

# THE GIRARDIAN THEORY AND FEMINISM: CRITIQUE AND APPROPRIATION

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The construction of theories of relationality, society, and religion supportive of women and women's experience is one of the major concerns of feminist scholarship today.<sup>1</sup> This study examines the arguments put forth by feminist scholars who contend that the Girardian theory offers important contributions to their work.<sup>2</sup> These scholars use the insights of the Girardian theory into the intrinsic connection between ritual and violence, religion and modes of relationality, myth and societal formation, and victimage and social cohesion to critique the androcentric-patriarchal worldview that has shaped western civilization.<sup>3</sup> Part One of this study will identify the elements of the

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to state the well known fact that there is no such thing as *the* feminist position, theory, or scholarship. It is of the very nature of feminist projects to be diverse, to acknowledge and honor the existence of difference and particularity. In the realms of religion and literature, projects by white Christian and Neo-pagan feminists have been criticized by both womanist and Jewish feminist scholars for their failure to uphold, in practice, this commitment to difference and particularity.

<sup>2</sup> I confine my attention to the ways in which the Girardian understanding of religion, societal formation, and modes of relationality informs the relation of violence and victimage to women. In order to explore the basic issues involved, I examine various writings of Martha Reineke, Luce Irigaray, Sarah Halford, Rebecca Adams, Carole Deering Paul, Cynthia Chase, Ann Demaitre, and Linda Alcoff.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to clarify for this study the terms "androcentrism" and "patriarchy." "Androcentrism" refers to patterns of thinking that posit the humanity of dominant male human beings as normative for all human beings: all non-normative human beings are viewed, accordingly, as derivative of, and dependent upon, the normative male. "Patriarchy" is the structural expression of an androcentric worldview. "Patriarchy" as *one* identified reality does not exist; rather it is a diversified reality whose expressions are influenced by the socio-political, historico-religious context. Its structure is so shaped that the multiple forms of power within a society are possessed by the dominant males. Women and non-normative men do not

Girardian theory that feminist scholars judge to be most useful to their projects, elements that serve as vital theoretical underpinnings for feminist critiques of conceptual frameworks, modes of relationality, and social structures which perpetuate the victimage of women.

Part Two examines elements within the Girardian theory which feminist scholars judge to be informed by an androcentric-patriarchal worldview. According to feminist theoreticians, those elements reinforce the oppressive dimensions of human relationships, of social institutions, and of religion. Because of this influence it is claimed that aspects of the Girardian theory cannot promote an authentic sense of selfhood and agency for women. It is, however, also the position of feminist scholars that a revisionary process could strip the theory of its androcentric elements and retool it in a manner supportive of women and women's experiences.<sup>4</sup> In this section I will highlight their recommendations for such a revision.

Part Three is my critique of the feminist critique. I will indicate what I find to be the major weakness in feminist projects to-date and discuss the ways in which the Girardian concept of difference may offer a possible corrective.

## Part One

Methodologically, a hermeneutic of suspicion is central to feminist projects. Its usage supports two main tasks of feminist scholarship: the retrieval of women's experiences and history from the oppression of silence, as Martha Reineke observes ("Body" 246), and the exposure of androcentric thought frames and patriarchal structures which have relegated women's history and experiences to the crippling domain of silence. René Girard's employment of a hermeneutic of suspicion for the analysis of the myths and

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have access to power by their own right. Women have access to power only through the men to whom they belong. The "androcentric-patriarchal worldview" can be summarized, then, in terms of an ethos which functions to exclude, to marginalize, and to render invisible in language and public life all who are defined as non-normative human beings. The theoretical and practical end of an androcentric-patriarchal worldview is, therefore, systemic oppression. This is achieved through the attempt to construct social and private relationships according to hierarchical ordering, an ethic of domination-subjugation, and a relationality of opposition. It is my judgment that feminist theories recognize most clearly that this worldview ultimately demeans the humanity of *both* the dominant male and those subordinated. This insight gives the feminist endeavor both its liberative impulse and its framework from which to develop criteria, or critical principles, for judging structures and theories.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of a feminist who advocates the systematic articulation of a worldview which is both gender-specific and gender-exclusive in its formulation and implementation see Irigaray.

religious rituals which have undergirded the formation of social institutions and modes of relationality is seen as one of his major contributions. This hermeneutic enables Girard to expose incidents of clandestine violence and the concealed victims of violence. Such exposure serves a critical purpose: the human community is not able to claim naivete when faced with the violent end which resulted from its reliance upon the scapegoat-expulsion mechanism. Instead, it must come to terms, as Ann Demaitre notes, with those forces which attempt to cloak acts of violence and victimization with an aura of mystification through an illicit use of ritual, symbol, and myth (259).

The Girardian option for a hermeneutic of suspicion when analyzing myth and religious ritual is of great benefit to feminist scholars who turn to an explicit investigation of texts of persecution. First, it supports the claims of feminist scholarship that much current scholarly inquiry is not only inadequate, but seriously flawed in its attempts to research the reality of women, religion, and violence as portrayed in texts of persecution.<sup>5</sup> Current scholarly inquiry is judged to be too facile in its acceptance of religion as extrinsic to the violence which women historically have suffered. What has resulted is a perilous misreading of the dynamics of persecution which leaves the persecutors unchallenged and the women victimized one more time (Reineke, "Devils" 56). Reineke's work offers a clear example of the way in which the application of the Girardian theory enables one to pursue a hermeneutic that not only exposes the treatment of women in texts of persecution, but also achieves such exposure in ways which, as Adrienne Rich proposed, "do not perpetuate the structures of history-making that first relegated women to invisibility" (qtd. in Reineke. "Devils" 55).

Second, feminist scholarship uses the results of the Girardian hermeneutic to unmask the devastating connection between the revictimization of women and the seemingly positive power of religious ritualization to quell the potentially devastating force of violence. Girard has revealed the way in which the sacrificial structure of cultural prohibitions functions to distance the community from the violent crisis which marked its beginning. Feminist scholarship emphasizes that when the participants are allowed to distance themselves from the violence that underlies religious ritualization, they also abdicate responsibility for that violence. The distancing process, ironically, perpetuates the violence by allowing the participants to envision themselves as the passive agents of powers that lie beyond them (Reineke, "Mother" 9).

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<sup>5</sup> For an articulate discussion of the ways in which current scholarly analysis is inadequate to the task of interpreting the experience of women during the periods of the witch hunts see Reineke, "The Devils."

As a result, the participants are given an avenue whereby they can abdicate responsibility for the transformation of the situation. Because feminist scholarship asserts that women are often the concealed victims beneath the publicly commemorated victim of myth and ritual,<sup>6</sup> a critical analysis of the distanciation function of religious ritual becomes an imperative.

Feminist projects attend seriously and consciously to the category of history. By "history" I mean a constructed phenomenon which can be investigated in order to evaluate the impact that violence and victimage have had on the ways in which societies and cultures have been constructed. Girard's location of the phenomenon of violence at the origins of human language and culture heightens the value of his theory for feminist scholars. He emphasizes that the linguistic and cultural structures of any time period are avenues through which we may gain an understanding of the crisis event which resulted in the activation of violence and of the scapegoat mechanism. Although linguistic and cultural structures do not offer direct access to the event, Girard stresses that they have been shaped in order to achieve a specific end: the concealment of a murder-crisis event.<sup>7</sup> Linguistic and cultural structures, therefore, as Carole Paul explains, refer to more than simply other texts, or literature (374). They refer to *historical* referents, *historical* events. This foundation undergirds the distinctive Girardian claim that, whether mythical, religious, or historical in nature, all such texts reflect *real events of collective violence and victimage*. They testify to the extra-textual, historical event of violence which informed human culture and societal formations (see Paul 373-4).

This Girardian claim is of crucial importance to feminist hermeneutical projects for two reasons. First, it underscores the feminist assertion that credible scholarship must employ methodologies and hermeneutical theories which attend to all of the components which make up a culture or society (i.e., economics, politics, sociology, etc.) and which give attention to the positionality of particular genders, races, classes within a culture or society (Alcoff 420). These are the factors which will illumine the historical circumstances that provoked the crisis event. Feminist scholarship is adamant that a hermeneutical framework rooted in the essentialist worldview of Platonic Idealism,<sup>8</sup> which insists upon a "universal, neutral, perspectiveless epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics" (Alcoff 420) and which stresses the

<sup>6</sup> For examples of this assertion see Irigaray, Joplin, and Reineke ("Mother").

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed explication of the mechanism of mimetic desire, mimetic crisis, and the role of myth and ritual see Reineke, "Mother," 4-7.

<sup>8</sup> Adams highlights the significance of Girard's methodological choices in "Book," 102.

fixed, static, immutable nature of human reality, is incapable of dealing with the murder-crisis event as a *historical* event. It thwarts thorough-going critiques of a culture's social structures because it endows these social structures with an ontological status. The ontologization of constructed social structures makes them appear as if they were "natural," if not divinely ordained and maintained. Historicity as a central category of analysis is lost.

Second, the Girardian claim that texts refer to historical referents supports feminist efforts to uncover the actual history of the victim. Feminist scholarship focuses upon the retrieval of the victim from her second victimage, that is, from the relegation of her experience to the abyss of silence. Girard's unrelenting efforts to recover the scapegoat-victim hidden under the manifold cultural prohibitions, religious rituals, and sacred mythologies is of vital importance to feminist scholars because it is an avenue whereby the ones who suffered the ritual expulsion are released from their "veiled" existence. We are confronted by the suffering and death of the victims as actual historical events of great consequence.

Girard's insistence upon the centrality of religion, myth, and ritual for human existence is highly valued by a growing number of feminist scholars. Such scholars recognize, above all, that contemporary society holds an impoverished view of myth. Because of this we are unable to draw upon the formative power of mythology when dealing with the powerful forces of human life—memories, hopes, dreams, fears, and ultimate concerns—or when attempting to construct human and humanizing cultures. Lost to contemporary society has been the intrinsic connection of myth and social reconstruction. Rebecca Adams, for example, highlights the power of myth to function as a vehicle for the imagining of an alternative social ordering ("Voice"). She shows that myth presses the feminist imagination to do more than simply subvert belief in the normativity of the androcentric-patriarchal worldview: it provides the dynamism from which an alternative vision of social construction may be brought forth. Feminist scholars also acknowledge the importance of myth and of a mythic reading of history for the interpretation of texts of persecution. Reineke views a mythic reading of history as precisely the avenue which releases the full revelatory power of the texts with regard to both the victim and the persecutor ("Devils" 77-8).

Girard's discussion of the relationship of christology to the myths of sacrifice and the victimage mechanism is also important for feminist deliberations. Of particular interest is Girard's focus upon the life and death of the Jesus of history, rather than upon the Christ of established religion. Of equal interest is his portrayal of Jesus as the innocent victim of a communal

act of violence which has its origin in the human, not in the divine (Adams, "Book" 102).

Christ's role as messiah has been central to Christian feminist attempts to construct a christology which is not in the service of a theological system oppressive to women. This has meant that a philosophically-based *Logos* christology is jettisoned in favor of a christology radicated in the Gospels. The Jesus of the Gospels is presented as advocating religious beliefs and expressions free from identification with any form of hierarchy and ideological power centers. As a consequence of their option for the Jesus of the Gospels, Christian feminist hermeneutics emphasize the iconoclastic function of Christ's messiahship: he is one with all who suffer marginalization and victimization.<sup>9</sup> It is on the basis of the example given through the words and actions of the Jesus of the Gospels that women protest against continued victimage and stand in solidarity with those who continue to be voiceless.

## Part Two

Convinced of the importance of the Girardian theory for scholarship, feminist scholars are attempting to extend Girard's insights regarding the nature of human interaction, societal formation, religion, and violence in ways which are beneficial to women.

Of primary concern to feminists is the worldview that informs the development of the Girardian theory. It is their judgement that this worldview bears the marks of the Western androcentric-patriarchal culture. A primary indication of this dependence, they argue, is the lack of gender consciousness throughout Girard's articulation and explication of his theory. The theory's silence with regard to gender representation when undertaking an examination of such topics as myth, ritual, religion, and societal formation is significant because this is an arena where his theory is most insightful. As part one of this paper emphasizes, one of the great contributions of the Girardian analysis is its acute consciousness of the socio-cultural power which religion, rituals, symbols, and myths wield.

Feminist scholars are uncompromising in their critique that a lack of gender consciousness opens the way for religion, rituals, symbols, and myths to be used in a manner which reinforces the oppressive nature of Western culture's gender-based social order. Their analyses illuminate the relevance of gender to the underlying pattern of violence which structures human community (Reineke, "Mother" 16). Thus, the Girardian analysis in its

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<sup>9</sup> For a stimulating analysis of the implications of a feminist christological hermeneutic see Rosemary Ruether.

present form is judged inadequate because it neglects a critical examination of the influence which the concealment of gender has had on the expressions of violence and victimization, social cohesion and scapegoating, and religious ritualization and community formation.

By way of correction, Reineke purposes the linkage of Julia Kristeva's gender-sensitive thesis with the Girardian analysis of the relation of religion, violence, and language. Through such a coupling Reineke is convinced that Girard's insights on victimization can serve to illuminate the victimization of women "sustained by the linguistic code of patriarchy and manifested in its religion" ("Mother" 3).

From feminist perspectives René Girard's desire to produce a totalizing theory is problematic. Whether he postulates the development of "a simple, universal model" (Paul 370) or of a "unifying theory on a variety of subjects ranging from the specificity of human nature and the origin of societal structure to the development of myths and the significance of rites" (Demaitre 259), such a project can be approached only with great caution by feminist scholars. Drawing upon the insights of liberation and political theologies, feminist scholars raise the warning that, historically, theories and emancipatory movements which claim a totality of vision not only have invariably failed but also function oppressively.<sup>10</sup> The failure has resulted from the inability of any one theory or emancipatory movement to account for the entire scope of suffering, violence, and victimage, past, present, and future. This is made strikingly clear when theories and emancipatory movements are confronted with the realities of finitude and death. It is precisely their impotence before the ongoing experiences of finitude and death which unmask their claims to universality. Liberation and political theologians emphasize that this failure has often been projected onto another, usually a vulnerable other. Feminist scholarship claims that the projection dynamic is a constitutive element of the androcentric-patriarchal worldviews. Ideologies informed by androcentric-patriarchal worldviews use this dynamic to negate anything that threatens their claim to universality. Thus, all difference, be it of conceptual framework, social vision, religious belief, race, gender, class, or sexual orientation, is suppressed. In light of this analysis, feminist theoreticians call for the vision of any theory or movement to be articulated according to its particularity, or positionality. They would encourage a

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<sup>10</sup> Both liberation and political theologies undertake a critique of the function of religion in society in the name of freedom, human autonomy, and liberation. For a comprehensive example of the contributions from political theologians see Johann Metz.

reexamination of the Girardian theory in order to identify and designate the specific audience and group experiences which this theory represents.

Concerns are raised also regarding the discussion of religion within the Girardian theory. Feminists who support the theory's position vis-a-vis the centrality of religious practices and beliefs look for the Girardian theory to incorporate a thorough-going critique of the ideologies which inform religious practices and beliefs. Once again, the historical record of how ideologies have utilized religion in order to motivate and perpetuate women's victimage leaves feminist scholars unwilling to attribute value neutrality to the institution of religion. The historical record of women's victimage compels them to call for a reexamination of religion's collaboration with oppressive social agendas (Reineke, "Devils" 56).

Feminist critiques of the treatment of religion continue when they turn to Girard's discussion of Christianity. While Girard notes the continuity of the Christian Scriptures with all other myths, there is an emphasis within his theory upon the distinctiveness of the Christian Scriptures. This is especially true regarding the Christian Gospels because the Christ figure is identified as the basis for the deconstruction of myths of sacrifice and victimage (Adams, "Book" 102). Feminist scholarship identifies two areas which need to be addressed in this regard. First, there is the historical phenomenon of Christian hegemony. While feminists do not advocate the rejection of Christian revelation, neither do they ignore the oppression which has resulted from some interpretations of Christian revelation and the Gospel imperative. Christianity cannot be exempted from responsibility for the devastation which it, working with other social institutions, has wrought upon those who have been its victims.

Second, there is the victimage of women which has resulted from the interpretation of traditional christocentric formulations. Such formulations have been used in theological *apologia* to denigrate the ability of female embodiment to image the divine as well as to justify the exclusion of women from positions of ministry and authority within their own religious communities.

### Final Adjudication: A Critique of the Critique

In my judgment feminist scholars have significant contributions to make to the development of the Girardian theory. Of importance is their argument that theories dealing with society, culture, and religion repudiate assertions of gender-neutrality. They offer ample evidence that this claim historically has functioned to mask the oppressive mechanisms within the androcentric-patriarchal worldview of Western civilization. Of equal importance is their



assertion that the reconstruction of theoretical frameworks be done in a manner which reflects the true life experiences of women in all of the diversity and commonality which those experiences entail.

Having said this, it is my judgment, however, that these scholars have not yet themselves broken out of the limitations of the androcentric-patriarchal worldview which utilizes a typology of oppositionalism, i.e. man/woman, culture/nature, patriarchal/feminist. In my estimation, the feminist scholars engaged in the reconstruction of the Girardian theory continue to employ a binary worldview. They offer important correctives to the Girardian theory, but they cannot ultimately free women from the strictures imposed upon them by an oppressive androcentric-patriarchal worldview. The feminist project envisioned as *against* the patriarchal project, ironically, still participates in the patriarchal project (Halford 6).

In my estimation, René Girard's concept of difference, shaped by "the model of the exception...in the process of emerging" (Williams 20), provides an important key for the construction of a worldview freed from a typology of oppositionality. This key is precisely the fact that Girard's concept of difference does not conceive of differentiation in terms of dichotomous oppositionality. Rather, it conceives of differentiation in terms of separation and identity, or distinctiveness and similarity. Because "the model of exception ... in the process of emerging" is not predicated upon the binary oppositionalism that informs both structuralism and deconstructionism, separation and identity function as the underpinnings for social cohesion and peace. It is the collapse of difference, or undifferentiation, which leads to violence and victimage. The Girardian concept of difference is predicated upon the conviction that the dynamic process of differentiation can, and should, take place without violence and victimage (Williams 54).

It is my contention that it would prove beneficial to feminists to use the Girardian concept of difference within a typology of distinctiveness which attends to positionality. Within such a typology the discussion of conceptual frameworks, modes of human relationality, societal construction, and religion is predicated upon the values of equality, commonality, and particularity. This worldview allows for a highlighting of both similarity and difference without a subsequent hierarchical valuation of those terms. Hierarchical valuation is avoided because a typology of distinctiveness which attends to positionality is not shaped by a theory of knowledge informed by representational ontology, which posits a unitary essence underlying all of reality. Rather it arises from an interdisciplinary, social scientific basis which recognizes social structures, gender role assignments, and religious institutions as constructed, and not ontologized, realities. Within this typology the notion of subjectivity

is affirmed as a constructed reality, rather than as a predetermined "given" which can derive its "being" apart from a socio-cultural context. Hence, in this typology the particulars of individuals are considered relevant and proper influences on knowledge (Alcoff 420). Thus, the reality of similarity and difference within any society or culture is approached with a respect for, and an acceptance of, pluriformity, rather than from a stance of rivalry and a zeal for uniformity.

This use of the concept of difference within a typology of distinctiveness which attends to positionality also holds important implications for the problematic of gender representation and concealment in rituals, myths, and religion. The Girardian concept of difference can be utilized to support an understanding of gender which allows for variation according to the differing ethos of each culture and society. A typology of distinctiveness which attends to positionality holds, as Alcoff suggests, that "there are a host of divergent ways gender divisions occur in different societies, and that the differences that appear to be universal can be explained in nonessentialistic ways" (413). Gender is recognized as a "construct, formalizable in a nonarbitrary way through a matrix of habits, practices, and discourses" (431). This theory of gender releases women from the definitions of "woman" that emanate from the strictures of a fixed, immutable, and static worldview. Gendered subjectivity, for both men and women, is understood "in relation to concrete habits, practices, and discourses while at the same time recognizing the fluidity of these" (431).

This understanding of gender achieves two important ends. First, gender is recognized as an essential factor for any analysis of religion, societal formation, or modes of relationality. Second, there is an acknowledgment that gender is a constructed reality, possessed of much diversity. Thus, cultural variations and similarities must be attended to, therefore, when attempting to adjudicate the role of gender in any analysis.

In conclusion, I take the position that a typology of distinctiveness which employs the concept of difference as defined by the Girardian theory can strengthen theories of relationality which strive to free all persons from the ravages of unresolved rivalry, fear, and violence. The Girardian concept of difference can promote feminist analyses which highlight the role of gender difference and representation in the violence and victimage suffered by women.

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