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Soteriology

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SOTERIOLOGY

Topic: Theological Responses to Gil Bailie's *Violence Unveiled* and René Girard

Moderator: Jon Nilson, Loyola University Chicago

Panelists: Patricia O'Connell Killen, Pacific Lutheran University
Sandra M. Schneiders, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
Leo Lefebure, University of St. Mary of the Lake
Gil Bailie, Florilegia Institute

René Girard's analyses of desire in relation to violence in society and of religion's ambiguous role in containing violence have evolved into a comprehensive theory of culture and a radical rereading of the Bible. For Girard, only Christianity offers an escape from the violence afflicting all societies and human institutions. The Gospel lays out the only path to "no more victims and scapegoats." Yet his work has received scant notice among theologians in the United States.

Gil Bailie's *Violence Unveiled* introduces and applies Girard's work. He finds the same dark undercurrents of desire and violence in such disparate places as poetic, philosophical, and biblical texts, today's newspaper, and contemporary events. In his view, culture's crisis is approaching a climax. Humanity is indeed at the crossroads. Only the Cross points us in the right direction.

This session was designed, therefore, to assess Bailie's book from the perspectives of comparative religion (Lefebure), biblical interpretation (Schneiders) and cultural analysis (O'Connell Killen). Their presentations were followed by a response by the author, Gil Bailie, and general discussion.

While all three expressed great appreciation for Bailie's accomplishment, each raised questions about the sweep of the book's claims. Without sufficient empirical verification, Lefebure argued, how can we agree that Girard has explained the origin of culture? There are, moreover, bloodless sacrifices and nonviolent traditions in non-Christian religions that the theory does not accommodate. Finally, a critical term, "violence," goes undefined.

For Schneiders, Bailie reads the Bible not as a theological resource or religious guide but as revelatory of the human condition. The Bible in *Violence Unveiled* discloses the dynamics of human subjectivity. She appreciated his discovery that the Bible's true meaning subverts many of its texts, for it shows the full horror of innocent victimage and a God implacably opposed to violence. She

wondered, though, how Girard might account for the Buddha's universal compassion and what the implications for our conventional soteriologies might be.

O'Connell Killen, too, appreciated the book as a powerfully revelatory lens upon facets of culture that otherwise go unexplained. She was troubled by the book's apparent affinity for singular explanations of complex phenomena. While the Holy Spirit plays a critical role in unmasking the scapegoating mechanism, the Spirit does not seem to be a resource for the creative restructuring of culture. Further, the book's metaphors sometimes suggest that humans were trapped in a cosmic struggle beyond their awareness and power.

In the time available, Bailie was understandably unable to respond fully to these and the other questions raised. He reminded theologians, however, that the Gospel makes universal claims; no wonder that it might uncover "things hidden since the foundation of the world." Girard came upon these in pursuing answers to his questions. He does not claim to be an innovator; his research only showed him what the Gospel already discloses.

People were still deep in conversation with Bailie over an hour after the formal end of the session.

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SPIRITUALITY

Topic: Authority, Leadership, and the Search for the Spirit

Convener: Elizabeth E. Carr, Smith College

Presenters: Brian O. McDermott, Weston Jesuit School of Theology
Theresa Monroe, John F. Kennedy School of Government,
Harvard University

Brian McDermott, S.J. and Terri Monroe, R.S.C.J. initiated a conversation on their work on leadership and authority from the perspectives of theology and the social sciences. In elaborating some elements of a public or systemic spirituality and relating leadership and authority to the search for the Spirit, Brian McDermott and Terri Monroe see the need to be bilingual—to use language appropriate to "within the walls" of a theological school and "on the wall" between the church and the secular world.