹⁵

Yet is this almost typically modern liberal conclusion the best that one can arrive at when considering religious belief? To entertain hope in respect of a transcendent being that one knows does not exist?

10. *Ibid.*, 38–9.

11. *Ibid.*, 119.

12. *Ibid.*, 39.

13. Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 55.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 93.

Girard's insightful ability to point out the fatal mistakes of communal violence and scapegoating mechanisms is utilized by Vattimo, among others, in order to critique the various false manifestations of sacrality in our world, but not to replace them with a proper object of sacrality—if such a thing could ever be done. This is what characterizes its liberal-nihilistic tone. Indeed, the propensity here is merely to leave traditional attempts to identify the sacred in the past as mere historical remnants. Whether one admits some form of Vattimo's nihilistic reading of belief, or takes up John Caputo's weak theology, or Giorgio Agamben's Franciscan ontology, or the like, there seems to be some truth in these claims insofar as they resonate with Girard's desire to eliminate the false sacred within our world, together with its plentiful justifications for violent actions.¹⁶ Vattimo subsequently embraces a “weakening” of thought—as a weakening of communal order—just as James Alison has consistently noted in his work how Girardian theory allows us to reexamine and critique all forms of established normative order, though in his case from the point of view of those marginalized due to their sexuality.¹⁷

What is at least clear at this point is that Girard's vision seems to implicate and critically analyze the sacrificial nature of all human institutions, much as Hans Urs von Balthasar also once surmised. Though such an indictment might seem to lead inevitably to a secularized viewpoint, Balthasar, from a theologically conservative point of view, deduced that such a conclusion was not yet inevitable, as it is also possible that a so-called secular turn away from the religious-sacrificial mechanisms that seek to limit violence in our world might actually lead to a “naked power” that begins to allow violence to spiral out of control.¹⁸ As Balthasar himself asked, if all religion is the “invention of Satan,” and yet doing away with the false sacred does not return us to some primal “natural” religion beyond the violence, then what exactly is the point of Jesus' death on the cross? From a theological perspective the answer—as provided by Girard interpreter Raymund Schwager—is, perhaps, that the cross represents Jesus' transformation of evil through the only way in which it could be transformed:

16. See the cataloguing and critiquing of these various positions in Gregg Lambert, *Return Statements: The Return of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

17. See, among others, James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2001).

18. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume 4: The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 304, 308.

in “total surrender.”¹⁹ Schwager’s assessment, it should be noted, thus contains the possibility of dovetailing with Vattimo’s focus on *kenosis*, while also providing a vantage point from which to reexamine core theological insights and foundations. Such an effort might in fact be part of what is needed to form a bridge between so-called liberal and conservative voices.

Part of what is most intriguing in this conjunction of views, even those lying between the secular philosophical (Vattimo) and the theological (Balthasar and Schwager), is that Girard’s theoretical structure may actually provide something like a suture to the fracture within continental-philosophical thought between the traditional (politically-theologically “conservative”) arguments put forward to justify sovereign power, and their genealogical-deconstructivist (“liberal”) forms of subversion. In other words, by focusing on the weakness of an ineradicable sovereign power—what Jürgen Moltmann once called the “crucified God”—we might obtain another perspective from which to locate the construction, deconstruction and re-construction of identities today in a way that mirrors Paul Ricoeur’s processes of totalization, de-totalization and re-totalization in his considerations of narrative form.²⁰ Ricoeur develops this particular tripartite scheme as the nature of all representations in his *Time and Narrative* where, accordingly, one must formulate and maintain a given representation only in order to then see it eventually deconstructed (de-totalized), before once more bringing it back together again (re-totalization). The fact that each stage appears as a totalized whole is indeed part of the illusion, but also the necessity, of representation itself. In the terms I have been using thus far, one must work with a given normative order (the *conservative* focus), only to eventually see it deconstructed (the *liberal* focus), before inevitably re-totalizing order in a completely innovative way. Though my suggestion here, involving this analogy with Ricoeur, might appear contrary to Girard’s own criticisms of a certain deconstructivist perspective in the final chapter of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, where he accuses proponents of the latter of trying to be “more Nietzschean than Nietzsche,” I believe there might be a way to read Girard against the grain on this point, and so as likewise opening a possible door onto Vattimo’s considerations.²¹

There is, in this overlap, a recognition of the need for a de-totalizing negative political theology that permeates so many political theologians on the

19. Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption*, trans. James G. Williams and Paul Haddon (New York: Herder & Herder, 1999), 228.

20. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

21. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 171.

“liberal” side of things, even if such views are typically unable to formulate any positive political or communal project. The work of Giorgio Agamben, for example, could easily be read as being somewhat akin to Girardian thought, as his depiction of the excluded figure of the *homo sacer* reveals the complicity of political apparatuses of Western subjectivity insofar as they hinge on sacrifice.²² His failure to articulate a positive political project—though, to be fair, this does fall somewhat outside the scope of his aims—likewise seems to resonate with those claims to the effect that a negative political theology has only a negative portrait to paint, and so fails to provide constructive insight regarding communal identity and its operations. Supporters of such intuitions strictly follow the deconstructivist side of things, in order to return to the Christian legacy without proclaiming a Church triumphant, but do so only by displaying an ontological poverty that continues to inform humanity about its condition. Such a perspective, indeed, also goes some way toward explaining why a committed secular Marxist such as Slavoj Žižek has found cause to celebrate both the Christian legacy and Girardian thought in his own work (though mainly through the interpretations of Jean-Pierre Dupuy).²³

It is perhaps surprising that these committed thinkers of the negative have been inclined on occasion toward the sweeping narrative of society that Girard’s work puts before us, and yet the critical import of his suggestions regarding violence and the false sacred have done precisely that. Rather than function merely to bring together frequently dissenting voices on both the left and the right, however, as Girard’s thought might seem to do, there is rather cause for concern regarding Girard’s understanding by some who would seek to preserve a communitarian position. Though this is certainly not shared by all communitarians, presenting some such reservations might go some way toward elucidating exactly what is at stake in the potential impasse that exists between these two divergent points of view.

COMMUNITARIAN READINGS OF GIRARD

From the more orthodox communitarian side, and despite the endorsement of Girardian thought from the likes of Charles Taylor, John Milbank, the founder of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, has actually criticized Girard for adopting a positivistic definition of religion as the stabilizing force of

22. “Not only is there no religion without separation, but every separation contains or conserves in itself a genuinely religious nucleus. The apparatus that activates and regulates separation is sacrifice.” Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 18.

23. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2013), 975.

society, thereby—so he claims—projecting a modern liberal stance upon an ancient context that would inherently reject such a division. In denouncing Girard’s formulation of mimetic desire, Milbank nevertheless assumes that there is something that can be “objectively desirable” in and of itself, beyond the imitation of another’s desire, though he does not indicate how one might critically appraise something objectively desirable. He does, however, suggestively comment that:

Equally possible would be a primordial hierarchical society, in which certain positions and values were regarded as objectively more important and desirable than others. In such a society, rivalry would appear to be a secondary phenomenon in comparison with the given objects of rivalry and desire, and this appearance could only be rationally denied if one assumed the arbitrariness of desire.²⁴

Such speculations, intimately connected to his vision of an eternal hierarchy of goodness and beauty and truth, seem to relegate the intensity of mimetic desire, rivalry and competition to secondary status. Society would, accordingly, be more attuned to the objective, hierarchical standards that a given community deems to be more significant than any mimetic contagion. It is not hard to see how Milbank’s understanding of the Church, as a Christian community oriented toward values and virtues that outstrip mimetic desire, becomes the objective solution to the problems of mimetic rivalry and the position from which he launches his critique of Girard. Indeed, his criticisms of much of (all-too-liberal) postmodern thought and its purely destructive nihilistic furor stem from much the same place.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Milbank paints a portrait of Girard that aligns the latter’s work with pagan mythology—an ironic reversal considering Girard’s lifelong efforts to distinguish himself from the violence-condoning activities of mythological narratives. In Milbank’s words:

In fact, by positing a real pre-religious phase of unlimited and anarchic conflict, Girard himself falls victim to a component of the pagan *mythos* as diagnosed by Augustine. For it is the claim of the legality of the *civitas terrena* to have suppressed an anarchy that is necessarily ontologically prior. Augustine concedes that this may have been historically the case, but denies any necessity to sinful confusion. And one should go further than Augustine to suggest

24. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 394.

that every legality has always claimed validity by virtue of its keeping at bay an essentially imaginary chaos. What came “first” was not anarchy, but this legal, coercive and itself “anarchic” assertion, meeting always a partial resistance from nomadic forces outside its city gates.²⁵

Girard is accused, moreover, of engaging in a purely deconstructive act and not developing a “positive, alternative practice” to mythological violence and its social structures—the very thing that characterizes the left’s deconstructive acts. Girard, by this count, seems content only to endorse a “negative refusal” of violence, but not to develop an actual, realistic account of political community.²⁶

Such criticism, we should note—and especially insofar as it is emblematic of a deeper issue at work in the tensions between the communitarians and the deconstructivists—resonates with those criticisms of, among others, Theodor Adorno’s negative dialectics as not being political enough, Derrida’s messianic calls for justice as not providing a positive political program, Agamben’s alleged antinomianism as failing to take seriously actually existing legal structures, and so forth, through multiple theorists on the genealogical-deconstructivist side of things.²⁷ From this angle, there is only abstract speculation about political forms, criticism of their historical instantiations and merely the occasional (and sometimes notorious) dabbling with politically intriguing configurations and events, such as with Heidegger’s national socialism, Foucault’s interest in Iranian affairs, Sartre’s communism and Žižek’s claim that he would have voted for Trump had he been eligible to do so.²⁸ From the communitarian perspective, as one might easily imagine, these political forays are utopic at best, socially and morally irresponsible at worst. But, as each of these theorists also argues at various points in their writings, there must be a space for abstract speculation as a reservoir of the imagination, so that new political forms can eventually come to fruition.²⁹ The impossibility of ever doing away with such disruptive and utopic thought

25. Ibid., 394–5.

26. Ibid., 395.

27. See the critical account of politics given in Geoffrey Bennington, *Scatter 1: The Politics of Politics in Foucault, Heidegger, and Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

28. Such cases, and many others, are identified along the conservative-liberal axis I have been using in Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review Books, 2016). It is no surprise then that, for Lilla, taking up the problematic side of liberalism has become his hallmark as of late. See also his *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper, 2017).

29. See the remarkable essay on thought and action by Theodor W. Adorno, entitled “Resignation,” in *The Culture Industry*, ed. Jay M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991).

cannot simply be wished away in favor of a permanent hierarchical ordering of values—something which may just as easily yield a totalitarian state. There seems to be, then, in these polarized readings of Girard, a deeper structural division that Girard’s work somehow brings to the fore, as I have already alluded to via Ricoeur’s work in the previous section.

Perhaps we can sense the difficulty of ever ending such deconstructive exercises if we stop to consider the role of violence in each of these theoretical domains, for this presence is often the litmus test that reveals the truth of each position. Indeed, this is where Girardian thought makes for insightful commentary on the nature of this tension, or illusory “*impasse*,” between so-called liberal and conservative elements. For example, Milbank ends up sounding a lot like Derrida when he claims that violence cannot be eradicated altogether, as he suspects Girard might fantastically contemplate, and that violence *as* persuasion is inevitably linked with every proposal of what is deemed to be “the Good and the True”:

Without attachment to a particular persuasion—which we can never *prove* to be either true, or non-violent—we would have no real means to discriminate peace and truth from their opposite.³⁰

Though there is a certain truth to such claims, what, we might also inquire, is to guarantee that Milbank’s vision of the imperial Church as a form of “absolute consensus, agreement in desire, and entire harmony amongst its members,” with a possible emperor who exercises “pastoral care” over his citizens, does not result in some form of Christian totalitarianism?³¹

Milbank claims to reject the “ontological necessity to sovereign rule and absolute ownership” through an exercise of forgiveness and atonement that works hand-in-hand with ecclesial forms of coercion, where these, in turn, are merely playing out the self-punishment of sin that an individual has brought upon themselves.³² But his scenario also holds forth the possibility, we must admit, of new (or even the oldest) forms of social control and domination masked in the guise of a benevolent dictator. It is supposedly the collective virtues upheld by the Church that allow sinners to reflect upon the state of sin they have brought upon themselves, according to Milbank—a proposition which sounds good in theory as a form of accountability, but which perhaps struggles with its relationship to violence when faced with historical

30. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 398.

31. *Ibid.*, 402, 407.

32. *Ibid.*, 417–8, 420–1.

examples of how such structures have functioned to oppress individuals or minority groups (something that, as many present day contextual theologies would remind us, is an ongoing blind spot for ecclesial structures). As he says when outlining the tactics of persuasion in an ecclesial context,

When a person commits an evil act, he cuts himself off from social peace, and this nearly always means that he is visited with social anger. But the aim should be to reduce this anger to a calm fury against the sin, and to offer the sinner nothing but goodwill, so bringing him to the point of realizing that his isolation is self-imposed

—this presumably being so even if the Church works with the state, in “hazy” ways, to execute the sinner.³³ Milbank does not state this last point, but it seems almost inevitably to be how such structures play themselves out historically. In this, Milbank shares perhaps more with Martin Luther’s justifications for the role of state executioner than he might suspect.

In essence, Milbank seems to absorb Girard’s thesis regarding violence as not being relevant for religion as a whole, but merely for the Christian Church, where the latter can function as a haven of peace amidst the world’s chaos. Hence, rather than positing a primordial chaos or anarchy that religion seeks to overcome, Milbank sees only the existent peace of the Church, and a chaotic liberal nihilism everywhere else. He therefore issues an absolute critique of the “gnostic nihilism” that undergirds so many failed dialectical attempts to negate political theology without, he rightly suggests, promising anything substantive in return. This is, in fact, a common refrain amongst not only the radically orthodox, but communitarians of any shade. His summation of this “Deleuze-inspired” project—a point that MacIntyre himself agrees with in his account of the deconstructivist-genealogists—is that

all that it holds out is an exit, not a future, since the strict logic of nihilism, its precise rationalism, posits no actual line of flight other than the ceaseless breaking and re-setting up of arbitrary boundaries. And this line of flight is already the line of our present proceeding, our present unstoppable acceleration.³⁴

This is the point at which, on such a reading, capitalism and nihilism converge to destroy the hierarchical values of a community upheld as sacred

33. *Ibid.*, 421.

34. John Milbank, “On Theological Transgression,” in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 150.

and inviolable, the very thing that the orthodox-conservatives seek to defend and maintain. Indeed, what the community holds as its founding virtues—the very things that allow mimetic desire to be reduced to a secondary level—depend upon keeping the “nihilism” of deconstruction at bay.

From another angle, Milbank does not want to argue against this immanent, nihilistic logic oriented toward death: rather, he only wants to show how it contains no hope and no faith.³⁵ There is no love in such a configuration, only the promise of a love that never materializes in the end, and is endlessly deferred (his target here is “Derrida et al.”).³⁶ Yet the even more significant target, he will further suggest, is anyone searching to provide justification for possibility over actuality—the theoretical stake that leaves one without the firm ground of community under one’s feet.³⁷ Girard’s work, much as the deconstructivist or negative-dialectical position would assert, is an attempt only to end the false sacred in our world, not an effort directed at maintaining the (sacred) bounds of a given society. With such a declaration, we can see how Girard’s thought has certainly resonated deeply with various negative political-theological points of view, but also how it seems to exacerbate practical problems regarding the governance of actually existing communal and political systems.

Perhaps, however, Milbank’s assessment of Girard is not quite so simple. It is of course true that Girard’s thought contains an overt critique of Nietzsche, nihilism and the deconstructive act that seems to follow implicitly from this line of inquiry. Girard is, moreover, critical of the deconstructivists for whom, he declares, “only interpretation exists.”³⁸ Nietzsche, in his estimation, had managed to avoid “the twin errors of the positivists and the nihilists,” while nevertheless failing to see that Christianity’s aim was not simply to side with the weak over the strong, but to engage in a “heroic resistance to violent contagion.”³⁹ Simply reveling in the ambiguity of undecidability, as Derrida was wont to do, would be a failure to condemn the violence at the heart of social formations indebted to mimetic desire. Failing to see this necessary last step,

the nihilisms of the extreme left are just as partial to Nietzsche as the nihilisms of the extreme right, but they carefully refrain from reviving the real

35. *Ibid.*, 152.

36. *Ibid.*, 155–7.

37. *Ibid.*, 158.

38. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 171.

39. *Ibid.*, 171, 173.

Nietzschean enterprise, which was to demolish our modern concern for victims.⁴⁰

Reminiscent of the way that Heidegger contemplated the withdrawal of being at the center of all thought, but not the exclusion of beings that are likewise constitutive of thinking, so too does deconstructive thought run the risk of failing to embrace the final insight regarding the origins of violence and the possibility of their being exposed.⁴¹ Girard in fact proffers the absolute—despite any deconstructivist claims to dismantle such metaphysical presumption—as existing precisely in our contemporary concern for victims, something that even those on the extreme left, those engaged precisely in certain forms of nihilism, have to admit is *the* principle which renders their thought, in reality, little more than mere “pseudo-nihilism.”⁴² In his assessment, despite the social decline of Christianity, the concern for victims that permeates our global culture today is the surest sign that Christianity has actually entrenched itself firmly within our world. As he phrases matters, “[i]f our world were really to escape the influence of Christianity, it would have to renounce the concern for victims.”⁴³

CONCLUSION

The true nihilists are the ones who oppose nihilism with their more and more faded positivities, the ones who are thus conspiring with all extant malice, and eventually with the destructive principle itself. Thought honors itself by defending what is damned as nihilism.⁴⁴

Theodor Adorno

As Adorno noted some time ago, defending what has been “damned as nihilism” in order to maintain the space of thought beyond all established or normative orders and logics is the path that must be taken by those wishing to engage in real critical thinking. It is perhaps also, if we can

40. Ibid., 177.

41. See Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 254–9. On Girard’s critique of Heidegger, see Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 175–6. See also the commentary on Girard vis-à-vis Nietzsche in Kaplan, *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist*, 192–200.

42. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 178.

43. Ibid., 180.

44. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Continuum, 1973), 381.

see things a bit more clearly, what allows the defense of what has been “damned as nihilism” to merge with those efforts wishing to denounce violence and scapegoating, as witnessed specifically in a Girardian context. The “inverted theology” that Adorno once spoke of toward the end of his *Negative Dialectics* thereby begins to share traits with the deconstruction of the false sacred that Girard brings to our attention, despite the protestations of those like Milbank who are tempted to see wholly nihilistic forces at work within such efforts.

One cannot deny that there is a significant overlap between deconstruction’s methodology—along with its own demonstrative critique of sacrificial machinery, as noted already by Andrew McKenna⁴⁵—and Girardian theory, which seeks to undermine the constructs of false forms of sacrality. But one must also realize that deconstruction has struggled at times to make the final, universal gesture of siding with victims and denouncing violence into its overt, central mandate: an acknowledgement that might bring the so-called liberals back from their unending critiques of grand narratives and assist them in rebuilding (re-totalizing) a positive political project focused on the role of the victim in society. Taking such a project seriously might enable us to see how the “impasse” between liberals and conservatives is really at times little more than a necessary illusion of certain stages achieved within our most fundamental representational claims (as in the case of linguistic, national, gendered or racial identities, and so forth). A representation is formed only to be deconstructed, though eventually another representation forms itself with the pieces that ultimately remain.

Certainly, Girard’s negative appraisal of false forms of the sacred, and so too the social bonds formed by them, is a gesture in unison with the Gospel’s proclamation, though such a reading appears at times to put him at odds with a purely philosophical, deconstructive interpretation of the sort that would refrain from any kind of ostensibly religious gesture. The convergence of Girardian thought with continental philosophical lines of thought, especially as portrayed throughout the so-called “return to religion” in recent memory, makes, however, the possibility of such a rapprochement that much more possible and, in turn, that much more appealing as well.⁴⁶ Though it is not always clear what remains of the religious after its

45. Andrew J. McKenna, *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

46. The “return to religion” within contemporary continental thought has taken a variety of forms, most notably those within phenomenological circles and those more focused on deconstructivist-genealogical approaches, though the overlap between them is substantial in many respects. Concerning the former, see Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the*

modern-liberal deconstruction, it should at least be clear that something will reappear and remain in the wake of whatever metaphysics has been upended, allowing any attempts to overcome ontotheology to still struggle with its seemingly permanent presence among us.⁴⁷

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Theological Turn: The French Debate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). For the latter, see Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

47. See Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), as well as Joeri Schrijvers, *Ontotheological Turnings? The Decentering of the Modern Subject in Recent French Phenomenology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012).

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