

René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis. By Scott Cowdell. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2010. Pp. xii + 260. \$34.

Interest in René Girard's mimetic theory continues to grow. This monograph by Cowdell, an Australian theologian and Episcopalian priest, offers a lively and timely contribution to a growing field. More than any other study devoted to Girard, C. incorporates Girard's more recent writings and interviews into a total picture of mimetic theory and brings it into conversation with modern secularism.

The book's introduction defines modern secularism and introduces Girard's take on it. Girard follows earlier and contemporary theorists of the secular—Hans Blumenberg, Max Weber, Marcel Gauchet, and Charles Taylor—in claiming the Christian roots of secularism. Yet his account, according to C., offers far more: "Girard goes deeper, darker, and further back. . . . Girard's version is highly explanatory and predictive" (12). C. shows how Girard's thought allows a more substantial critique of secularism than does the thought of most other theorists.

The book takes a predictable turn over the first three chapters, which cover the three stages of mimetic theory: mimetic desire (chap. 1), the scapegoat mechanism (chap. 2), and the gospel's unveiling of this mechanism (chap. 3). Chapter 1 demonstrates an author in full command; C.'s knowledge of Girard's corpus comes together with his own particular cultural and literary knowledge—C. was already a mature academic before he came to mimetic theory. Not since Gil Bailie's *Violence Unveiled* (1995) has a Girardian theologian offered such a riveting account of mimetic theory as social critique and hermeneutic of human behavior. C., a self-confessed "three-bottle Girardian," does not gloss over or hedge on Girard's theory that the scapegoat mechanism forms the basis of all cultural order and its institutions. He also treats Eric Gans, Girard's most influential and also least doctrinaire student (66–68). After studying with Girard at Johns Hopkins, Gans developed an alternative theory, generative anthropology, which roots human language and culture in a linguistic signification rather than a real, historical scapegoat. C.'s treatment of Gans, while hardly exhaustive, is helpful in that many Girardians either ignore Gans or appropriate his thought uncritically. C.'s nomenclature for generative anthropology, "a kinder, gentler Paleolithic" (66), cleverly summarizes the difference between Gans and Girard.

Chapter 3 discusses the Scriptures, with a tour through Genesis, the Psalms, Job, and the New Testament. C. says little that has not already been said by previous Girardians, but his concision and rhetorical facility result in several points that capture the applicability of Girard's thought to theology: "No Christian priest or minister who catches on will be content with preaching shallow platitudes, a pallid pietism, a conventional moralism, a reactionary conservatism, a stubborn biblical literalism, a demythologizing rationalism, a Jungian spirituality, or a soft-left social gospel" (96). Such statements indicate the clear, direct approach of a writer convinced that the questions Girard raises get to the heart of what makes mimetic theory so exciting for Christian theology.

Chapter 4 treats modern institutions, in particular the market and the nation-state. It ends with a critique of forms of state-sponsored violence: abortion and the

death penalty. Demonstrating how mimetic theory enables a deconstruction of these institutions, C. deftly applies mimetic theory as a social-political critique of modernity. Chapter 5 offers an analysis of international affairs, in particular 9/11 and Islamic terrorism. Here C. unpacks the insights from Girard's last major work, *Battling to the End*, which, since its French publication in 2007, has been largely ignored (by, for instance, Michael Kirwan's otherwise excellent *Girard and Theology* [2009]). The modern narrative that only a nation-state can ensure peace and that religion is best kept private seems to belie the facts of nations going to war with greater frequency and for less convincing reasons. Mimetic theory, along with the recent political theology of William Cavanaugh, exposes the "myth" of religious violence powerfully and convincingly.

C.'s book deserves a place among the pantheon of works that show the importance of mimetic theory for Christian theology. It bears the closest resemblance to the above-mentioned works by Kirwan and Bailie. Other theologians (most notably James Alison, Robert M. Doran, Mark Heim, and Raymund Schwager) have used Girard to advance discussion of a particularly vexing question, and have thus demonstrated how mimetic theory can advance theological discussion of, say, original sin or atonement theory. C.'s book falls more in the former category and does not provide a comprehensive study of secularism or modernity.

There is no doubt, however, that C. has done Girardians a great favor in offering a readable introduction that incorporates the range of Girard's works and commentaries on them. The bibliography alone will help even seasoned Girardians. In addition, it will interest those keen to understand secularism theologically. As the "first generation" of students and scholars of mimetic theory begin to slow down, the emergence of "second generation" Girardians like C. offers tremendous promise for this profoundly fruitful avenue into Christian theology.

Grant Kaplan
Saint Louis University

The Memoirs of Jin Luxian, Volume One: Learning and Relearning, 1916–1982.

Translated from the Chinese by William Hanbury-Tenison. With an Introduction by Anthony E. Clark. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 2012. Pp. xxii + 296. \$25.20.

Jin Luxian, who died last year at the age of 96, was arguably one of the most impressive churchmen in twentieth-century China. He was also one of its most controversial. J. himself witnessed some of the greatest glories of the church in China (more specifically, in Shanghai) as well as one of its most brutal persecutions. In fact, he would become one of the crucial figures who tried to shepherd the church during those unforgiving years.

The great strength of these *Memoirs*—elegantly translated and with a fine introduction—is that they are recounted by J. himself. Perhaps Philip Wickeri is correct: "No other religious leader in China has written in such detail about his own life" (endorsement, back cover).