

Theology and Peace

A new organization, a kind of offspring of COV&R, saw the light of day in January 2007. I have already referred to the discontent of Anthony Bartlett with COV&R's theoretical and theological orientation (see chapter 4). He and some others have felt the impact of Girard's thought but wanted a commitment more experientially and praxis-oriented to the New Testament roots of Christianity. In the summer of 2006 Bartlett and Tom Nicoll conceived the idea for a new group made up of participants who were convinced of the pressing need and committed to thinking and working out the consequences of the Christian faith in North America. Michael Hardin, director of Preaching Peace, became involved in this project as organizer and person in charge of publicity.²

A selected group was invited for a theological conversation under the name of Theologia Pacis. The name was subsequently changed to Theology and Peace. It first met in Akron, Pennsylvania, on January 9 and 10, 2007. There were over twenty present, with the notable participation of the peace churches, especially the Mennonites. A board was appointed, and annual conferences began in 2008. Its primary purpose is expressed in its self-description on its website: "An energizing movement seeking the transformation of theological practice through the application of mimetic theory."³

Elizabeth Bailie in Memoriam

Along with the death of other prominent members through the years (Roel Kaptein, William Mishler, and Raymund Schwager), the passing of Elizabeth Bailie was an occasion of great sadness for those who knew her. Elizabeth, wife of Gil Bailie, died on February 18, 2007. Gil, a friend of many of us from the beginnings of COV&R, found through her love and spirituality a companion who graced and inspired his life and work. As Martha and René Girard expressed it in their remembrance, "We were inspired by her spirituality, warmed by her friendship and awed by her courage. Her voice, stilled too soon, lives on in her poems and in our hearts, and for that we are grateful."⁴

Templeton Advanced Research Program at Stanford

An exciting new research project was launched at Stanford University on April 28–29, 2007. Sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation, the Metanexus Institute, and the Travis Research Institute of the Fuller Graduate School of

Psychology, this was a two-year research project bringing together scholars in social science, religion, and philosophy. The principal investigator was Scott Garrels, a member of COV&R who is on the faculty of the Fuller Graduate School of Psychology. The object was to deepen dialogue and achieve greater integration between mimetic theory and empirical research on imitation. The three groundbreaking areas that were introduced and discussed were mimetic theory, led by René Girard; imitation theory, led by Andrew Meltzoff; and mirror neuron investigations, led by Vittorio Gallese. COV&R colleagues attending the meeting, in addition to Girard and Garrels, were Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Paul Dumouchel, Mark Anspach, Robert Hamerton-Kelly, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, and Trevor Merrill.⁵

This research project was one of the important developments that led to the formation of *Imitatio*, which was formally established at Stanford in April 2008.

The Annual Conference in Amsterdam and Soesterberg

The annual conference in the Netherlands was a noteworthy event because of its setting in one of the world's most interesting cities and metropolitan areas, the social and political turmoil that formed part of the backdrop of the symposium, and the group that brought it about, the Dutch Girard Society.

The Dutch Girard Society

An exceptional circle of people in Holland planned and organized the 2007 conference. The Girard Circle, as it was then called, dates back to 1981. Roel Kaptein suggested to Father André Lascaris and others that they start a study group to discuss the work of Girard. Sandor Varga, who was on the faculty of the Free University of Amsterdam, also played a key role in the beginning of the group. Kaptein and Lascaris were both involved in peacemaking work in Northern Ireland. Participants began meeting in Utrecht and Amsterdam, and later the group was hosted by Seth Boonstra, then the university chaplain at the Free University of Amsterdam. Among the early members of the group were also Matthew Schoffeleers, Aat van Rhijn, Martin Hiebrink, Martijn Leopold, Ernst Stern, Nico Keijzer, Simon Simonse, Hubert Darthenay, Hans Weigand, and Michael Elias. Elias was the convener for a number of years (1994–2004), managed their website (2004–2009), and is the chairperson at this writing. Thérèse Onderdenwijngaard is the current convener and secretary. Berry Vorstenbosch has taken over as overseer of the website, and serves in that

capacity as a second secretary. Sonja Pos has also been a participant, although her health in recent years has prevented frequent attendance. Thanks to a grant from Imitatio, the group was officially registered in October 2009 as the “Stichting Girard Studiekring” (Foundation Girard Study Circle), according to Dutch law on charitable and nongovernmental organizations. However, since in English the usage of the word “foundation” for organizations implies an entity that finances projects and awards grants for education or charitable purposes, “Dutch Girard Society” is probably the best name in English. Other officers, in addition to those mentioned above, are Simon Simonse as vice chairman and Hans Weigand as treasurer.

There are usually fifteen to eighteen persons who attend. They meet about five times a year at the Free University of Amsterdam. The university provides a room and the service of mailings to members. The gatherings are always on Friday from 10:00 A.M. to 12:30 P.M. Either the chairperson or someone who has prepared a presentation starts off the session with introductory comments, and then the rest of the group speaks freely in a wide-ranging discussion. Sometimes they have an assignment to read certain chapters in Girard’s books; sometimes they read and discuss other Girardian materials. Occasionally they have a guest speaker who starts off the session. Now and then they focus on crucial current events, for example, the 2002 murder of a gay politician and sociology professor, Pim Fortuyn, by an animal rights activist, and the slaying in 2004 of Theo van Gogh, a publicist and filmmaker, by a Muslim fundamentalist. Both murder victims pushed the boundaries of traditional Dutch tolerance—Fortuyn, by expressing uneasiness about immigrant minorities, and van Gogh, by what he said about Muslims and Jews. Each person in the group wrote his or her reflections on the killings and the social and political dismay that ensued, and these reflections became the basis for discussion when they met.

It is remarkable that the group, which currently has only about forty people on its mailing list, has held together all these years. Those who attend come from all over Holland, so the dedication to meeting for learning and fellowship is strong. When I asked a number of them what held the Circle together for so many years, their unanimous response was that the discussions were very interdisciplinary, in keeping of course with being followers of Girard and the mimetic theory. The meetings are casual and relaxed, and persons of widely varying backgrounds feel free to enter into the conversations.

One of the Society’s proud moments occurred when Girard was given an honorary doctorate, his first, by the Free University in 1985. It is unclear whether the Society directly brought that about, as a university professor not

in the group made the actual nomination. However, it is likely that the group had some influence, directly or indirectly. Girard met with the Society and talked to them at length while he was in the city for the academic ceremony.

Many members of the Dutch Girard Society have been active in research and writing about the mimetic theory, as well as actively participating in COV&R. Of these members, Simon Simonse, André Lascaris, and the late Roel Kaptein published books that have been reviewed in the *Colloquium’s Bulletin*.⁶

The idea for a COV&R conference in the Netherlands began with Simon Simonse and André Lascaris as they were conversing at the 2005 conference in Koblenz. Their colleagues in the Dutch Girard Society took up the idea and were the ones primarily responsible for organizing it. Following up on an essay by the Dutch novelist Margriet de Moor, who discussed the idea of the Netherlands as a potential laboratory of tolerance, the steering committee for the conference came up with “Vulnerability and Tolerance” as the conference theme. The initial concept was more about vulnerability in social and political life, but during the actual symposium the emphasis in papers and discussion shifted to tolerance.

The Society worked in cooperation with the Dominican Study Centre for Theology and Society and l’Association pour les Recherches Mimétiques. The institutional hosts were the Blaise Pascal Institute of the Free University of Amsterdam, IKV (Interkerkelijk Vredesberaad [Inter-Church Peace Consultation]), and Pax Christi. The members of the steering committee were Mark Anspach, Gied ten Berge, Wiel Eggen, Michael Elias, André Lascaris, Thérèse Onderdenwijngaard, Edwin Ruigrok, Simon Simonse, Laura Stoorvogel, Jan Weenink, and Hans Weigand.

“Vulnerability and Tolerance,” July 4–8, 2007

The keynote address was given by Ian Buruma, himself a native of the Netherlands. A member of the faculty of Bard College in the state of New York, Buruma is well known as an author and essayist. Two of his recent books were directly relevant regarding the conference: *Murder in Amsterdam* and *Occidentalism*, the latter coauthored with Avishai Margalit. His paper was very engaging because he not only addressed the current social and political crisis but also recognized patterns of imitation and resentment, although these were not processed through the mimetic theory. If he had been familiar with mimetic theory, he might have raised a question about tolerance as a virtue. But those present could certainly agree with his conclusion: “The only

thing that all citizens should be bound by is the renunciation of violence, in political, religious, or social conflicts.”⁷ The only question is whether the renunciation of violence goes far enough.

Wolfgang Palaver responded to Buruma’s presentation and did his usual good job of clarifying major points for COV&R colleagues within the framework of the mimetic theory. Palaver, who expressed general agreement with Buruma, explicated three theses. (1) It is mimetic rivalry, not religion as such, that leads toward violence. He acknowledged with appreciation that Buruma, as well as Margalit, his coauthor of *Occidentalism*, shows great insight in indicating the role that mimicry and resentment play in Islamist fundamentalism. And he does not overlook that dogmatic secularist reactions to this fundamentalism can easily fall into the same extremist trap (Marxism, Maoism, Third World liberationism, multiculturalism, etc.). (2) Human beings are religious beings; they are both homo mimeticus and homo religiosus. As Girard has pointed out, and as Buruma acknowledges in his own language, we imitate what we adore, and secularists are certainly not immune to this, even if they are not “religious” in a traditional sense. (3) Concerning religion and the Enlightenment, it has been the “Abrahamic overcoming of the scapegoat mechanism [that] embodies the true spirit of the Enlightenment.” However we evaluate Voltaire, for example, he was an authentic representative of that phenomenon when he sided with the Protestant Calas against his Catholic executioners, who falsely accused him of murdering his own son. “Enlightenment means to side with the victim of collective persecution.” Palaver concludes that Buruma himself represents the true spirit of the Enlightenment, as instantiated in his comment about Ayaan Hirsi Ali. He strongly disagrees with her rather rigidly doctrinaire embrace of the Enlightenment heritage, but despite this “he protests against the fact that she was forced to leave the Netherlands. The last sentences of his postscript to his book *Murder in Amsterdam* show his siding with the victim: ‘Theo van Gogh is dead. Mohammad Bouyeri is locked up in prison alone with the words of his holy books. And Ayan Hirsi Ali has had to leave the scene. My country seems smaller without her.’”⁸

One of the presenters, Joel Hodge, addressed the conference theme within a framework of a political theology rooted in an understanding of the Eucharist, and in so doing he touched on the ideas and concerns of several other speakers. Drawing upon Girard, Charles Taylor, and William Cavanaugh, Hodge questioned common notions about the modern democratic state, which is based on the convictions and scapegoating tendencies of secularism. The secular state is based essentially on a negation of religion, particularly Christianity and the Catholic Church. Its primary scapegoat is

the Church, which it sees as virulently intolerant (against women, homosexuals, Jews, heretics, indigenous people, other religions). The state seeks to inculcate tolerance—the basis of politic correctness—by isolating the individual. The dependency of the individual “on the state legitimates the conflicting mimetic desires of citizens, which the state uses to construct a system of exchange held together by transcendent nationalistic fervour that supports its own power.”⁹ One of the most important characteristics of the modern nation-state’s secular character is the taboo against intolerance. “Tolerance is a distortion of the virtue of justice” and it “is the minimal requirement to control one’s own desires and lifestyle.”¹⁰ Tolerance does not seek the good and the just but the avoidance of violence. It is an attempt to mediate between envy and rivalry.

This understanding of tolerance and intolerance is a partial response to a position like Buruma’s, who accepted the idea of tolerance as based on renunciation of religious, social, and political persecution. One can agree with Buruma on renunciation of persecution. However, he doesn’t seem to discern the invidious condition of envy and resentment that the state promises to mediate with the imposition of tolerance. The state, whose ultimate sanctions are exclusion and death, thus imposes violence as the arbiter of human life; its implicit claim is to be the savior, saving and protecting its citizens from conflict and violence. It may be liberal, a democratic republic, but its sanctions are violent, for it may declare war when it serves its interests, legalize the killing of unborn children, allow capital punishment, practice secret surveillance if it is seen to be in national security interests, and in general encourage scapegoating in some form or the other for politically incorrect speech. It is implicitly, and sometimes openly, the enemy of most forms of Christianity, which hold that God is the final arbiter of human relations and human destiny.

Henri Beunders agreed with Buruma that since the 1960s a spoiled, materialistic, individualistic “Bohemian” elite had dominated Dutch culture and politics, and these same people harshly criticized the public when symptoms of dissatisfaction and grumbling about cultural changes that affected so many aspects of national life began to erupt. However, he states, “Many people were just longing for new boundaries and were demanding clear answers from the government to the questions and problem that they had to deal with every day.”¹¹ Tolerance does not suffice. One could say, as Hodge implies, that the people of the Netherlands needed to sense a true commitment to justice from their leaders, and however justice is defined it would have to include respect and responsibility for one’s fellow citizens as neighbors.¹²

Justice is not tolerance; it is responsibility for and before the Other. As Joachim Duyndam pointed out in his challenging paper on Girard and Levinas, both thinkers articulate the biblical demand to recognize that humans are chosen for responsibility for the other within a network of interrelations. In the account of the women taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11), Girard's brilliant interpretation of the passage elucidates that "Each accuser holding a stone in his or her hand is holding the first stone. This makes each 'the only one,' unique. . . . All of a sudden you are called to account for your responsibility," and thus "you are singled out."¹³ Jesus himself withdraws from the crowd, the hordes (Heidegger's *Mitsein*), and refuses to participate in the mimetic trap his opponents were laying for him. He stands in for the adulterous woman, who is indeed guilty of adultery—but he offers her forgiveness and new life rather than acquiescing in her condemnation and death. Here there is no conflict between mercy and justice, for Jesus' gracious act of defending her and not joining the persecutors is simultaneously an act of justice. For as the psalmist puts it in proclaiming God's will to save God's people: "Love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss" (Psalms 85:11).

To return to Hodge's presentation, he proposes a Eucharistic political theology as an alternative to the modern democratic republics that conceal their violence and scapegoating under a doctrine of tolerance in the national governing entity that provides security and offers prosperity. With Girard's thought always in the background and drawing explicitly on William Cavanaugh's political theology and ecclesiology, he illustrates a way of life rooted in imitating Christ and living out the reality of the Body of Christ by telling the stories of Timorese martyrs who have acted nonviolently in witnessing to the Christian revelation.¹⁴ The final paragraph of his paper is worthy of quoting in full:

In this paper, I have attempted to show that secularism is intimately tied to the rise of the nation-state. The State bases its power and influence on dividing and isolating its citizens, especially in limiting their faith, and allowing them to individually determine their desires within certain limits. The State guarantees its own order based on an exclusive nationalism. The illusion that the secular nation-state gives a free space for people to determine their own selves is exposed when the State becomes increasingly violent and dictatorial. In these circumstances, the Church's unique nature as a Body founded on the victim Christ becomes a stark contrast and challenge to the State. The Church's Eucharistic witness awakens and fulfils the mimetic nature of the human being who seeks relationship with God and stands alongside those victimised and oppressed by the State.¹⁵

In apparent opposition to any truth claims about the Eucharist or to the belief that Christian witness is a remedial response to cultural conflict and decline, Erik Borgman issued a plea for the affirmation of truth and value in other religions and criticized Girard for his putative claim for the absolute truth of Christianity. The title of his paper, "The Weak Presence of Grace: A Theological Plea for the Return to the Ambivalences of Modernity," reflects his borrowing of Vattimo's "weak ontology" and his own view that a Christian theology should humbly relativize all truth claims. He argued that "Christianity is not a theory claiming to be absolutely true nor a culture propagating unflawed values."¹⁶ Borgman's voice is one that should be taken seriously. However, questions about the accuracy of his position may be raised. In a set of comments published on the postconference website, Simon de Keukelaere refuted Borgman brilliantly: "Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction."¹⁷ The title of his reflections comes from a sentence in G. K. Chesterton's book, *Orthodoxy*, published in 1909. He quotes two sentences that give Chesterton's thought in full: "Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed." Girard does not make a claim that Christianity as a historical tradition is unflawed and that all other religious traditions are devoid of truth. What is essential is its origin in the biblical revelation that was given anthropologically, through human desire and human relations in various circumstances. The central, founding event for the Christian tradition is the self-surrender of Christ, his "rendering up" (from middle French *surrendre*) of himself to the violent scapegoat mechanism so that the love and power of God the Father would be revealed. Christ is the model/mediator of the Christian's life and relations. That means we should doubt ourselves, our doctrines and narrow perspectives, but not the conviction that God has come among us. The truth is there, but the love of God is the reality that is primary, not any claim to absolute truth that any human being completely understands and controls. This is the authentic Christian conviction, that Christ the convict (Gil Bailie), the "convicted one," is worthy of our trust and belief.¹⁸

Gil Bailie summed up the whole point about the Christian tradition in a question at the heart of a postconference letter that was sent to a Dutch newspaper: *How to honor the historic commitment to cultural openness and generosity without eviscerating the religious and moral sources of that very generosity?* It is ironic and instructive that this key sentence was omitted by the newspaper that published the letter.¹⁹

Finally, a few words should be said about the work of the steering committee and all who helped in the organization of the conference. By all accounts, the organization was excellent. Quentin Delval reported that the method of organizing parallel sessions was particularly good. "Small sessions were often more intense than plenary sessions to me, and dialogue way easier with the speaker."²⁰ Moreover, this writer will attest to the quality of the Dutch Society's record-keeping. Thanks to the work of Michael Elias, all of the abstracts and most of the papers have been made and kept available online, both on the COV&R website and the Dutch Society website.²¹ This is a great boon not only to anyone interested in specific papers but obviously also to future historians.

Semiannual Meeting, with AAR/SBL in San Diego

The 2007 meeting of COV&R in conjunction with the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature took place November 17, 2007. Not many attended. This was a chronic problem due to our lack of status with the organizations. Since we were not a "Related Scholarly Organization," our programs were not listed in the regular program schedule. However, Martha Reineke was at work to change this, and our status changed by 2009, as reported in the previous chapter. Reineke urged those few who came to drink lots of coffee, for which we paid \$70 a gallon.

Nikolaus Wandinger read a paper on "'Sacrifice' in Harry Potter from a Girardian Perspective." Some of those present wondered whether the Harry Potter series was worthy of such treatment or whether it was appropriate to bring into play a grand theory like Girard's to interpret such works. Wandinger himself evidently thought it merited consideration for the sake of understanding popular culture. A number of questions were raised according to Britton Johnston's report, including whether "J.K. Rowling manage[s] to transcend primitive sacrifice and achieve something genuinely transcendent, or does Harry's fate in the final volume fall short of such redemption?"²²

Michael Hardin and Brad Jersak led the second part of the program on the recently published anthology they edited, *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*. Seven of the contributors attended the meeting. The title of the volume gives a good sense of the content. Representing a wide range of denominations in the Christian tradition, the contributors are united in their opposition to the atonement doctrine of penal substitution.²³

TO RIVERSIDE AND BEYOND (2008)

2008 was a year when new developments in the work of COV&R and its members began to multiply. In fact, it seems that all of a sudden so much was happening that I wonder whether I can give even a sketch of it all. But in a deeper sense it was not "all of a sudden"; the events in which COV&R and the mimetic theory were caught up grew out of seeds of thought and work planted long before. Yet like the poppies in their riot of color appearing on the Southern California hillsides in spring, the manifestations of engagement with the mimetic theory seemed to be popping up all over.

Mimetic Theory and Neuroscience at UCLA

This conference took place at the University of California at Los Angeles on January 15–16, 2008. It was sponsored by the Center for the Study of Religion at UCLA. Britt Johnston's report in the Bulletin describes the content discussed as "stimulating—even thrilling."²⁴ Scott Garrels made a presentation that included an outline of points of convergence between mimetic theory and mirror neurology. "Mirror neurons" are nerve cells in the brains of humans and some higher primates that become activated not only when the individual performs certain goal-directed actions, but also when they see another individual perform that action. They are the neurological basis of imitation. The structure of the ensuing conversation emerged from his paper: an opposition "between the neuroscientists' ignorance of the social implications of imitation, and the mimetic theorists' ignorance of neuropsychology," and an opposition "between the neuroscientists' desire to embrace mimetic theory as empirical science and Girard's impulse to use the discoveries in neuroscience as rhetorical support for his theory."²⁵ Other contributions included Antonio Damasio on the work of mirror neurons, Marco Jacoboni on the social implications of mimesis, and Jean-Pierre Dupuy on the scientific validity of the mimetic theory, independently of whether it is empirically supported by neuroscience.

Imitatio

Imitatio is an incorporated organization started by Robert Hamerton-Kelly, René Girard, and Peter Thiel for the purpose of extending the mimetic theory in the various fields of the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. Its work is supported by the philanthropic arm of Thiel's enterprises.²⁶ The initial meeting took place Friday, October 26, 2007. This was