

Editor's Introduction

Contagion owes its existence to a small group of scholars who, in the fall of 1987, proposed to include the study of René Girard's work in the biannual meeting of Westar Institute's Seminar on the Bible, Narrative, and American Culture (BINAC). By March 1990 the BINAC seminar had been discontinued, replaced, in effect, by a new association of scholars dedicated to the continued exploration of Girard's hypotheses: the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. The early collaborative effort of James Williams, Charles Mabee, and Robert Hamerton-Kelly has since evolved into a thriving organization whose members, from throughout the European Community and North and South America, represent a remarkable range of academic and non-academic interests.

Contagion will reflect that diversity of interests as it explores the possibility of a non-rivalistic desire for meaningful knowledge about human relations. Forthcoming issues will, accordingly, include studies by scholars in the humanities, religion, and the social sciences, as well as by professionals outside the academy engaged in such practices as psychotherapy and conflict resolution or actively involved with issues such as innercity development and the implementation of new approaches to the problem of individual and community violence.

Girard's hypotheses on culture, mimetic desire, and human violence provide the common frame of reference for this wide array of critical orientations and practical concerns. How and to what extent do his hypotheses account for the broad range of phenomena which he discusses? What are the limitations, the possibilities for development, and the social as well as ethical implications of the mimetic/scapegoat model? And what are the viable long-range alternatives to the use of violence — individual, social, political, juridical — as a means of redress and a recourse for social cohesion?

In the face of far-reaching aims and an ambitious, interinstitutional, program, Contagion will strive for conceptual order by focusing on previously selected topics: the relation of literature and the sacred, theological and secular thinking in the

context of social theory, concrete social applications of mimetic theory, and feminist concerns vis à vis the Girardian model. Nevertheless the editors also invite essays of interest unrelated to those topics, as well as proposals for special issues in the future.

To launch a project of this nature requires, finally, a bit of patience, long hours, and a broad base of support, all of which — I gratefully acknowledge — was abundantly forthcoming on the part of contributors to this issue, especially Cesáreo Bandera, Raymund Schwager, and James Williams. Special thanks are in order to a number of colleagues at East Carolina University as well: to Joan Mansfield and Eva Roberts of the School of Art for "the mourning figure" illustration and cover design; to Keats Sparrow, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, for his invaluable support in addition to a grant to defray start-up costs; and to Marlene Springer, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, and Diane Jacobs, Dean of the Graduate School, whose matching grants were indispensable to the realization of this endeavor.

It is an honor to present the inaugural issue of Contagion as a tribute to the scholar whose broad vision and keen insights have been an inspiration to all of us.