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A (WELL-HIDDEN) TREASURE, BUT ONLY FOR A FEW

WILLIAMS, J.G. (2012) *Girardians: The Colloquium on Violence and Religion, 1990–2010* (Münster: LIT) 322 pp., ISBN 978-3-643-90281-8, €29.90.

The subtitle of the book might be very attractive for the representatives of several disciplines; not only for philosophers and theologians, but also for sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists. However, be prepared; it is a trap.

I humbly admit, as a sociologist, I have never heard the name of René Girard, let alone the Girardians. But the topic – religion and violence – was as much a bait for the sociologist of religion as it might be for the scholars of other disciplines. What is more, the text on the back flap lured me further into the trap by promising that Girard’s mimetic theory ‘tries to prove itself in interdisciplinary dialogue with the humanities as well as with the social and natural sciences’. The book however is not about this dialogue, although there are hints to the possibilities of interdisciplinarity. Probably the most interesting among these is the potential application of mimetic theory in researches on eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (93).

Williams’ work is on the history of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R), and it is prepared with meticulous care. The structure of the book is logical, and serves the author well in his undertaking of enlisting the events and ideas behind COV&R.

He begins in Chapter 1 with a short description of the ‘predecessors’ of COV&R, the Jesus Seminars and the Bible, Narrative, and American Culture, or BINAC. As Williams concludes, René Girard’s lecture at a BINAC meeting in 1989 led, for all practical purposes, to the death of BINAC, which in turn paved the way to the birth of COV&R (9). The same chapter also summarises briefly the most important works of René Girard. For those who do not have any previous knowledge of mimetic theory, this is probably the most valuable part of the book. Chapter 1 also provides a surprise (which repeats itself at the end of each chapter), namely, the short biographies of COV&R leaders prominent in the time phase discussed in the chapter.

The story of COV&R is presented in the following four chapters. The period between 1990 and 1993 is the time of early developments. The next four years witnessed the upsurge of the organisation, as presented in Chapter 3. The following chapter discusses the stabilisation and a transition of COV&R taking place around the second millennium (1999–2006). The story ‘ends’ in Chapter 5 with the meeting at Notre Dame in 2010, and the book’s conclusion in Chapter 6 points out future possibilities rooted in the diversity of Girardians. Tragically, Williams’ words on the prospect of a dialogue with Islam turned out to be a dreadful prophecy. Agreeing with Girard, he points to ‘a reversion to elements of archaic mentality in some

forms of Islam, especially modern fundamentalist or “Islamist” movements, which cannot tolerate a sphere of social and political existence not controlled by their religion and whose sanctions against those who transgress its boundaries (prohibitions) are brutal’ (244).

The author, however, had another aim apart from presenting the historical developments of COV&R. His final goal was to show ‘how great are both the mimetic theory and the person who brought it to the light of the day and how valuable are both the work and the friendships and collegial relations that the formation of COV&R has produced’ (ix). In that regard, in my opinion, Williams failed. The meticulously described details hide the greatness of the theory, and, for all practical purposes, makes it impossible for the theory to prove itself in interdisciplinarity. That is why perhaps apart from a narrow circle of literary critics and anthropological philosophers, the book will be rather boring for readers.

All in all, if someone is not part of that narrow circle, the *Girardians* is not for ‘beginners’. Not even for advanced students of other disciplines. A quick survey conducted among a small sample of PhD candidate theologians at the Catholic University of Leuven indicated that although some of them had heard about René Girard, they admittedly knew nothing about his work. It is not in their curriculum.

And that is a pity. If someone takes the time and energy to excavate the interesting interdisciplinary implications from the enormous amount of details, one finds very promising possibilities. However, if someone is not a fan of René Girard and his mimetic theory, he or she will not do it. Or at least not on the inspiration of the *Girardians*. It is the history of COV&R, and as such, it might be a treasure for a few insiders. But for others, this treasure remains hidden in this book.