René Girard and Atonement: A Dialogue

ルネ・ジラールと贖罪：対話

Jeremiah Alberg*  Sherwood Belangia†  Matthew Taylor‡
ジェレマイア・オルバーグ  シャーワッド・ベランジャ  マシュー・テイラー

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Abstract
This three-way dialogue follows a conference and symposium supported by the Institute for the Study of Christian Culture of Kinjo Gakuin University. The dialogue explores the profound impact of Girard’s mimetic theory, especially his concepts of “sacred violence” and “scapegoating,” on both historical and emerging understandings of Christ’s atonement. The authors situate Girard’s “anthropology of the cross” in relation to their own backgrounds and ground-shifting encounters with Girard’s thought, to scripture and theology (including the traditional atonement theories), and to the world at large.

* 国際基督教大学教授
† アウガスタ大学（ジョージア州、アメリカ）特任教授
‡ 金城学院大学文学部英語英文学科教授

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Part I: Personal Histories and General Reflections

Matthew Taylor: The Cross of Christ is central to Christians. It is the center of human history, the center of “salvation history,” the love story of God and humanity. It is central to our identity as Christians and our daily life trying to live out the faith.

We are taught that Christ’s Passion is wrapped up in something called “atonement,” or, as my colleague Matsuto Sowa reminded me, “at-one-ment”:\(^1\) Christ's death reconciles us to God. Most Christians seem to agree about this, but what does it really mean? What exactly is atonement? How is it effected? Why?

We often don't really know what it means, or if we think we do, it doesn't necessarily mean what we thought it did — at least that was my recent experience when I got into this subject. Many atonement theories are “out there,” and often not mutually compatible, to say the least. Moreover, even when we “accept” a particular theory (at least in my case, again speaking from recent experience), on closer inspection it appears somehow thin and pale, considering the magnitude of the subject. This indicates why, among many other reasons, René Girard's contribution is so important.

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\(^1\) Matsuto Sowa made the comment in the discussion following a plenary lecture by Seung Chul Kim, “Things Hidden in Interreligious Dialogue: René Girard and the Self-understanding of Asian Christianity,” during the 10th annual conference of the Generative Anthropology Society and Conference (Kinjo Gakuin University, June 17-19, 2016). Kim’s lecture was the springboard for the follow-up symposium on Girard and atonement (Lectures and Symposium Honoring the Legacy of René Girard, Kinjo Gakuin University, November 5, 2016), and for the present dialogue.
How does any of this resonate with you two? How might your own faith journeys inform your approach to the subject? And, before getting into specifics, how might you broadly characterize Girard’s contribution?

**Sherwood Belangia:** The centrality of the cross is something I really didn’t understand before encountering René Girard. In the usual Reformed Protestant rendering that I grew up with, atonement is a strictly divine transaction — the only real actors are Jesus and His Father. In Calvinism, the human object of the salvific act is not acting but acted upon — election is unconditional, grace is irresistible, etc. Jesus must die on the cross to “pay the price” for our sin, although that never quite made sense to me. Why couldn’t God just forgive without demanding blood? Isn’t that what He demands of us? Try as I might to accept the blood satisfaction story, my doubts about it nagged at me spiritually. My practice when I can’t grasp a doctrinal formulation is to at least ponder the question that gave it birth — in this case: why specifically the cross? I was earnestly seeking for an answer for years, leading up to my eureka moment when I discovered Girard.

On Girard’s account, the crucifixion is an apocalypse, a revelation. It reveals: (1) the innocence of the victims we have slaughtered in the past and will slaughter in the future, (2) our complicity in violence against the innocent, and (3) the love of God in suffering for us so that we might “know what we do” (Luke 23:34).² The revelation demands that we confess, repent and atone for our implication in scapegoating violence. The cross deconstructs the violence that has lain “hidden since the foundation of the world.”³ Our eyes are opened to the fact that the wrathful god is an idol, a mirror of our own violence. Jesus gives us a way to defeat violence without violent means by taking up our own crosses, secure in the

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Father’s life-giving vindication. As I have heard somewhere, the atoning work of Jesus doesn’t change God’s mind about us, but our minds about God. Finally, the apocalypse of the cross injects a growing distrust of scapegoating violence into human history, changing its course radically. The at-one-ment restores the victim to human community, undermining the sacrificial system that requires his rejection. This has consequences that are apocalyptic in the ordinary sense.

I’m afraid that is too sketchy to be helpful and makes pretty large claims without evidence, but the scriptures are replete with such evidence, which I only came to see with the help of Girard and Girardians.

Matthew Taylor: I think that we cannot help being sketchy here, but I hope that we can return a bit later to your summary, which I think is excellent.

I confess I never gave much explicit thought to the specifics of the atonement as such, until it forced itself upon me in recent years as an issue in Girard studies. I was raised in a very secular family, had two “born again” episodes, the last of which stuck, and then gradually converted to Catholicism. In my “born again” phases, my understanding of atonement (rarely if ever did I have that specific term in mind) reflected more or less what one would find in the “Four Spiritual Laws” tracts distributed by Evangelical Protestants: God loves us, sin separates us from God, Jesus died for us, and if we repent, believe in Him, and accept Him into our heart we can be forgiven and have a loving relationship with Him. The conversion to Catholicism entailed adjusting my understanding of atonement (again, without that particular term being much in mind): atonement and conversion work in an ongoing way, rather than once off, and through participation in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

Girard profoundly impacted my understanding of my faith, but it had to do with the meaning of Christianity on the whole, rather than the specific question of atonement.
Jeremiah Alberg: I grew up in a Catholic household and with Catholic education being carried out in the midst of Vatican II. So there was more emphasis on the love of God and his mercy as manifested in Christ. Still, I would say that my childhood understanding of salvation was based on my home life. If you did something wrong and got caught (and there was no question here of God not catching you), you got punished. Jesus was like an older brother who volunteered to take the punishment. It had to be meted out, but it did not matter so much to whom and the punishment had no intrinsic relation to the crime. Once the punishment was done, things were restored or made whole again. All in all, for a childhood faith it was not bad.

But as one gets older the inconsistencies begin to show themselves. In particular this question of why God was so angry and yet so loving and forgiving. They did not seem to go well together. Why punish your Son who was innocent? How does Jesus's suffering heal my wounds? Before studying theology I think my basic take on the situation was acceptance that I had contributed to Jesus's suffering and death through my sins and he had accepted them and let them be forgiven or erased in his death and resurrection. I think what was right about this was the implication of my own involvement in Jesus's suffering. But it was very individualistic and not rooted in any anthropological insights.

For me Girard contributes two related things. 1) He roots the events around the crucifixion in a larger anthropological context of violence and scapegoating. This is a universal way that humans have been forming community and controlling violence and now it is revealed as arbitrary and built on a lie. 2) Girard helps me to see the crucifixion as the climax of a long process of revelation that begins in Genesis. A long process of pruning violence from God, as James Alison puts it.⁴

This story cannot be told if we do not begin with a state in which it appears that
God is very involved in the violence. Thus, those parts of the Old Testament that
seemed so embarrassing and strange, now became valuable and illuminating.

Part II: A Brief Summary of René Girard’s “Anthropology of the Cross”

Matthew Taylor: Originally, our plan was to review the atonement theories
before moving on to Girard, but given the pull of your comments, it seems
appropriate to introduce Girard's “Anthropology of the Cross.” I can only provide
a thumbnail sketch.

According to Girard, we are in a radical and fundamental way constituted by
“mimesis,” roughly, unconscious imitation. We are “intersubjective,” drawing or
“catching” our being from others, imitating their desires; we are not individuals
but “interdividuals.” However, mimesis, or mimetic desire is highly problematic,
because it can and does lead to rivalry and conflict.\(^5\)

The primordial human community was threatened by the outbreak of such
conflict. By “mimetic contagion,” it could spread, through similar mimetic
effects, until it engulfed the whole community. This “mimetic crisis” threatened,
innumerable times, the survival of the community. Girard posits that this crisis
was spontaneously resolved by *scapegoating*. The anger and violence of the
community were suddenly discharged onto an unfortunate individual, who
was blamed for all the trouble at the peak of this crisis. The community then
experienced a sudden peace and unity.\(^6\)

The community could only interpret what had just happened miraculously

\(^5\) Girard’s first and major explication of mimesis was *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, trans.
Yvette Freccero (Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). See also Book III,
“Interindividual Psychology,” in Girard’s *Things Hidden*, 283-393.

\(^6\) See Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
— the contagious, terrifying mimetic conflict, then the sudden peace and unity. The community discovered a reliable way of preserving itself against mimetic violence, and “discovered” religion, both as a mysterious (seemingly preternatural) force for good and evil, and as a ritual system, specifically a sacrificial system. Taboos emerged to prevent mimetic conflict. Ritual evolved to channel and contain it. Myth came into being to tell the story of the community in a heavily redacted form — a whitewashed tale of mob violence that deified the victim, both as troublemaker and as savior.7

Culture and humanity thus came into being through, co-evolved with, the sacred, the sacrificial system which maintained this unity and “peace.” Humanity then moved on into larger, more complex orders of social organization, yet remained deeply and fundamental sacrificial. This is the pagan world, which came to be challenged in an unprecedented way by the Judeo-Christian revelation.

The Hebrew scriptures introduced a “wild card” into the picture. They took the viewpoint of the victim. This utterly novel religious development culminated in Christ.8 The crucifixion, as Jeremiah just observed, revealed the arbitrary violence that structured the social order, and was also the climax of a “long process of pruning violence from God, as James Alison puts it.”9

Christ's Passion, and the testimony about it, fundamentally disrupted, disabled, and disarmed the mechanism of culture. It introduced a great ethical and epistemological shift. We live in a post-sacrificial world. As Sherwood just noted, “the apocalypse of the cross injects a growing distrust of scapegoating violence into human history, changing its course radically.” The Christian revelation also “has consequences that are apocalyptic in the ordinary sense.”10

9 See note 4.
10 Girard, Battling to the End, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2010);
Girard’s “Anthropology of the Cross” presents an entirely new dimension to atonement. This is no doubt the “hottest” theological issue in mimetic theory.\textsuperscript{11} Again, as Sherwood said, echoing what Jeremiah has been observing, the crucifixion reveals “the innocence of the victims,” “our complicity in violence against the innocent,” and “the love of God in suffering for us so that we might ‘know what we do’ (Luke 23:34).”

More, and perhaps more controversially (Sherwood again), “Our eyes are opened to the fact that the wrathful god is an idol, a mirror of our own violence.” Overlooking the unavoidable brevity of the preceding summary, is there anything to add here, or anything to dispute, correct or clarify?

\textbf{Sherwood Belangia:} That summary does justice to the Girardian theory. Perhaps it would be fruitful to return to your earlier plan to outline the various competing atonement theories. Provisionally, it seems that there are three rough types of atonement theologies: (1) Satisfaction theories (e.g. Anselm); (2) Emulation theories (e.g. Abelard); and (3) so-called \textit{Christus Victor} theories (e.g. Greek orthodoxy). Girard’s version seems to have some convergences with the latter two and to sharply call the first into question. To me, the most interesting connection between Girard and the Western theological tradition is with \textit{Christus Victor}. In fact, I think it is a kind of Christus Victor theory. But there is one more important issue to bring in. We didn’t mention the “powers and principalities” in our capsule synopsis of Girardian atonement theory, but it belongs. Girard provides a novel way of understanding the parasitic quasi-beings called \textit{exousiai},

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...archai, dunameis, etc. in the New Testament. Our summary didn’t include any mention of these parasitic “beings” that hold humanity hostage, but Girard would explain them as mimetic phenomena.

Here is a list of the Greek words and some of the important passage dealing with principalities and powers:

- *Exousiai* (authorities/powers), *Archai* (principalities/rulers),
- *Stoicheia* (elemental forces), *Kosmokratores* (powers of the world),
- *Thronoi* (thrones/regents), *Kyriotes* (lords, dominators), *Archontes* (rulers),
- *Dynameis* (powers), *Pneumatika* (spiritual forces), *Daimon* (demon, evil spirit), *Kosmos* (world, system, order, domination-structure), *Aion* (age, world, see Kosmos), *Thanatos* (death).

Selected texts emphasizing the principalities and powers:

- Ephesians 6:10-17, Colossians 1:15:16, Romans 8:38-39, 1 Corinthians 15:22-26, Colossians 2:13b-15: 13b, 1 Peter 3:21b-22 – 21b,

That aspect is important for understanding both *Christus Victor* and Girardian atonement.

**Matthew Taylor:** To understand Satan in Girard’s system is crucial. Satan is the spirit of envy, of invidious comparison which is at the heart of all mimetic rivalry and conflict, *and*, Satan is the spirit of accusation that is at the heart of scapegoating. Satan is the liar, the murderer, the accuser, and the Holy Spirit is literally (as Girard points out in a talk given in 1997), “the lawyer for the defense.”

Girard thinks that when Jesus asks “How can Satan cast out Satan?” (Matt. 12:26) he is not being rhetorical but is describing how Satan establishes a
system that recycles itself.13

Part III: A Brief Review of the Historical Atonement Theories

Matthew Taylor: As Sherwood suggests, it is necessary to present the historical theories of atonement. I would like to follow Sherwood’s three-way scheme but I propose we tackle the theories in rough historical order.

The first atonement theory, worked out in the patristic period, was called the ransom theory.14 This holds that, through the bondage to sin, Satan “owns” us, possesses the rights to us, and holds us under the power of death. Christ offered up himself as a ransom for us.

“Christus Victor” was an elaboration of ransom theory. Christ’s victory over sin and death came especially to be emphasized. Christ, by dying, defeated death itself. Christians are meant to live within the framework of this extraordinary victory.15 Nearly any Christian will assent to some aspects of the ransom and Christus Victor theories, and it is really a question of relative emphasis.

We come now to the atonement theories that are most contested among Christians in general, satisfaction theory and penal substitution theory. Anselm of Canterbury worked out satisfaction theory at the end of the 11th century in Cur Deus Homo (Why the God Man?).16 His purpose was corrective, to address the perceived inadequacy of the ransom theory, which appeared to give Satan “rights” over us that he shouldn't properly have, and seemed not to grant sufficient power to God (for why could not God just take such rights away?).

14 See note 12. Girard’s lecture begins with a useful summary of the ransom theory.
15 For a useful thumbnail summary see Weaver, 14-15.
Anselm argued instead that it was not Satan who is owed ransom, but God who is owed recompense, satisfaction, due to our offense against His holiness, justice, and honor. However, we, finite, weak, and sinful, cannot possibly make amends for our incalculable offense. Christ steps in to offer himself as a perfect sacrifice on our behalf, one that is perfectly pleasing to God.\(^\text{17}\)

Critics of Anselm say that satisfaction theory is too much a product of its time and makes God out to be a thin-skinned, peevish Medieval lord.\(^\text{18}\) Anselm’s defenders say that underneath his analogy (penalty paid for an offense) is a focus on the restored relationship that God desires. God wants it for our sake: He wants for us to be healed from sin, to be restored to the glory in which we were created, and to be able to live in proper communion with Him.\(^\text{19}\)

Satisfaction theory exerted a huge influence on the Protestant reformers, who developed it several centuries later into penal substitution theory. While satisfaction is expiatory, penal substitution is propitiatory. In the reformer’s view, it was not that God needed satisfaction, or reparation, but rather that, because sin offends God’s perfect justice, it demands God's infinite wrath. Jesus steps in to take God’s wrath instead of us, literally “penal substitution.”\(^\text{20}\) This doctrine is the stuff of fiery sermons, and of dramatic conversions of hardened sinners — hallmarks of Evangelical Protestantism.

Satisfaction and penal substitution theories mark some major sectarian divides in Christendom. The Eastern Church rejects both satisfaction and penal

\(^{17}\) See for instance Weaver, 16.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.


\(^{20}\) See for instance Weaver, 16-17.
substitution theories because they appear to mischaracterize God. The Catholic Church has not dogmatically defined the specifics of the atonement and leaves the issue open, though satisfaction theory reflects the predominant habit of thought and religious sensibility. However, the Catholic Church rejects penal substitution theory, because it focuses excessively on propitiation at the expense of other aspects of atonement, because it takes the substitution analogy too literally, and because it has God punishing the innocent on behalf of the guilty, creating logical, moral, and legal difficulties.

For many Protestants, on the other hand, especially in the Reformed traditions, penal substitution is the correct and mandatory doctrine of atonement, though aspects of the other atonement theories might also be accepted in spirit. To complicate matters further, though penal substitution is a distinctively Protestant view, it is by no means the view held by all or even by most Protestants. Penal substitution is probably as much disputed within Protestantism as it is without.

We come finally to what is traditionally called moral influence theory, identified by Sherwood as emulation theory — a wonderfully Girardian formulation. Peter Abelard, very close to Anselm in history, is the theologian most strongly associated with moral influence theory, which he developed.

21 Frederica Mathewes-Green nicely presents the Eastern Orthodox view of atonement, as well as the contrast with the Western churches, in an online lecture, “Orthodoxy and the Atonement” (Theoria, January 18, 2016), Youtube channel, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55Z7S7wn77k (Accessed September 25, 2016).

22 See Weaver, 1-2.


25 Ibid., 21-22.
specifically as a reaction against Anselm and satisfaction theory. The idea is that Christ, through his incarnation, life, example, teaching, service, healing ministry, persecution, martyrdom, death, and resurrection, inspires us to change, to be regenerated, and to transform the world. This is a “subjective” theory of atonement rather than an “objective” one, meaning that it focuses on the effect and experience for believers, and the world at large, rather than a divine transaction (the other atonement theories are “objective” in that sense).

Moral influence theory met opposition (then general acceptance) within the Catholic Church. It was opposed by most of the Protestant reformers. Yet few Christians would argue with the bare summary above, and in some form, moral influence theory has been present from the beginning of Christianity. As with some of the other theories of atonement, it is not a question of it being wrong but a question of relative emphasis.

One argument against an over-emphasis on moral influence might be that, by laying aside the sacrificial element of the cross, it ignores the explicit connection Christ himself made with the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. Another argument might be that the theory does not account for the “moral influence” of Christ on the disciples themselves; far from being morally emboldened by Christ’s martyrdom, they scattered in fear and went into hiding. Something else appears to have “objectively” happened to turn these weak and timid men into the world’s greatest evangelists. Yet, on the other hand, the moral influence that Christ has, and should have, on Christians and on the world, can hardly be over-emphasized, and we Christians too often fall short.

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26 See Weaver, 18.
27 Ibid.
Our survey of atonement theories has not been exhaustive. A number of other theories have been proposed, many of which did not enter the main currents of theology. In addition, those we have covered here are often labelled, described, or grouped differently, and there exist also a number of variations or sub-theories.

**Part IV: René Girard, Girardians, and Atonement**

**Matthew Taylor:** Perhaps we are ready now to return now to René Girard’s contribution to this monumental issue in Christian theology. Going online, I found that “scapegoat theory” (identified with Girard and James Alison) is now listed as a major atonement theory in the top search results! I suppose this both vindicates and complicates our project. Is Girard’s contribution “another major atonement theory”?

Girard, despite his immense impact on theology, was modest on the subject and did not consider himself a theologian. However in his lecture at the American Academy of Religion, Girard gave a very mimetic explication of the ransom theory. This strongly supports Sherwood’s view (also the view of J. Denny Weaver) that the anthropology of the cross really is a ransom (i.e. Christus Victor) theory of atonement.

Yet still, at the end of the same talk, Girard briefly reconciled himself to Anselm, whom he had criticized rather harshly before (for instance in *Things*...
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*Things Hidden*. Girard suggested (again, quite briefly) that there may indeed be a way to think of Christ making a sacrifice on our behalf. Thus, a defense of Anselm is possible within a Girardian framework; at least Girard and more than a few Girardians thought and think so. This might be a fair way to characterize the “Innsbruck school,” meaning the late Fr. Raymund Schwager and his associates, as well as like-minded theologians.

My own view would be that Girard’s anthropology of the cross engages and illuminates all the historical atonement theories. However, penal substitution does not survive this engagement well — perhaps the one thing in Girardian atonement debates that everyone agrees upon. Many Girardians draw the same conclusion about Anselm and satisfaction, and consider it more or less interchangeable with penal substitution. To me they seem quite different; even superficially, it is the difference between a gift offered to repair a broken friendship vs. a beating to appease wrath.

A prominent and iconoclastic voice in the Girardian atonement debate is of course Anthony Bartlett’s. For Bartlett, and others of the same view, notably Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, Girard truly wipes the slate clean, and his

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34 See Girard, *Things Hidden*, 224-236. Girard’s critique of the Epistle to the Hebrews also implied a rejection of Anselm and the “sacrificial” elements of historical doctrine. Girard later softened this critique considerably, something generally attributed to his close association with the theologian Raymund Schwager. See Howles, 13-16.


37 See for instance Jersak in Jersak and Hardin, and Hardin’s “Out of the Fog: New Horizons for Atonement Theory,” also in Jersak and Hardin, 54-76.
anthropology of the cross necessitates an entirely new view of atonement; in this view, the historical atonement theories themselves are compromised by, if not fatally tainted with, sacrificial violence. This goes beyond Girard’s own view, yet any discussion of Girardians and atonement would be remiss not to mention Bartlett in particular.

Finally, we have barely mentioned the enormous contribution of James Alison. In fact, I have felt his influence inflecting your commentary here, both of you, probably more than any other “Girardian” thinker than Girard himself. Alison certainly had a huge impact for me in working out the spiritual implications of Girard’s work.

So, there is a great deal of Girardian scholarship about atonement. None of us has read all of it, but collectively, I think we have read quite a lot. In addition, much of it is very recent. Overall, what I’ve read in Girardian atonement studies indicates that there is not a single consensus emerging about what a “Girardian” theory of atonement might be, but rather quite a number of different approaches, taking many different directions. Perhaps that is to be expected. While I had a number of reactions as I read this scholarship, now I am somewhat in a state of bafflement, not about the immense value of Girard's insights, but about the different ways it can be understood or applied.

**Jeremiah Alberg:** First, I doubt that Girard offers a whole new theory of atonement. Perhaps one will eventually grow out of Mimetic Theory as its

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implications get more and more fleshed out. My own sense of the situation right now is that mimetic theory really does allow us to revise some of our thinking about the human condition, especially in terms of its systemic reliance on violence to control violence and establish peace and how that is being undone by increasing knowledge of the scapegoat mechanism, deeper recognition of sacrificial structures and a concomitant reduction in their effectiveness. The first place to look for mimetic theory’s impact is in the anthropological realm, including the theological anthropological realm, and then allow it to work itself out. We cannot predict what all the reverberations will be.

For me, the first change is an understanding of what we are being saved from. It is not just personal sin. That is huge, and that cannot be overlooked or undervalued since ultimately our goal is to become the individual God intended us to be and that means accepting responsibility for our sins and God’s forgiveness of them. But the work of salvation really is as cosmic as the sin. We begin to see how deep the sin goes if we accept that we interpenetrate each other with our sinfulness, bringing each child into a world of fractured and warped relationships that fracture and warp their humanity. Salvation reaches not just the sin I commit, but also the sin committed against me, the wounds inflicted upon me by the sins of others. This becomes intelligible in a mimetically structured world.

Mimetic theory does help us to get over the image of a God who is somehow standing on his pride and refuses to be reconciled with us until he has been paid what he is owed. There are too many parables in the Gospels that speak directly against this image of God (including those that seems to speak in favor of it), for it to be sustainable anyway, but mimetic theory helps us to see that we do not need that kind of God to understand how human beings could be in a hopeless situation without Christ, that is without existential recourse to something besides the scapegoat mechanism. I don’t think that we should underestimate the poverty
of our imagination to create alternatives to scapegoating. Just on that level, that might be called moral influence theory.

There is a *New Yorker* cartoon that captures the human condition under original sin as I understand it. There is no caption. There is a robot with cobwebs showing between its limbs. It is bent over and its “hand” is clutching its own electrical cord, which indicates that its last act was to have unplugged itself. That is what sin did to us, cut us off from our source of life and love, God. At that point, like the robot, we can no longer help ourselves. Someone has to come along and help us get reconnected.

God sent his Son to reconnect us with himself. We chose to reject the help and kill the Son. But God used this rejection of his son to definitively save us by revealing through it both who we are and who God is. We are murderers and God overcomes our death-dealing ways through the resurrection of his Son that is also forgiveness for killing him. While this is not simply a matter of intellectual understanding, there is a knowing involved here. We know ourselves and God in a new way, in a constantly renewed way that means we are always being called to acknowledge the sin we have committed and accept its forgiveness and answer again the call to love.

**Sherwood Belangia:** One other suggestion for how Girard might contribute to atonement theory is through his understanding of myth and its extension to the biblical notion of “powers and principalities.” Girard concentrates on the myths of primitive religion, but I think those represent a small but powerful subsets of myths. Let me provisionally define a myth as “a reality distorting story with normative implications.” They are “cosmic” in the sense of world-defining. Our political forms are largely mythical in this sense. So are corporations, currency systems, nations, economies, sports leagues, celebrities — the list can go on. All of these are taken for granted “realities” that exist at the intersection of
beliefs, desires, comportments, narratives and symbols. As such they are wildly susceptible to mimetic influences and to sacrificial forms of exclusion and victimization. They shape our psychologies and our value systems. The Calvinist in me would call them “totally depraved” — not in sense that they do nothing good, but in the sense that there is no pure part of them not contaminated with our sinfulness. They literally dominate our lives. When we say “Jesus is Lord” (i.e. Dominus) we are making a counter-claim against such domination. The cross removes the veil from myths, unmasking the lies at the heart of our society. This mechanism has been well-explained in previous emails, so I won’t unpack that here. I only want to introduce what is at stake in that unmasking. It is the end of the “world,” i.e the “kosmos,” i.e the institutions that structure our reality and amplify/justify our sinfulness. This domination by hostile powers is also what we are being saved from, an event that is even now unfolding in time...to the end of the age!

Matthew Taylor: Which is as good a time as any to conclude the present discussion, from which I have profited a great deal! While in so many ways we have barely scratched the surface of the subject matter, your insights have been to me like fine “etchings” that have made the truth of the atonement come to life for me in new and unexpected ways.

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