

## Preface

AS THOUGH POINTING to the veracity of the claim made by Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* that the circle of knowledge is “mutilated” and in need of reform when theology is dropped from it, there have been several recent claims that in postmodern thinking the category of the theological “has now returned with a vengeance,” and that we are witnessing in several notable contemporary philosophers a “‘turn to religion’ and to monotheism in particular.”<sup>1</sup> Few participants in the contemporary discourse concerning the nature of the human person and the origin and idea of human culture have reasserted the continuing vitality of Christianity more powerfully than René Girard.

Girard’s publications have been primarily in the area of literature, mythology, and anthropology, beginning with a book in 1961 on Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, and Proust, translated into English in 1965 as *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. In 1999, looking back at the course of his career, Girard observed: “Great literature literally led me to Christianity. This itinerary is not original. It still happens every day and has been happening since the beginning of Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> But that

itinerary does not describe the path travelled by the most famous scholars of literature during the rise of literary theory in the 1960s and 1970s, making Girard's academic accomplishments all the more remarkable. He has been actively engaged with many of the most prominent intellectual movements in the humanities from the 1960s through today, but throughout that time he has become increasingly direct and persuasive in his assertion of the truth of biblical revelation in our efforts to understand all areas of human culture and to find salvation from the violence that is deeply ingrained in it. In this engagement, Girard has shown himself to be an important proponent of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

We can trace Girard's engagement with contemporary thinking in the humanities back to his position as one of the coorganizers of an important international conference in Baltimore in 1966 while he was a professor at Johns Hopkins University. That conference, titled "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," marked the academic ascendance of French structuralism and the establishment of the hope that the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure could provide a new basis for the humanities as the interdisciplinary study of all of human culture understood as a structure of signs. Such an approach promised nothing less than a new basis for the production and organization of knowledge in the human sciences, offering a new system of thought on the basis of which the various disciplines in the humanities could become cooperative partners in explaining all of culture as a vast semiotic system. Since the basis for this new understanding of the human sciences resided in the capability of the human person to make and use signs in accord with the recently discovered structuralist principles of sign systems, a new understanding of all claims to truth made by texts and other cultural products throughout cultural history, including religions and religious rituals, could now be pursued.

Jacques Derrida gave a brilliant presentation at this conference in an essay titled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Derrida claims that the new understanding of

all of culture as a semiotic system has introduced a new historical epoch, indicating in a historicist mode that the emergence of this new knowledge of the human person as inevitably caught within the production of semiotic systems that had no ground or foundation outside of the operation of the system itself has inevitably changed the possibilities of human knowledge. Derrida speaks in a prophetic mode at the conclusion of this essay as he ponders the emergence of a radically new cultural epoch now that we have finally come to understand ourselves as in a sense both producers and products of the systems of signs through which all of human culture has always been generated:

Here there is a sort of question, call it historical, of which we are only glimpsing today the conception, the formation, the gestation, the labor. I employ these words, I admit, with a glance toward the business of childbearing—but also with a glance toward those who, in a company from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away in the face of the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the non-species, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.<sup>3</sup>

These words seem deliberately to echo the closing lines of “The Second Coming” by W. B. Yeats: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

I offer this account to indicate through broad strokes the intellectual climate with which Girard was engaged. His study of literature cited above had already pointed in a different and more traditional direction in the search of an understanding of human culture. Girard had seen in writers such as Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, and Proust a disclosure through literary art of certain anthropological truths concerning the imitative nature of human desire, and he understood these truths as functioning in a manner analogous to Dante’s *Inferno* as guides to the hell of modernity:

The more modern the novel becomes, the more you descend down the circles of a hell which can still be defined in theological terms as it is in Dante, but can also now be defined in non-religious terms—in terms of what happens to us when our relations with others are dominated exclusively by our desires and theirs, and their relationships dominated by their desires and ours. Because our desires are always mimetic or imitative . . . they always make us into rivals of our models and then the models of our rivals, thus turning our relations into an inextricable entanglement of identical and antagonistic desires which result in endless frustration.<sup>4</sup>

Girard was following his own path toward an understanding of the origin and nature of human culture through interdisciplinary study that involved literature, mythology, and religion. In his own way, he began to realize that the modern world might be facing some emerging crucial historical moment, but he regarded the humanities as having a responsibility to ground themselves in a deeper anthropological understanding than that offered by an account of the human person as a sign-maker caught up within semiotic systems.

Girard's study of mythology provided a path through which to study the anthropological insight into the mimetic nature of human desire and to expand that insight into an account of the origins and nature of human culture. His studies published in *Violence and the Sacred* in 1972 claimed that the anthropological truth of mimetic desire that he had identified through his study of literature could be seen at work throughout world mythology. He proposed that mythology indicated that human culture and ancient religion came into stable existence when it was discovered that the recurring cycles of rivalry and violence based on the mimetic nature of desire could be allayed temporarily and periodically by placing blame for the sources of conflict upon an individual and then killing that individual as a scapegoat for the good of all. But while structuralism proposed that all mythology, including biblical stories, could be explained as operating in accord with the same set of structural principles that served as the

basis for all human culture as a semiotic system, and while the earlier historical study of comparative mythology had already proposed that the Bible could be reduced to a particular subset of materials derived from the common ancestral sources of all world mythology, Girard, in contrast, in a book published in 1978 proposed that the Bible held a unique position in world culture and history as a source of a newly revealed understanding of human nature and human culture. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard proposed that the Old and New Testament broke into and disrupted the cycles of violence grounded in the anthropological roots of mimetic desire by revealing the innocence of the scapegoat and by offering through Jesus Christ the revelation of a new model for human desire based on love and forgiveness—a model, moreover, that cannot itself be explained by any other element of human culture and that emerges as a fulfillment through the unfolding revelations of the truth of the human person and human culture in the entire sequence of Biblical texts.

In a recent publication, Girard points explicitly to the hope for human beings made available through Christ as a new model for the human person. Understanding Satan as the principle of rivalry against God that is then diffused as the basis for all mimetic rivalry and human conflict, Girard observes: “Both Jesus and Satan prompt imitation. Imitation is the road to our freedom, because we are free to imitate Christ in his incomparable wisdom in a benevolent and obedient way, or, on the contrary, to imitate Satan, meaning to imitate God in a spirit of rivalry.”<sup>5</sup> Such imitation is exemplified throughout all ages of Christian history through saints as imitators of Christ and as models of guidance in our own efforts to model ourselves on Christ.

Girard was able to remain engaged with the structuralist and poststructuralist modes of thought that grappled with a sense of the distinctive character of modernity even while his claims to the unique position of the Bible and Christianity within world history and culture set him apart from and in opposition to most of the

prominent contemporary thinkers who came to dominate the human sciences in recent decades. But his recognition of the essential historical role of Christianity in disrupting the efficacy of the scapegoat mechanism by revealing the innocence of the victim and by offering a new model for the human person through Christ found at least limited resonance in the thinking of Gianni Vattimo, an Italian poststructuralist thinker who has come to recent prominence in some intellectual circles. (Readers of *Logos* were introduced to Vattimo in our Spring 2011 issue through an article by Thomas Guarino titled “The Return of Christianity to Europe? The Postmodern Christianity of Gianni Vattimo.”) Vattimo reports that he was moved to return to Catholicism by reading Girard, even though a number of important differences remain between Girard and Vattimo in their understanding of Christianity, as indicated by Vattimo: “I ought to state that René Girard has helped to inspire my own conversion—although I’m not sure how pleased he would be to find out what he has converted me into! . . . Girard made it possible for me to grasp the historical-progressive essence of Christianity and modernity, the meaning of their eventuation.”<sup>6</sup>

In keeping with his efforts to develop his thinking while remaining engaged with the most widespread tendencies in the contemporary practice of the humanities, Girard’s dialogue with Vattimo points to those elements of poststructuralism that he has found intellectually fruitful and those elements that he rejects, especially the practice in that mode of thought of interpreting human culture as enclosed within a semiotic circle and thereby refusing to grapple with an underlying reality of human history. Girard points to this problem explicitly: “The key term for defining this school could be ‘game.’ Everything is ludic; it’s a linguistic game.”<sup>7</sup> When we recall that a key term in Derrida’s 1966 address in Baltimore was “play,” referring to the structuralist principle of the free play of meaning within semiotic systems, we can see that Girard’s oppositional critique of postmodernism has been developed continuously throughout his career.

Girard does not describe himself as a theologian, meaning that in his writings he does not begin with revelation and then engage on that basis with wider frames of understanding. His work instead provides a configuration of literary studies and the humanities that prepares the way for a recognition of the doctrinal claims of Christian revelation. For instance, he points to the doctrines of the divinity and the virgin birth of Christ as highly plausible hypotheses within the perspective of reason alone as exemplified by his analysis of human culture and history, since the intervention of Christ in human history from outside of the cycle of violence was necessary in order to break that cycle. In a recent book, he has offered a clear account of the nature of his work as a preparation for the reception of divine revelation. Although his words in the introduction to *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* refer to that book, they can be construed as an apt description of his work as a whole as “a defense of our Christian and Judaic tradition, as an *apology* of Christianity rooted in what amounts to a Gospel-inspired breakthrough in the field of social science, not of theology.” He goes on to point to the way his work “vindicates the intellectual power of the Bible and Gospels” and thereby “can only increase our confidence in our religious tradition, which is an essential component of religious faith.”<sup>8</sup>

It would therefore be apt to say that Girard’s thinking operates within the domain of the human sciences in a manner that reopens them to fruitful engagement with theology and therefore serves precisely as an effort to overcome the deformation of modern knowledge that results from the exclusion of theology from its circle. His work constitutes a particular kind of Christian renewal within the intellectual domain.

The first article in this issue of *Logos* looks back over the last forty years or so of spiritual experience within the Catholic Church and argues that the term “baptism in the Spirit” identifies “one of the most widespread and influential of the movements in the Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council” through which a re-

newal of faith through the Holy Spirit can be seen in the contemporary world. **Ralph Martin** in **“A New Pentecost? Catholic Theology and ‘Baptism in the Spirit,’”** defines the key term of his title as “an experience of the Spirit which is often accompanied by a deeper personal encounter with Christ, characterized by a glimpse of his Lordship, an experience of the Father’s love that is personal and deeply liberating, and a new awareness that we are not orphans but that the Holy Spirit is truly present and ready to encourage, convict, guide, and help us understand the things of God.” Martin describes a consistent call from the papacy beginning with Pope John XXIII and including Pope Paul IV, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI to pay attention to the importance of seeking to experience the work of the Spirit as portrayed in the gospel accounts of Pentecost. Martin then looks back over the work of theologians involved in the Catholic charismatic renewal in the years following Vatican II, and identifies three main interpretations of that renewal that have emerged. The first and predominant interpretation of baptism in the Spirit is “a ‘stirring up’ or ‘renewal,’ a ‘releasing’ or ‘actualization’ of the gift of the Spirit given in the sacraments of Christian initiation, primarily of baptism and confirmation,” and he goes on to provide an account of the scriptural and exegetical foundations of this interpretation. A second interpretation, put forward by Fr. Francis Sullivan, SJ, views baptism in the Spirit as “a distinct sending of the Spirit, apart from Christian initiation, to equip the recipient for a special service or for an important step forward in life with Christ.” The third interpretation understands baptism in the Spirit as “an eschatological outpouring for world evangelization in light of the Lord’s return,” and the main proponent of this view, according to Martin’s account, is Fr. Peter Hocken. Martin provides a detailed analysis of the three interpretations put forward, and concludes with the suggestion that the spiritual movement described in the article is a response to the reemergence of an international pagan culture and the modern phenomenon of the “dictatorship of relativism” that Benedict has pointed to as a contemporary cultural danger.

In **“Just War: Catholicism’s Contribution to International Law,”** James Gaffney argues that just war theory originated as a moral doctrine and was then progressively refined and modified by a number of thinkers responding to historical controversies up through the time of the Renaissance and Reformation. At this point, he argues, “just war theory, in essence nearly complete, ceased to be part of specifically Christian intellectual history and became part of the new jurisprudence of international law.” Protestant thinkers played a relatively insignificant role in this development because at the time Protestantism was emerging just war theory was already becoming part of international law. The article gives an account of pre-Christian thinkers such as Aristotle and Cicero who served as authorities on matters of political authority for many early Christian thinkers in the development of just war theory. The contributions of Augustine and Aquinas are examined, and Gaffney argues that as just war theory matured, it departed progressively from Augustine’s point of view. The article traces the controversies that emerged when accounts of incidents of torture, enslavement, and slaughter perpetrated against indigenous peoples in the lands first made known to Europe by Columbus reached Spain, and Gaffney describes the important contributions then made by Spanish scholar Francisco de Vitoria. The article then traces the synthesis of thinking developed within the theological tradition and the emergence of international law, and concludes with reflections on the particular challenges faced in the modern world in dealing with an understanding of what constitutes a just war.

**Christopher M. Graney** in **“A True Demonstration: Bellarmine and the Stars as Evidence Against Earth’s Motion in the Early Seventeenth Century,”** offers a fresh understanding of the Galileo controversy based on an exact account of the nature of the scientific evidence that was available through observations of the stars made by telescope. When Robert Cardinal Bellarmine in 1615 expressed the need for physical evidence to support the claims that we should abandon a geocentric world system for the Copernican heliocentric

theory, the evidence available through the best telescopes of the time in fact continued to support the geocentric theory because they did not produce observations that would indicate that the earth was circling the sun. Graney's account provides a nuanced understanding of an early encounter between theological and scientific thinking and overcomes the strict dichotomies that are dominant in the popular understanding of this encounter.

In "**Joel Chandler Harris, Catholic,**" **Bryan A. Giemza** provides us with an account of the Catholic conversion late in life of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American writer now best known for his Uncle Remus stories. Arguing that Harris needs to be reintroduced to modern readers, Giemza calls him "a retiring man who became an unlikely spokesman for the New South and racial reconciliation," and argues that Harris was in the company of writers such as Mark Twain and George Washington Cable in his views of the racial politics in the American South, although Harris had to express his views subversively and not directly in his public writings. Giemza develops an account of Harris's efforts to change the racial attitudes of his region and points to Harris's conversion to Roman Catholicism as a prominent example of his rejection of the dominant Southern culture. The article recovers the traces of Harris's spiritual journey and points to the strong theological implications in many of his writings.

The call issued by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Spe salvi* is taken up by **Douglas V. Henry** in his examination of hope titled, "**Hope's Promise for Christians in the Not Yet and In Between.**" The article describes the nature of hope as a theological virtue that plays an indispensable role in Christian culture, and examines the ways in which hope corresponds to central aspects of human nature. He then considers the contemporary dangers posed by intellectual pride and by despair and points to the importance of magnanimity and humility as a support for hope especially in the intellectual life. Henry provides an insightful reading of Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer* to provide support for his analysis of the contempo-

rary challenges faced by hope, and concludes with an account of the “critical and constructive engagement with culture” that the revitalization of hope engenders.

**Keith Lemna** in “**Human Ecology, Environmental Ecology, and a Ressourcement Theology: *Caritas in veritate* in the Light of Philip Sherrard’s Theandric Anthropology**” examines the writings of the Greek Orthodox theologian and writer Philip Sherrard and his contributions to an understanding of the importance of attending to our care for the environment in the spirit of Christian charity. According to Lemna, “Sherrard sought to recover a truly spiritual and metaphysical cosmology in the line of the great patristic tradition of Christian thought that elucidates the connection of (to use Benedict’s language) ‘human ecology’ to ‘environmental ecology.’” Considering especially Sherrard’s book *Human Image: World Image*, Lemna elucidates “Sherrard’s Christological and trinitarian participationist metaphysics or “theandric anthropology,” and then goes on to examine Sherrard’s Platonist epistemology. The article brings forward the critique of modernity that emerges from Sherrard’s writings and examines Sherrard’s approach to overcoming the modern ecological crisis: “Sherrard compels us to see, as an essential precondition for the recovery of a sure-footed environmental ecology, that we must heal our human ecology by suffusing it once again with the undiminished sacred wisdom of our religious heritage.”

In the first of a two-part series closely examining St. Thomas More’s work as an English poet, **Patrick F. O’Connell** acknowledges that More’s verse is rightly overshadowed by both his life and by his other literary achievements while then calling attention to the significance of More’s relatively small quantity of English verse. In “**‘Leisure to Make Rhymes’: St. Thomas More as English Poet,**” O’Connor focuses on this segment of More’s writings, numbering fewer than 1,500 lines of verse that survive, and argues that this work “situates More at a pivotal point of transition between the Middle Ages and modernity: while his themes are largely those

of the medieval world in which his roots, particularly his religious roots, were deeply anchored, the influence of such giants of the Italian Renaissance as Petrarch and Pico is also evident.” The account that emerges adds additional dimension to our understanding of this great man. (Part Two will appear in the Fall 2011 issue of *Logos*.)

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Editor

### Notes

1. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), Discourse III, Section 8, 50; “Returned with a Vengeance”: Creston Davis, ed., *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 3; Frederiek Depoortere, “Turn to Religion,” *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 1.
2. René Girard, “Conversion in Christianity and Literature,” *Mimesis & Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 263.
3. Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *The Critical Tradition*, ed. David Richter, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 889.
4. Girard, “Conversion in Literature,” 264.
5. René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origin of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2007), 224.
6. Gianni Vattimo and René Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue* (New York: Columbia University Press), 27.
7. *Ibid.*, 36–37.
8. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (New York: Orbis, 2009), 3.