

The Religious Lie and the Grace of Revelation: A Comparative Analysis of René Girard and Karl Barth on Religion and Violence

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Abstract

Many theologians have noted the strong parallels between René Girard's mimetic theory and the critique of religion laid out by Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics*; however, their conclusions are reached by means of opposing methodologies. As a result, their solutions to the problem of violence take on a different character for the Church. Notwithstanding Girard never wrote directly to matters of ecclesiology, his work can be a useful aid in the Church's call to be peacemakers. This essay seeks to pull together the similarities and differences between the two respected approaches with the intention of demonstrating the positive application mimetic theory can have when incorporated into a more robust theology. Mimetic theory is insufficiently equipped for this task on its own, but there is much we can learn from Girard. While Barth may not offer Christians a system for preventing religious violence, he rightly emphasizes a turn to the God of revelation who speaks bindingly to each and every human situation. By doing so, he is better able to incorporate the Christian response to the Holy Spirit in times of impending violence that may be overlooked by mimetic theory.

There is no unanimous definition of religion, but however it is understood, it has often been seen as inherently divisive and violent. As William Cavanaugh says, "that religion has a tendency to promote violence . . . is . . . the conventional wisdom of Western societies."¹ He notes Martin Marty's description that religion involves the focus of our ultimate concern, and in this way, it is a lot like politics. The difference, he says, is that "religion" refers not to the ritual

1 William T Cavanaugh, "Does Religion Cause Violence?," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35.2/3 (Spring/Summer 2007): 1.

vowing of allegiance to a flag, but only to the Jehovah's Witnesses refusal to do so. Cavanaugh argues that this sort of description shows precisely why the religious/secular dichotomy is an incoherent one. Religion ends up becoming whatever people take seriously. And if no distinction is clear—if humanity is unavoidably religious—then religion must be both the cause of, and solution to, the violence of humanity.

For René Girard and Karl Barth, humans are inherently religious beings.² In the simplest terms, this means for both that humanity is incapable of ridding itself of God. However, as the Apostle Paul tells us, human beings “exchanged the truth about God for a lie,” and so religion became corrupted, founding itself on communal violence for Girard and the unbelief of humanity for Barth. Since Girard's entrance into theological dialogue, there has been a lumping together of these two figures for their similar critiques of religion. While there are similarities to be sure, their conclusions pertaining to the quelling of religious violence and the Christian call to be peacemakers differ dramatically as a result of their forms and methods. This essay will begin by pointing towards the similarities and differences between the two approaches with the intended purpose of retaining elements of Girard's anthropological insight that, although they will prove insufficient, are of great worth to a theological understanding of religious violence.

The “problem” of violence is itself challenging to define. One may be inclined to speak unequivocally about violence as never being good, or to say that its total elimination would be ideal. Yet it may be said with equal force that the means to putting an end to violence may, in our fallen state, call for its very use. The notion of pacifism has thus taken on various forms, each of which treat violence as something to be avoided at considerable costs, though not always completely and in all events. Perhaps one of Girard's deepest contributions here is the renewed awareness of the human capacity to move too precipitously towards a violent resolution—one that can be downplayed by the communal act, diffusing guilt across multiple participants so as to free the individual from insidious self-reproach. Yet for Girard, the answer to overcoming violence means, rightly or wrongly, the complete abandonment of its potential utility. That “violence can never be sacred” means there is little room for the “broken middle,” the agony of decision in which such a contradiction is mediated. As Gillian Rose puts it, in Girard's formula, “humanity is not sinful but unenlightened,” and this leads to “an attempt . . . to

2 It should be noted that Cavanaugh in fact argues that Girard undermines this distinction. This essay does not seek to dispute him; however, it will be argued that Girard does see religion as both the cause of, and solution to, violent humanity. See, William T Cavanaugh, “Girard and the Myth of Religious Violence,” in *Does Religion Cause Violence?: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Violence and Religion in the Modern World*, ed. Joel Hodge et al. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

abolish the ethical instead of suspending and releasing it.”³ It prepares humanity quite readily for a legalistic pacifism that receives a resounding “No” from the cross of Christ. But the problem arises when the notion that violence is simply unjustifiable requires no further thought on behalf of the party (individual or otherwise) seeking peace in times of war, or potentially life-threatening circumstances. One might ask if any theory for the utter denial of violent action can truly prevent human beings from engaging in it? Mimetic theory thus runs into difficulty standing alone, but a theology such as Barth’s may help us consider the process of discernment that occurs at this point of resistance. Without it, Girard’s mimetic structure risks becoming prisoner to its own anthropological systemization, forcing, In George Hunsinger’s words, a ‘Pelagian’ solution to the problem of violence that supersedes the moment of Revelation and becomes even ontologically inappropriate.

Barth is able to make a significant corrective to this tendency; one that is marked by his understanding of *Grenzfall*, or the “borderline case” of violent action. Here, Barth resists the urge to systematize an ethics of war, refusing the language of absolutes so as to ensure that the necessary “discernment” of God’s command does not instead fall prey to an unconditional code. The content of Christian revelation presupposes “that there can be no valid generalization,” and thus for Barth, the *Grenzfall* appears as the one solid principle that rejects all principles; “the general rule that there must be an exception to every rule.”⁴ For this reason, critics otherwise appreciative of Barth’s ethics have been wary of his lack of clarity on this point. The *Grenzfall* provides no clear answer to the problem of violence, no way of knowing in advance how to respond. Yet it succeeds in integrating more fully the continued personal reflection of the living Word of God within the Church that one finds absent in Girard.

What is needed in order to fully embrace the Christian call for peacemaking is an insistence on the practice of nonviolence as a skill, honed through the idiom of the Bible and reaching its perfection in Jesus and the Church.⁵ Here it is surely Barth who better accentuates this task. For Barth, the “once-and-for-all” revelation of Jesus Christ, who models our ethic of violence, is not an event so sequestered to our past so that by mere recollection we can determine our decisions regarding violence ahead of time. By emphasizing a continual participation in the here-and-now revelation of the Triune God, Barth avoids the absolutizing of a legalistic pacifism, but maintains an ethic in which we rather “prepare for peace”

3 Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), 147.1992

4 John Howard Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War; and Other Essays on Barth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 46.

5 Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 176.

in times of war.⁶ If we have been hoodwinked by a religious lie, as both Barth and Girard wish to imagine, then it is our continual participation in receiving God's revelation that allows for the unveiling of the religious disguise and grants us the power to help subdue our own primitive instinct for violence and destruction.

Mimesis

Girard's "mimetic theory" begins as a basis of insight into humanity's unalterable religious nature. In recent years, the inherently religious constitution of *anthropos* is a claim that has been met with suspicion. Less than a few decades ago, theories of secularization were immensely popular, especially in the sciences. According to Wolfgang Palaver, many considered religion to be a phenomenon of the past—one that would soon disappear with the increasing modernization of the world.⁷ As the era progressed, these claims proved obsolete. Religious sentiments not only continue to rise, but even "phenomena previously subject to mere secular modes of inquiry are now being analyzed for deeper religious meaning."⁸ In the twentieth century, cultural theorists began to view political movements like fascism, National socialism, Marxism, or even our own capitalist super-structures as fundamentally religious in nature. It was not "real atheism" that drove the likes of Stalin and Mao to murder countless millions in the 20th century, say the new atheists, because these were themselves deeply religious schemes all along.

To this we might agree, but, then, that is precisely the point. The religious dimension is inescapable. It cannot be shunned away, only manipulated. Humans wish to construct a god of their own resources, but according to Barth, the universality of this religious impulse is the very symptom that proves humanity is utterly incapable of ridding themselves of the true God. Likewise, Girard makes this same initial point by drawing from Alexis de Tocqueville: "Men cannot abandon their religious faith without a kind of aberration of intellect and a sort of distortion of their true nature; they are invincibly brought back to more pious sentiments. Unbelief is an accident, and faith is the only permanent state of mankind."⁹

For Girard, religion is the immovable sacred structure at the origin of culture and thus it can never be relegated to the private domain. For this reason, Girard

6 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2009), III/4, 452; hereafter *CD*. Barth invokes the Roman proverb, *si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war) in order to make his corrective: *si non vis bellum, para pacem* (if you do not want war, prepare for peace).

7 Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 16.

8 Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, 17.

9 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, Francis Bowen, and Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage, 1990) I:310; See also, René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 178ff.

prefaced the first edition of his book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, with the powerful epigram from Max Scheler: “*Man believes in either a God or in an idol. There is no third course open.*”¹⁰ It is here that Girard’s “mimetic theory” emerges first and foremost as a theory of religion;¹¹ one that offers what might best be called a “sacrificial theory of social cohesion.”¹²

In the mimetic process, humans are driven by the manifestation of unspontaneous desire, roused by another who serves as a type of model. Rivalry ensues, not simply as a result of their mutual infatuation for an irreplaceable object, but as a perversion of imitation that evolves into an attempt to outstrip the model. As John Milbank puts it “the will to difference is *also* malign, and antagonistic, because it is a desire to distinguish oneself from the similar rival in some respect or another.”¹³

The only way to resolve the anarchic condition is to fix upon a single victim who can be displaced as the common enemy. Through the collective murder of the scapegoat, the victim acts as the bearer of societal ills. The scapegoated victim becomes sacralised as a sacrifice, because it is by this process that the rivalry which spawned its murder suppresses the cyclical pattern of untamed violence from developing. Girard calls this a “double transference.” The murdered victim is symbolically relocated, because while they are the bearer of social evil, their death also restores social harmony. The “original victim no longer appears as the monstrous source of evil but is now enshrined in the symbolic form of a god.”¹⁴ It is this mystification of the socially beneficial effects of scapegoating that “constitutes the precise point of birth of religion, whose real function is to legitimate and conceal acts of founding violence. By the same token, religions are machines for the forgetting of history and the substitution of mythology.”¹⁵

Following this model, humanized religion accomplishes peacemaking, but only through another violent act. The original source of disorder becomes the peaceful resolution, but it is a lie, a façade. Thus, religion becomes the “awe-full perpetuation of a fortuitous escape from the death trap of internecine violence, upon which protohumans stumbled when first they lynched a scapegoat.”¹⁶ It is this understanding of religion that Girard claims tricks us into justifying violence as a form of peacemaking. This is the great sin, says Girard—the idolatrous

10 Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. Bernard Noble (New York: Harper, 1961), 399; *italics* original.

11 Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, 15.

12 George Hunsinger, “The Politics of the Nonviolent God: Reflections on René Girard and Karl Barth,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51.1 (1998): 62.

13 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 396.

14 Hunsinger, “The Politics of the Nonviolent God,” 62.

15 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 396.

16 Scott Cowdell, “Secularization Revisited: Tocqueville, Asad, Bonhoeffer, Habermas,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, ed. James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 346.

thought “that something good could come from violence.”¹⁷ Hence a clear definition emerges: religion is the myth that violence can be sacred. It is not religion that leads to violence, but violence that leads to religion.

Girard thus comes to view religion as moving through two distinct phases: firstly in the form of mimetic idolatry, and secondly through the divine revelation of Christ that unveils this process by exposing His innocence. This is what the biblical narrative presents: “the religious system of Jesus’ day served as a retardation or concealment of the gradual process of discovery and enlightenment which was working its way through the Old Testament traditions.”¹⁸ Jesus shares the same fate as his predecessors, and yet with His subsequent resurrection the founding murder loses its foundation. At minimum, His death is a resistance to sacralization. His being raised from the dead is the Father’s refusal to ‘accept’ it as sacrifice; declaring “God’s absolute non-complicity with the violence carried out by religious people in God’s name.”¹⁹

In this way there appears to be a clear bifurcation between a “false,” or “archaic” religion, and a “true” sense of which Christianity (and it alone) becomes the conduit through which to unmask the murderous regression of human societies. A sort of “Christian triumphalism” emerges for this reason; one that results in a deprecation of all non-biblical religions. They must “turn to epiphanies of sacred violence to resolve social crises,” and are thus powerless to break the cycle of violence on their own.²⁰ As a result, there has been a strong push to resist the allure of mimetic theory because of this insensitive myopia, but as Grant Kaplan notes, one should also ask themselves if such exclusivism is not the left hand of any Christian apologetic.²¹

According to Michael Kirwan, this sort of Christian exclusivism positioned Girard as “almost Barthian” according to critics.²² Girard’s analysis that Christianity is functionally antireligious echoed for many the claims of Barth’s dialectical theology. And certainly, Girard is explicitly projecting the same “tension” that has been noted by dialectic theologians before him—the idea that Christianity is both a religion and the negation of religion.²³ Girard’s theory raises several notable objections, but his portrayal of the “gradual process of discovery” from “archaic”

17 René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoit Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 109.

18 Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 83.

19 Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 84.

20 Leo D. Lefebure, “Mimesis, Violence and Socially Engaged Buddhism: Overture to a Dialogue,” *Contagion* 3 (Spring 1996): 122.

21 Grant Kaplan, *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist: Mimetic Theory and Fundamental Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 105.

22 Lefebure, “Mimesis, Violence and Socially Engaged Buddhism,” 122.

23 Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 81.

to “true” religion is the first to lack the delicate treatment of Barth. Such a view of religion may inadvertently flatten the biblical text, allowing for the Old Testament to be useful only in view of this negative affirmation.

The Yahweh of the Old Testament *is*, after all, the same God who is “father” of Jesus Christ, but, as Ephraim Radner says, “the historical contours of these names and their personal referents, in each case and in their juxtaposition, and hence the meaning they ‘deliver’ scripturally, are not equal.”²⁴ The limiting of God to his revelation in Jesus Christ ends up placing the God of the Old Testament starkly in the category of an “archaic” idolatry that limits the understanding of the Triune God who also speaks in the Old Testament. Girard thus seems entrenched by a hermeneutical snare that forces talk of God into a dispensational “economy,” treating the Trinity as an “unfolding” that allows for either the progressivist risks of both supersessionism and Marcionism, or worse, pits the testaments against each other as “rival Testaments.”²⁵ When examined, this appears more prevalent in Girard’s work by his willingness to posit a nonviolent God as an ontological reality despite the more wrathful depictions of God in the Old Testament.²⁶

The Disharmony of Christianity and Religion in Girard and Barth

The similarities between Girard and Barth were noted by Hans Urs von Balthasar as early as 1980 in his *Theo-Drama*. According to Balthasar, religion “in Girard, as in Barth . . . must be totally corrupt.”²⁷ This relates to what Barth was referring to when he assigned the word religion to “the human tendency to confuse Creator and creature.”²⁸ As Joseph Mangina points out, Barth “could even use language of pathology here: religion is a disease, a sickness, a basic deformation of the human creature.”²⁹ Barth even states outright in his opening section on religion in the *Church Dogmatics* that “religion is unbelief” and “the one great concern of godless man.”³⁰ In fact for Barth, our blindness to the phenomena of God’s revelation unfolding before us is due to the fact that we are so religiously engaged that we fool ourselves into thinking that we have been involved with God from the beginning. “The revelation of God is . . . the *hiddenness* of God in the world of human *religion*.”³¹ This means that God’s revelation, similarly to Girard, is

24 Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 254.

25 Radner, *Time and the Word*, 254.

26 “The God of the Christianity isn’t the violent God of archaic religion, but the non-violent God who willingly becomes a victim in order to free us from our violence.” See, René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 219.

27 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Drama Theory IV: The Action*, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 308.

28 Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville: WJK, 2004), 14.

29 Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness*, 14.

30 Barth, *CD* I/2, 300.

31 Barth, *CD* I/2, 282. *italics* added.

primarily an act of unveiling. God “does not confront us ‘in a neutral condition,’ but as *religious* people who deny that they are ungodly and contest their dependence upon God’s revelation. That is, revelation ‘reaches us in the attempt to know God from our standpoint,’ and not ‘in the activity which corresponds to it’ but in our ‘*opposition* to it.’”³² The echoes of this in Girard’s understanding of *mythos* and the “archaic” religion formed by mimetic rivalry seem clear. But in both cases, there is a redeeming quality, firstly in Barth’s justification of Religion through revelation, and secondly in Girard’s notion of “good mimesis.”

Girard contends that “mimetic desire, even when bad, is intrinsically good. . . . Mimetic desire is also the desire for God.”³³ Yet even with this said, mimesis presents itself in Girard’s early work as being almost purely violent and destructive. Barth saw the deceptiveness of religion as man baring himself against revelation by providing a substitute. Religion, and especially the Christian religion, can mutate into an imposing structure that believes *for* the Christian. It allows for a “relationship with God . . . apart from revelation,” and yet, it is this framework that constitutes, and is the presupposition and criterion of, the necessary understanding of revelation.³⁴ That is why for Barth, “Religion is never and nowhere true as such and in itself,” but it can be rescued.³⁵ Religion can be *saved*. The Christian religion is the true one only as it listens to the divine revelation, and there is faith in this promise: “In this faith, the presence and reality of the grace of God . . . differentiates our religion, the Christian, from all others as the true religion.”³⁶

It has often been wrongly contended that Barth wished to do away with Religion in all its forms. The unfortunate translation of the German word *aufhebung* as “abolish” in Barth’s writing further compounded the problem. Garrett Green notes that a more accurate term, following Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* would be to employ the term “sublate,” or “sublation.” Green suggests that translators are best to use ‘sublimation’ despite its easy confusion with *Sublimierung* in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical writings.³⁷ Sublimation invokes its cognate: *sublime*. To make something sublime (or to “sublimate” it) means to make it better—to take something higher by channeling it through a new medium toward its apex. The following quote from Barth makes clearer sense with this translation:

The sublimation of religion by revelation does not only have to

32 Busch, *The Great Passion*, 143, citing CD I/2, §17, 104; *italics* original.

33 René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996), 64.

34 Barth, CD I/2, 289.

35 Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 85.

36 Barth, CD I/2, 327.

37 Garrett Green, *On Religion*, ix; from the Translator’s Preface.

mean its negation, not only the judgement that religion is faithlessness. Religion, even though that judgement upon it is valid, and for that very reason, can be *happily* sublimated in revelation, it can be sustained by it and rest secure within it; religion can be justified by revelation and— we must immediately add—sanctified. Revelation can accept religion and single it out as true religion.³⁸

In this way, true religion exists in the same way that we exist as justified sinners. We do not cease to be sinners even in the fact that we are made righteous. As Barth goes on to say, “religion can *certainly* be preserved in revelation, although and in that the judgement still stands. It can be upheld by it and concealed in it.”³⁹

There is thus a great confluence between Girard and Barth found in that the Church must be continually reminded of the most serious of all symptoms. That “it was the Church, not the world, which crucified Christ.”⁴⁰ But where Girard held that the emergence of religion was the result of rivalry and violence, Barth’s insistence is that religion is the construction of Godless man to evade what the revelation of God in Christ has spoken. The decisive difference for Barth is found in that the witness of truth “does not validate to us a principle, a formal rightness, a simple agreement between our perceptions and terms,” but “must be respected ever anew in concrete relationships.”⁴¹ The liberation that comes from truth itself does not happen in a single moment of recognition as it appears for Girard.⁴² In this way we are *mere* witnesses to the truth that is Christ Jesus. That is, we do not possess it, nor is it ours to manipulate, and we must defend against systems that do so, even if it be not their intention. We are *dependent* on truth for its ability to open itself to us in ever new ways. Truth cannot be an “end in itself” or the object of our self-seeking.⁴³

Girard may thus be correct about our drive to violence and rivalry through religiosity, but this requires more than the mere acknowledgement of our tendency to do so in order to oppose it. Turning from wickedness can only be overcome when the Holy Spirit, who gives us power and opens our eyes continually (Acts 1:8), sublimates the false, often violent narratives we perceive as irenic and redirects them toward the peace that is found in Christ. This is the “ineradicable contradiction” of Girard’s theory, that while “acknowledging Christ’s divinity . . . he is positing a theological dimension that explodes his allegedly pure

38 Barth, *On Religion*, 85.

39 Barth, *CD* I/2, 326.

40 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E.C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 389.

41 Busch, *The Great Passion*, 148.

42 Barth, *CD*, II/1, 234.

43 Barth, *CD*, IV/3, 566ff.

scientism.”⁴⁴ Thus God cannot be bound to this formula if we are to truly experience the grace of his revelation. Moreover, it is Barth’s unwillingness to attribute complete non-violence to God and concomitantly to a Christian ethic on the basis of our election in Christ that separates him from Girard.

***Grenzfall* as the Discernment of God’s Command**

Despite never calling himself a pacifist, Girard’s system ends with a staunch refusal to accept violence in any form, but for Barth, it was possible for there to be circumstances, albeit extraordinary or unusual ones, in which the command of God *might* require killing.⁴⁵ This is discussed in the heavily criticized section of the *Church Dogmatics* committed to war. It specifically outlines Barth’s concept of *Grenzfall*, or the “borderline case” in which war may be in line with the command of God.

For Barth, all ethics of violence fall under the doctrine of God and the revolutionary treatment of Christ’s election. Thus, the proper task of ethics is to interpret and bear witness to the goodness of God, who is “the commander of man,” in recognition of His enacted self-revelation in the history of Jesus Christ.⁴⁶ The ethical question of “what ought we to do?” is itself a question about what Jesus has already done. But this very notion cautions Barth against forms of casuistry or universal principles. For Barth, “the Scriptures do not contain the command of God. Rather, they bear witness to the command as it was heard by those attested to in its narratives.”⁴⁷ As John Howard Yoder points out, “[w]hat Barth is therefore concerned to reject is a concept of some ideal law that would allow men the freedom to decide on their own what the command of God really means. Variety in the specific commands of God is to be expected . . . because God speaks really and bindingly to each concrete decision.”⁴⁸

We are thus given no general moral doctrines or a specific system to adhere to, as one may find in Girard. Rather, the individual is to listen for the command of God and act accordingly. Hence, the emphasis on *practicing* nonviolence—that is, listening for the command of God within the situation—comes to the fore, and this, Barth believes, can only happen under the collective authority of the Church. The Church’s purpose is to be “on watch to give the individual in challenging political situations guidance and direction which are not legalistic, but evangelical, plain and unequivocal, concerning the understanding and keeping of

44 Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Drama Theory IV: The Action*, 4:308.

45 Matthew W. Puffer, “Taking Exception to the Grenzfall’s Reception: Revisiting Karl Barth’s Ethics of War,” *Modern Theology* 28.3 (July 2012): 478.

46 Barth, *CD*, III/4, 32.

47 Puffer, “Taking Exception to the Grenzfall’s Reception,” 480.

48 Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, 52.

the command of God which is really at issue.”⁴⁹ In this way, Barth creates room for the *Grenzfall*, which is, as Matthew Puffer has rightly noted, neither a command, nor an exception, but an extenuating circumstance, or context—a “borderline case” in which violent action may be warranted.⁵⁰

Barth’s primary intention is to show “that only when one misinterprets the respect for life as a principle, as a commanded will to live, does one wrongly understand the borderline case as a relaxation of God’s command or as an exception.”⁵¹ Thus, within the *Grenzfall*, casuistry fails, but as Richard Hays highlights, “Barth exhorts exegesis and prayer as the means of discerning God’s command. On such occasions, Barth’s ethic most nearly approximates an intuitive act-deontology in which, through prayerful exegesis and reflection, individuals seek to enact an obedience that corresponds to the obedience of Jesus Christ.”⁵² Conversely, the problem arises that the individual never achieves certainty regarding the degree to which an action corresponds to the command of God. Every individual is nonetheless responsible for his or her own discernment of the command of God in every situation.⁵³

But unlike the pacifism which seems to proceed inevitably from Girard’s ontology, Barth is only willing to keep company with pacifism for “a good part of the way,” because “apart from the inadvisable absolutism of its thesis, [pacifism] consists in its abstract negation of war, as if war could be understood and negated in isolation and not in relation to the so-called peace which precedes it.”⁵⁴ In the end, the question of how we truly discern the command of God is left without a satisfactory answer. Yet as unclear as it may be, it allows for the integration of personal revelation, within the Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to take shape in our reflection on violence in a way that Girard simply does not offer.

Girard’s starting point identifies mimesis as the constitutive factor of the “Self” and the “absolute condition for the existence of humanity.”⁵⁵ From here, it follows that the recognition of the death of a victim to bring peace out of violence is the first stirring of human consciousness. Therefore, one finds an anthropology suggesting that “awareness of the other and awareness of the self come about

49 Barth, *CD*, III/4, 469.

50 Puffer, “Taking Exception to the Grenzfall’s Reception,” 492.

51 Puffer, “Taking Exception to the Grenzfall’s Reception,” 485. Puffer critiques Yoder specifically for his failure to appreciate the non-determinative form of the command here discussed. He proposes a convincing argument for another conflation of terms in Barth between *Grenzfall* as “borderline case” and *Ausnahme* as “exception.” In some editions, both words have been translated as “exception,” but this only muddies Barth’s intended meaning.

52 Puffer, “Taking Exception to the Grenzfall’s Reception,” 496, citing Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), 236.

53 Puffer, “Taking Exception to the Grenzfall’s Reception,” 490.

54 Barth, *CD*, III/4, 458.

55 Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 28.

simultaneously and as part of the same process of . . . violent desire.”⁵⁶ James Alison says this lays the foundation for an anthropology of grace, giving an account of what is required of human beings to change for the better.⁵⁷ However, the anthropological thrust of the entire process places Girard closer to Karl Rahner than to Karl Barth. It is a “transcendental anthropology” where “the overcoming of sin receives little attention” and we are forced to find room for “the mediation of Jesus and the significance of his death.”⁵⁸ In other words, Christ comes too late in the story—the good news is only presented in the context of this negative aspect. The story becomes primarily about our deficiency, not God’s initiative.⁵⁹

For this reason, Michael Kirwan proposes that Girard’s approach be described as a theological “anthropophany”—not so much a theory or discourse about man but a shocking discovery; a wisdom that, while rational, is also brought to awareness in the Gospels by a higher, divine power. Barth, however, is a “resistance fighter” against the anthropological limitations of such post-Kantian reflections, and makes clear that “Jesus is not simply an intense expression of the common, human experience of ‘God-consciousness’; nor is Christology simply anthropology writ large.”⁶⁰ Anthropology can only serve as the predicate of Christology, for otherwise it is impossible for theology to reach beyond its parameters, leaving it doomed to fall short of any proper speech about God and humanity.

Girard follows this pattern. Christ is no longer the starting point, but the conclusion of a gnostic anthropology,⁶¹ arriving in the form of a *deus ex machina* to tidy up the mess when things seem at their worst. Thus, while we must remind ourselves time and again that Girard is no theologian, the system that he presents prevents a proper emphasis on the grace of Christ as the gift that *precedes* our response.

As George Hunsinger has rightly argued, Girard’s deepest insights are possible to be retained, but only with the support of a theological framework like Barth’s to make up for his deficiencies. “Much will obviously need to be left behind.”⁶² To develop a systematic approach to the problem of religious violence in the way mimetic theory does leaves its advocates with “a ‘Pelagian’ solution to an

56 James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 37.

57 Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 52.

58 Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 55.

59 Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 60; Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 7ff.

60 Kevin Vanhoozer, “Human Being, Individual and Social,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 172.

61 Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 140. Kirwan makes note of several scholars who have levelled this critique. Though some have defended Girard, the claims are numerous enough to give it serious consideration.

62 Hunsinger, “The Politics of the Nonviolent God,” 69.

inherently ‘Augustinian’ problem.”⁶³ The “horizontal” becomes emphasized at the expense of the “vertical.” Hence one must ask if it is so simple for the victims of brutal *injustice* (a word that Balthasar notes Girard rarely uses) to overcome their retributive emotions with the simple epiphany of the scapegoat? It is hard to imagine. Thus, Hunsinger rightly adds, “the saving significance of Jesus Christ cannot be grasped merely from the standpoint of his having endured injustice as an innocent victim at the hands of society. It can be grasped only when his death is seen as an agreement between himself and God the Father for the sake of the world.”⁶⁴

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of mimetic theory is, as Balthasar says, that it “concerns only men’s attitude to the Crucified, as if God’s attitude to him did not exist.”⁶⁵ The critique can be levelled against Girard, but it would be problematic to think that Barth is guilty of the same. Despite the problems of clarity within Barth’s *Grenzfall*, it is only in Girard’s theory that we have the failure “to convey anything of the drama which is the life of the triune God.” The transferal of guilt to Jesus becomes only a “psychological unloading” and the “power-less Father-God demands nothing in the nature of an ‘atoning sacrifice.’”⁶⁶ Without this, Girard is stuck with a view of the cross as “solidarity” with Jesus, but he is unable to adjust his focus to see the “substitution” of Christ that Barth most certainly can. The Judge judges *in our place* and intercedes for us, says Barth. If this is not said up front, then His solidarity with us would appear to be His complicity with the wrongdoing of our sin.⁶⁷

Girard’s argument for Jesus’s finality and divinity can thus only be rescued if one unites it with the idea that “the exemplary narratives of Jesus show us the ‘shape,’ and the concrete possibility, of a non-violent practice.”⁶⁸ If, on the other hand, “Jesus’s practice is only atoning by his exposure of the logic of *mimesis*” then we are certainly to be pitied.⁶⁹ Thus, it can be said of Girard that he accounts for a moralism of faith, but the strange warming of the heart that is actually capable of turning people against violence is absent where it is present in Barth. The true religion, that leads us out of violence, is a creature of *grace*.⁷⁰ And this one thing we cannot stress too strongly: the relationship of the truth of the Christian religion to the grace of its revelation.⁷¹

63 Hunsinger, “The Politics of the Nonviolent God,” 69.

64 Hunsinger, “The Politics of the Nonviolent God,” 72.

65 Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Drama Theory IV: The Action*, 4:310.

66 Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Drama Theory IV: The Action*, 4:309–10.

67 Busch, *The Great Passion*, 207.

68 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 396.

69 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 399.

70 Barth, *On Religion*, 85.

71 Barth, *On Religion*, 53.