*Chelsea Jordan King**
Distorted Relations: Engaging Mimetic Theory with Feminist Re-Configurations of Sin

In a chapter of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* entitled "Men Become Gods in the Eyes of Each Other", Girard writes, "Every hero of a novel expects his being to be radically changed by the act of possession".[1] Throughout that work, Girard examines five male authors to construct the foundation of his mimetic theory. Not surprisingly, mimetic theory is often described from the male perspective. When asked to talk for a few minutes about so-called "feminist critics", who have argued that mimetic theory caters to men and seems to solely employ male examples, Girard responded with, "I find it strange that women so badly want participation in the male power of archaic societies, for it is precisely their real superiority that women don't appear, for the most part, as the primary agents of violence. If they want now to join the power games of the males, and that is understandable, are they not losing their real moral superiority?"[2] Based on these remarks alone, it is difficult to claim Girard as a feminist.

As for theologian, Girard has never claimed that title. However, his ideas, especially as they have developed over time, are inherently theological. Girard's entire thesis is predicated on the idea that the sacred has been formed out of violence, a violence in which innocent scapegoats have been expelled and sacrificed to the gods. The foundation of human culture itself relies on a founding murder that enabled the human species to survive. While these notions are not necessarily theological per se, Girard makes the ultimate theological move when he claims that the Gospels have revealed this entire process. The Gos-

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[1] R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel; Self and Other in Literary Structure.* trans. by Yvonne Freccero, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1969, p. 53.
[2] R. Girard et al., *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World,* Stanford University Press, Stanford 1987, p. 275.

pels and the wider Biblical witness, unlike other myths from various cultures, reveal the innocence of the victim and reveal the history of scapegoating for what it truly is. Since the publication of *Violence and the Sacred,* theologians have relied upon Girard's work to inform their own theologies.[3]

When it comes to *feminist theologians*, there is very little in terms of engagement. This could be for a variety of reasons – Girard himself never explicitly engaged the work of feminist thinkers, his theory has been charged with being male-centric, and his work has largely focused on the male perspective. Thus far, no one has placed Girard into direct dialogue with feminist theologians on the topic of sin.[4] This is a rather unfortunate omission in Girardian scholarship because there are not only similarities between mimetic theory and feminist understandings of sin, but the voices of these theologians can expand and further develop Girard's mimetic theory. Mimetic theory is constantly developing and changing to accommodate a wider world, a world in which the victims have explicitly been named and seek agency in a broken system. This article will directly engage mimetic theory with feminist re-configurations of sin, providing a way forward in furthering the dialogue between Girard and feminist theologies.

In the first section, I present three main components of Girard's mimetic theory: desire, rivalry, and scapegoating. In the second section, I lay out two feminist and one womanist theologian and their theologies of sin: Rosemary Radford Ruether, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Delores Williams respectively. In the final section, I demonstrate explicitly some similarities between mimetic theory and these understandings of sin. While cast in different language, mimetic theory and feminist theologies offer us an account of human anthropology wherein sin is defined as inherently relational and involves the placing of blame on some marginalized group, which oftentimes consists of women and women of color. I contend that not only is mimetic theory incomplete if it leaves out the voices of these women, but it runs the risk of turning victims of the scapegoating mechanism into an abstraction.

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[3] James Alison's seminal work on original sin, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes,* Crossroad Publishing, New York 1998 directly engages mimetic theory and offers an account of Resurrection that emphasizes Jesus as the Forgiving Victim. Raymund Schwager, SJ, who perhaps had the most influence on Girard throughout his career, has also engaged Girard's mimetic theory with original sin and sacrifice in *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption.* Crossroad Pub. New York 1999.

[4] This is not to say that feminist theologians haven't put Girard into dialogue with feminist thought, but none have focused solely on the theological category of "sin".

Mimetic Theory

Mimetic Desire

Girard first discovered that the great novelists of the 20th century such as Cervantes, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Flaubert and Proust came to an important insight into what Girard calls mimetic desire. In analyzing the novels of these authors, Girard inferred psychological and anthropological insights. Girard saw that the authors themselves went through a kind of conversion where they realized that desire was not autonomous. Girard referred to this as "novelistic genius", where "what is true about Others becomes true about the hero, in fact true about the novelist himself".[5]

To explain this seemingly simple insight further, it is helpful to consider a basic understanding of desire and the self promoted by Romanticism as Girard conceived of it. According to Girard, the Romantic belief is that desire is autonomous and comes from the subject. Now, the contrast between the "Romantic" and the "novelist" could not be starker. While the Romantic sees desire as belonging to him- or herself, and therefore entirely autonomous and linear (proceeding from subject to desired object), the "novelist" recognizes a certain lack of control and autonomy in desire. Concealed beneath the idea of autonomy is the presence of a *mediator* that draws a person into desire.

This mediator can take many forms including something as particular as a person or something as abstract as an idea. The point is that desire is not shaped by the ego but is instead shaped and molded by some other. Thus, desire is not linear, but triangular, and involves a subject, an object, and a mediator or model. Beyond literature and anecdotal evidence, mimetic theory is also confirmed by studies in anthropological behaviorism. According to Matt Cartmill and Kaye Brown, "humans are the only terrestrial mammals that imitate sounds, and the only animal that imitates the things we see".[6] This allows the human being to learn language, dance, create and spread art, and socialize with one other. There is not an innate tendency to internalize values and norms, rather, "cultural homogeneity arises first from imitation".[7] While it may be obvious, because imitation is linked to learning in general, learning can only take place in community. A particular way of learning emerges in community.[8] Situated learning is

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[5] R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, cit., p. 38.
[6] See M. Carmill & K. Brown, *Being Human Means that 'Being Human' Means Whatever We Say it Means*, in "Evolutionary Anthropology", 21, 2012, p. 183.
[7] *Ibid*.
[8] J. Kendal, *Cultural Niche Construction and Human Learning Environments: Investigating Sociocultural Perspectives*, "Biological Theory", 6, 2011, pp. 241–250.

a process where there is no such thing as a "master learner", but instead the focus is on the communal learning that takes place. As Girard also argues, there is nothing in human behavior that "is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation. If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish".[9] Seen in this light, mimetic desire is positive, productive, and indeed necessary for human flourishing.[10]

But mimetic theory doesn't simply shed light on the positive aspects of human nature. Hidden beneath the surface of the mechanism of desire lies a profound and troubling anthropological truth. It is to this second component of mimetic theory that we now turn.

Mimetic Rivalry

While mimetic desire is fundamental to who we are as human beings, it can lead to some disastrous consequences. Consider the fact that human beings desire what others, who are perceived as more prestigious or more valuable, desire. The higher social position of a mediator is responsible for one's desire for a particular object, and in fact infuses the object with value. As Girard argues, "the mediator's prestige is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value. Triangular desire is the desire which transfigures its object".[11] The reason Girard uses the word "illusory" here is because what is actually, subconsciously being desired is not necessarily the *object,* but the mediator him- or herself. And herein lies a fundamental insight of mimetic theory: desire for an object is actually desire for the mediator's *being.* It is always "a desire to be Another".[12] This of course implies a dissatisfaction with oneself; a kind of "insuperable revulsion for one's own substance".[13] If we are actually desiring to be another, we must also be subconsciously unsatisfied with our own lack of being. This insight helps to explain why it is that once a subject acquires the object of so-called desire, the object ceases to satisfy. There is always an insatiability because there is a fundamental poverty of ontology.

This lack of awareness of one's own inherent ontological poverty is the ground upon which rivalry, competition, and eventually violence is built. As stated above, mimetic desire is fundamental to how human beings

[9] R. Girard et al*., op. cit*., p. 7.
[10] R. Adams has done extensive work in unpacking positive mimesis throughout her career. She refers to positive mimesis as "loving mimesis". See *Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text': A Creative Reassessment of Mimetic Desire*, in W. Swartley (a cura di), *Violence Renounced: Ren*é *Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, Pandora Press, Telford, PA 2000, pp. 277-307.
[11] R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel,* cit., p. 17.
[12] Ivi, p. 83.
[13] Ivi, p. 54.

have evolved and has contributed to cultural and social advancements. Yet because the subject is unaware that his or her desire comes from another, and remains focused on the "object", he or she will begin to view the other as a competitor for the object. The closer that the subject is to the mediator, the higher the probability that rivalry will occur. When the model becomes an obstacle, subject and object can become "monstrous doubles" of one another. The only thing that matters now is for the rival to be destroyed. This puts humanity on the brink of destroying itself, for the violence can easily become contagious in nature. What are human beings to do in this scenario? Why haven't they destroyed themselves entirely thus far? This brings us to the third feature of mimetic theory: the selection and expulsion of the scapegoat.

Scapegoating

When the level of animosity increases between two parties, the risk for violence intensifies. This is especially the case in larger groups, where one group becomes the rival of another group. What ultimately saves a group from destroying the other is the selection of an arbitrary scapegoat. The group must believe that another outside person is responsible for the conflict in the first place. When a scapegoat is selected and then destroyed, a certain degree of peace and tranquility washes over those involved.

Understanding the interplay of scapegoating and human survival is not necessarily novel or controversial. But Girard takes this analysis and applies it to the formation of human culture and ancient sacrificial systems and institutions. In *Violence and the Sacred,* Girard begins his turn toward an anthropological analysis, and deduces that if we can see this dynamic at play today, perhaps there is evidence of the scapegoat mechanism in the stories that ancient cultures narrate about themselves, and the foundation of their own cultures. Through this analysis of myths, especially foundation myths[14], Girard takes mimetic theory to an entirely new explanatory level and argues that the human understanding of the sacred was born from the scapegoating mechanism itself.

Sophocles *Oedipus the King* provides perhaps one of the clearest ways in which Girard's theory applies to myth. In the beginning of the story, a plague threatens the City of Thebes. According to the Oracle, the plague

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[14] A "foundation myth" simply refers to those myths that describe the origin of a particular culture or religion. For instance, the "foundation myth" of Rome is the story of Romulus and Remus. It should also be noted that Girard mostly focused on the Greek mythology. However, he did begin to explore other non-western cultures.: see *Sacrifice Breakthroughs in Mimetic Theory*, Michigan University Press 2011, where Girard interprets the Brahmans of Vedic India through mimetic theory.

has been brought upon Thebes because the murderer of its King, King Laius, has not been brought to justice. As Girard points out, the "oracle itself explains matters: it is the infectious presence of a *murderer* that has brought on the disaster".[15] Girard draws his attention back to the plague itself and argues that underneath the surface of the chaos is a social crisis. A plague signifies death, destruction, and chaos (similar to the crisis that unfolds with mimetic rivalry and the scapegoating mechanism). We must notice that there is, from the very beginning, a desire to find the culprit – a reason for why the plague has been unleashed. Rather than confront the idea that the plague is random, those in the myth seek a reason for the plight their city is facing. The hero, Oedipus, is determined to find this murderer and bring him to justice.

Of course, the irony is that Oedipus turns out to be King Laius' murderer without realizing it. One important part of Girard's analysis is that the myth doesn't exonerate Oedipus for this murder, even though Oedipus had no idea it was his own father. In fact, *all of the* blame is placed upon Oedipus for the City's woes even though "everybody shares equal responsibility, because everybody participates in the destruction of cultural order…Each party progresses rapidly in uncovering the truth about the other, without ever recognizing the truth about himself".[16]

Notice that a sinister masking occurs here in this analysis. The blame is placed upon a single individual's shoulders who does not deserve it. As Girard states:

> When a community succeeds in convincing itself that one alone of its number is responsible for the violent mimesis besetting it; when it is able to view this member as the single 'polluted' enemy who is contaminating the rest; and when the citizens are truly unanimous in this conviction – then the belief becomes a reality, for there will no longer exist elsewhere in the community a form of violence to be followed or opposed, which is to say, imitated and propagated.[17]

When everything comes to light, and when Oedipus realizes that *he* was the murderer of his own father long ago, he is driven out of Thebes, and in this driving out, Thebes is saved from the plague. Oedipus curses himself and the myth seems to imply that he deserves his expulsion: he is guilty of murdering his father, and therefore for bringing the plague to Thebes. In other words, the myth itself portrays the scapegoat mechanism, while also retaining the false idea that the scapegoat is guilty: "Oed-

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[15] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1979, p. 76.
[16] Ivi, p. 71
[17] Ivi, p. 82.

ipus is responsible for the ills that have befallen his people. He has be-
come a prime example of the human scapegoat.[18]" The myth concludes
that Oedipus deserves his fate and cannot escape it. He is the cause of the
plague without even realizing it, and his expulsion leads to the solution.

According to Girard, this dynamic conceals the reality that all human
beings possess within themselves violent and murderous tendencies yet
seek to blame others for what is inherent to them. In the move to sepa-
rate "all" versus "one", the "all" becomes blind to its own complicity
and guilt. Knowledge of oneself becomes buried underneath this process
of separation: "the formidable effectiveness of the process derives from
its depriving men of knowledge: knowledge of the violence inherent in
themselves with which they have never come to terms.[19]" It is important
to recognize that behind these myths is not some kind of pure event, or
pure fabrication, but is an account that has been "distorted by the ef-
ficiency of the scapegoat mechanism itself, a mechanism that myth tells
about in all sincerity but that is necessarily transfigured by the tellers,
who are the persecutors".[20]

As mentioned from the outset, Girard himself does not use the language
of "sin" to describe the above dynamic, but theologians have engaged
mimetic theory with their theologies of sin for obvious reasons. Mimetic
theory offers theologians a way of understanding the darker side of hu-
man nature; one might suggest that it is yet another way of conceiving of
original sin. While this engagement has been immensely fruitful, there is
an even more direct connection to be had with feminist understandings of
sin. Feminist theologians have argued that for most of Western Christian-
ity's history, when it comes to understanding sin, there has always been a
scapegoat. The Church Father, Tertullian said it best in the 2nd century:

> And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God
> on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You*
> are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are
> the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom
> the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's
> image, man. On account of *your* desert – that is, death – even the Son of
> God had to die.[21]

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[18] Ivi, p. 77.
[19] Ivi, p. 82.
[20] R. Girard and M. Treguer, *When These Things Begin Conversations with Michel Tregu-er*, Michigan State University Press, Michigan 2014, p. 22.
[21] Translated by S. Thelwall. Book 1, Chapter 1, From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4. Edited by A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Christian Literature Publishing Co., Buffalo, NY 1885. Revised and edited for New Advent by K. Knight. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm.

Feminist theologians have rightfully critiqued this understanding of original sin and have offered accounts that have challenged and enriched traditional teachings of sin. It is to their understandings of sin that I now turn before demonstrating the more direct connections with mimetic theory.

Part Two: Feminist Theologian's Re-Configurations of Sin

Rosemary Radford Ruether

While many feminist theologians distance themselves entirely from notions of sin and original sin, Rosemary Radford Ruether re-configures it. According to her, sin has been understood as a "perversion or corruption of human nature, that is, of one's good or authentic potential self".[22] This corruption implies that there was a capacity *not* to sin – and hence, the entire notion of sin is predicated on human freedom. This notion of freedom sets the human being apart from the rest of the created world – our freedom is our distinct identity. A part of this freedom relies upon the capacity to draw distinctions between what *is,* and what *ought to be.* Sin has been understood as not living up to our capacity to do what ought to be done.

Even though this understanding of sin has dominated the Christian tradition, feminists "feel that the good-evil dichotomy is not one that feminists should accept".[23] The reason they should not accept this dichotomy is because this dialectical thinking stems from a patriarchal framework. It is steeped in binaries: right/wrong, us/them, good/evil. This dualism has damaging consequences for marginalized groups because oftentimes the marginalized groups are seen in opposition to what is deemed good by the majority.

Ruether is clear: "these dualisms of the polarities of human existence scapegoat the 'evil' side as 'female.' Sexism is the underlying social foundation of the good-evil ideology".[24] Now, it is not the case that Ruether dismisses the notion of evil altogether. Feminism insists that patriarchy itself is an evil, so feminist theologians must maintain some sense of sin in their theological reflections. The key for Ruether is that sin stems not from individual freedom but from distorted *relationships.* This distortion oftentimes happens at the group-level; when one group understands itself as superior to another group of people (the classic us vs. them mentality),

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[22] R. Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk,* Beacon Press, Boston 1983, p. 160.
[23] *Ibid*.
[24] *Ibid*.

then this original relationship of mutuality and equality is destroyed and replaced by one of power, manipulation and control. Herein lies a complex interplay of projection and exploitation.

The superior group projects its own insecurities onto the other group, which allows the "us" of the dominant group to then become separate from the inferior "them". An even greater danger emerges here that the inferior group will internalize those projected insecurities. Projection becomes reality. As Ruether describes it, "The element of projection leads to irrationalities that exceed merely the self-interest of the dominant group. Genocidal campaigns, witch-hunts, and pogroms go beyond the self-interest of the powerful into a fantasy realm in which the dominant group imagines that by purging society of the 'other', it can, in some sense, eradicate 'evil.'[25] Oftentimes women are the ones blamed for the woes of the world. Perhaps no myth has captured this sentiment more than the Christian reception of the Genesis myth of the fall, wherein Eve is blamed for the fall of mankind and for original sin.

Feminist theologians like Ruether argue that the real sin here is the process of projection and exploitation. The groups labeled as evil aren't actually evil, but the process of naming those groups as evil and inferior is. As she argues, "The very process of false naming and exploitation constitutes the fundamental distortion and corruption of human relationality. Evil comes about precisely by the distortion of the self-other relationship into the good-evil, superior-inferior dualism".[26] Sin is understood as both the capacity to set up these distorted relations, and the acceptance of them. Importantly, there is no grounded self in Ruether's analysis. She insists that in all of this, the primary "subject" is the identity of the group. This analysis relies upon the group's feeling of insecurity at not actually having a self: "the hostility of the male group ego toward inferiors is also based on the insecurity of lacking a grounded self".[27]

Rita Nakashima Brock

Rita Nakashima Brock's work begins with an acknowledgement of suffering. "We live in a broken-hearted society", she writes. Historically, she argues, Christianity's response to this suffering was to advocate that we fully embrace it and hope in the Resurrection. Many may be suffering here and now, but the Christian message has pressured its followers toward a "passive piety" in which they simply wait for heaven, where every

[25] Ivi, p. 163.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] Ivi, p. 164.

tear will be wiped away. Brock considers this a false hope. The Resurrection is to be experienced here and now and not put off into some distant future. Her goal, in other words, is to finds ways in which suffering can be alleviated now.

Writing from the perspective of her own abuse in childhood, she critiques understandings of sin and salvation that focus on the death of Jesus as some sort of sacrifice that appeases an angry God. At the core of her critique is that these so-called "atonement doctrines" imply the necessity of a savior that perpetuates a "hero" motif, which instills a sense of dependence upon some authority (oftentimes father) figure. We become "dependent upon the perfect father to show us the way to a restored relationship with him and each other".[28] But this father, according to atonement doctrine, is punitive in nature, demanding punishment for sin committed against his honor, specifically the sacrifice of his own beloved son. As she states, the "patriarchal father-god fosters dependence and, in his latent, punitive aspects, haunts many atonement doctrine".[29] Even Trinitarian formulations are a target for Brock – for their connection to doctrines of atonement "stress the sacrifice of the father-god in taking on mortal life, so that he also suffers through the crucifixion"[30] This, for Brock, amounts to abuse.

Brock levels critiques against the idea that the Father has to punish his only Son in order to forgive his other children, and also the idea that the Father sits back and watches as his Son suffers the consequences of sin. In this second version of the atonement doctrine, the Father's refusal to interfere with human freedom somehow allows for the salvation of all through his Son's death on the cross. This then leads to a belief that "the sacrifice of this perfect son is the way to new life with the father of all those who, in their freedom, choose to believe someone else's suffering can atone for our flawed nature".[31] Ultimately, these atonement doctrines that involve the Son on the cross and the Father's allowing for it to take the blame, do not result in a grace that is life-giving, but in a "sense of relief from escaping punishment for one's failings".[32] Her final conclusion is that "such doctrines of salvation reflect by analogy, I believe, images of the neglect of children or, even worse, child abuse, making it acceptable as divine behavior – cosmic child abuse, as it were".[33]

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[28] R. Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* Crossroad, New York 1988, p. 55.
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] Ivi, p. 56.
[33] *Ibid.*

This assessment of the problematic nature of atonement doctrines allows her to move away from the language of sin. Instead of sinfulness, she proposes the language of "broken-heartedness". The key theme of her work, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* develops this insight further. The image of the heart captures the emotional, intellectual, affective, and sensory capacities of human beings. To talk about broken-heartedness, then, is to speak about the brokenness of the entire structure of what it means to be human in relationship to other human beings. The self is constituted by internalized relationships; "the self is the relationship-seeking activity".[34] The possibility of a false self emerges when the relationships become so distorted that it fundamentally leads to a broken-hearted self that is overly reliant on others for its sense of meaning and worthiness. In other words, for Brock, even though the self is a relationship-seeking activity, it can easily fall into the trap of seeking out damaging relationships and placing its entire sense of worthiness on others (oftentimes without being consciously aware).

The process of becoming aware of this dynamic of over-dependence leads toward healing. Those who have hurt the self cannot heal it, and so therefore Brock encourages all to turn inward: "we must take responsibility for recognizing our own damage by following our hearts to the relationships that will empower our self-healing".[35] Paradoxically, we cannot depend on relationships that exist outside of us for our own healing, but must turn inward in order to find that our most authentic "self" is connected to everyone. The value is therefore not placed on us by an Another, but the Other is found within, as is our sense of worthiness and love. As she writes, "to be born so open to the presence of others in the world gives us the enormous, creative capacity to make life whole".[36] This radical openness leaves us vulnerable to being manipulated and overly reliant on the whole for the formation of our selves. We must constantly return to the foundation of the self, which is the love of grace. This is what Brock means by finding one's heart – the core of who we are is a self, divinely given. In order to uncover this true self, we must face the pain that has lead to the creation of the false self.

It is important to underscore that Brock's rejection of the language of sin does not dismiss the reality of suffering and evil. She states, "I take human evil and suffering and their consequences seriously, but I do not believe most doctrines of sin go deep enough to the roots of our abil-

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[34] Ivi, p. 9.
[35] Ivi, p. 16.
[36] Ivi, p.17.

ity to hurt ourselves and each other".[37] It is through the recognition of our "profound interrelatedness" that we can begin the journey toward healing. The goal is not to place blame on our natures as the doctrine of original sin might have it, but rather to recognize our own primordial goodness, and heal our broken relationships through this recognition.

Her theology moves away from thinking of the human being as an isolated subject prone to commit sin against God and moves toward thinking of the human as a being that is always in relationship with others in a community. Importantly, the power that animates, sustains, and enlivens human communities is the "erotic", which involves a constant going out of oneself to the other in mutual love and respect. She states that "erotic power creates and sustains connectedness – intimacy, generosity, and interdependence".[38]

Delores Williams

Contemporaneous to these feminist theologians, Delores Williams and other womanist theologians began to take issue with its predominantly white nature. In her 1985 article "The Color of Feminism" published in *Christianity and Crisis,* Williams argues that Ruether's work is "as exclusive and imperialistic as the Christian patriarchy she opposes".[39] This is because Ruether only gives concern and attention to white, non-poor feminist women. She mentions nothing about classism or racism. If the North American Church is solely focused on sexism, "it remains a diseased, sinful institution registering no concern for poor women, black women, and other women of color".[40] Patriarchy is not the only evil; white supremacy needs to be dealt with.

In *Sisters in the Wilderness,* Williams exegetes the biblical story of Hagar and traces the way in which Hagar's experience serves as an analogy for the experiences of African-American women. Framing Hagar's story as a wilderness experience marked by homelessness, motherhood, and surrogacy, Hagar's life provides a narrative that confirms and validates the experiences of African-American women. Sarah's abuse of Hagar is similar to how white women have been complicit in the violence against African American women, a form of personal and social sin. This participation in violence is seen especially in surrogacy.

Surrogacy moves well beyond simply carrying another's child. Historically, there were two kinds of social-role surrogacies: coerced and

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[37] Ivi, p. 8.
[38] Ivi, p. 37.
[39] D. Williams, *The Color of Feminism*, in "Christianity and Crisis", 45, April 1985, p. 164.
[40] *Ibid.*

voluntary.[41] Coerced belongs to the pre-Civil War period where black women were forced into roles that would normally be filled by others. One example is when black slaves had to provide care for white people's children. As Williams describes it, the "mammy" role was reserved for black slave women to "nurture the entire white family".[42] It also involved them working in positions that would normally be done by men at the time (like repairing roads). A more degrading form of coerced surrogacy was filling the role of the slave master's wife whenever he pleased. While coercive surrogacy is no longer an issue in America, many black women are faced with social pressures that put them into surrogacy roles, what Williams calls "voluntary surrogacy". Because of poverty, many black women must take on roles that many in power simply have the privilege of not doing – farm labor and service industry jobs. Black women today are still substituting their own energies for white men and women. Their own needs and desires have become second to the needs and desires of the ruling class.

This system of oppression is "distinct from that of the Anglo-American woman. The AfroAmerican woman's sexuality, procreative powers, even the capacity to nurture, are appropriated by the white ruling class, providing economic benefits and personal comforts for white men and women. The continual violence, physical and psychological, destroyed the bodies and spirits of black women".[43] Williams describes the history of surrogacy, the violence that has been inflicted upon black women as America's "social sin".[44] This oppression, like we have seen with Brock and Ruether, leads many black women to internalize violence and has led to a sense of unworthiness. This sense of unworthiness and the constant confrontation with this structure of sin leave many black women in a "wilderness experience…where one is exhausted and spent and needs an infusion of faith, a shower of God's grace".[45] Importantly, even black women can participate in this guilt when they "do not challenge the patriarchal and demonarchal systems in society defiling black women's bodies through physical violence, sexual abuse, and exploited labor".[46] Here,

[41] Id.,, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk,* Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1993, p. 54.
[42] Id., *Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption*, in M. Trelstad (a cura di), *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today,* Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis 2006, p. 20.
[43] Id., *Sisters, cit.*, p. 62.
[44] Id., *A Womanist Perspective on Sin*, in E. M. Townes (a cura di), *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering.*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1993, p. 66.
[45] D. Williams, *Way Out Yonder, Longing for Home,* "The Other Side", 32 (March-April 1996), p. 32.
[46] Id., *Sisters,* cit., p. 146.

"sin" is understood not only as an active evil that is committed, but also a passive response to injustice. Liberation for most African-American women involves becoming a "self" in a world that has denied selfhood to them; in Williams words, becoming a "somebody".[47]

Conclusion

The reader may have already noticed some similarities between mimetic theory and the theological reconfigurations of sin thus far. We may categorize some of these similarities into two key understandings: sin is relational and sin involves the exploitation and the projection of guilt onto to another. This twofold understanding of sin is further fleshed out by the feminist and womanist perspectives presented above. It is my contention that mimetic theory is not only compatible with these theologies of sin but *must* take them into account in order to continue developing the theory further and to give it concrete expression today.

Sin is Relational

Perhaps most importantly, all three theologians distance themselves away from notions of sin that have at their center an individual who sins. Thus, for these theologians, sin does not stem from individual freedom. Articulated in their own way, each theologian offers a reflection on human nature that embraces a kind of relational ontology. This is strikingly similar to mimetic theory's greatest insight that the notion of an autonomous self does not really exist; it is a Romantic Lie. Thus, whatever "sin" is, it cannot be the result of one's autonomous freedom, but is instead the result of being thrown into a condition that limits freedom. As mimetic creatures, human beings form themselves in relationship to other selves that limit their freedom.

Ruether's understanding of sin as distorted relationship manifests most acutely in the form of sexism. The dualities between "male" and "female" that have existed in human history are dangerous, for they stem from a patriarchal framework where one group (oftentimes men) is superior to another group. Recall that this difference involves a projection of one group's own insecurities onto another group. Not only is the dichotomy false, but it involves a failure to recognize one's own flaws. This is similar to mimetic theory's insistence that every person has within him-or herself the capacity for violence, but blames others instead of facing this truth.

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[47] Ivi, p. 145.

Ruether's analysis makes this dynamic specific and concrete by solely focusing on how *men* have projected their own insecurities onto women. The rivalries formed between human beings have oftentimes been those between men and women, where women are the ones arbitrarily selected as scapegoats and seen as "rivals". Of course, this recognition of the false dichotomy between "male" and "female" allows room for a relational ontology in which human beings are not constituted by individual "I's", but rather by the group in which they relate to other members.

Similarly, for Brock the self is not constituted as an independent subject in a world that exists separately from itself but is rather the culmination of the relationships that help form it in an ongoing activity. In other words, the self is a verb. This of course implies that sin can only exist as relational. To have a broken-heart is to be a self formed by other wounded selves, which ultimately constructs a "false self". Recall that for Girard, knowledge of oneself is buried underneath the process of separation from other selves. The key to discovering the authentic self-in-relation is to acknowledge this fundamental relationality, to rediscover the capacity for positive mimesis that does not lead to the creation of false selves trapped in mimetic rivalry.

As we've seen above, Williams argues that black women must strive to become "somebodys". At first glance, this insistence might conflict with mimetic theory's claim that there is no autonomous self. However, this "somebody" is not necessarily the same kind of autonomous self that the Romantic Lie denounces. The somebody formed is a somebody in community and someone who bears responsibility for participating in systemic racism. Here is where womanist and feminist theology can offer a helpful corrective to mimetic theory. Mimetic theory has maintained that the notion of an individual self is a lie but does not do enough in terms of re-claiming those marginalized voices who have had their "selves" taken away. One of the risks of mimetic theory is that it can silence those struggling to find their voices on the margins of society precisely because it seeks to erase the idea of autonomous selves. Williams offers us a helpful reminder that mimetic anthropology need not erase identities entirely, it needs to emphasize the relational formation of these identities. For African-American women, who are constantly scapegoated and victimized, it is absolutely crucial that they re-claim their self in relation to other selves in a positive way.

Sin Involves Blaming the Marginalized

As articulated, the scapegoat mechanism is a complex system of blame and victimhood. Oftentimes, the targets of the scapegoat mechanism are marginalized members of society that are already on the fringe. Girard

oftentimes lacks the actual perspective of the victim in his theory. Even though he spells out the innocence of the scapegoat, it is an entirely different thing when the victims are given a voice. Ruether, Williams, and Brock give concrete voice to the victims of the scapegoat mechanism. As we have already seen above, Ruether's understanding of the dynamic of exploitation and projection seems to line up perfectly with the scapegoat mechanism. The very dualities and binaries that Ruether rejects are similar to the kinds of polarities that mimetic theory highlights as being responsible for mimetic rivalry.

Now, the notion of surrogacy as found in William's work can offer some interesting points of comparison with Girard's understanding of the scapegoat mechanism. William's analysis of surrogacy allows mimetic theory to make even more explicit the harmful effects of the scapegoat mechanism. The victim is chosen somewhat arbitrarily according to mimetic theory, but Williams offers a helpful lens with which to examine how the mechanism oftentimes selects those who are on the margins of society, class, and race. The so-called arbitrariness is countered by the presence of systemic racism with which the United States is still coming to terms. The scapegoat mechanism is also inherently social, and nearly everyone has a part to play in it. Williams, too, does not claim that black women are immune from collective guilt. When patriarchal and racist hierarchies are left unchallenged, a certain kind of sin is committed by anyone who does not act.

Finally, Brock's rejection of atonement doctrines that place blame upon the shoulders of Jesus helps us to recognize the dark side of the scapegoat mechanism. The atonement doctrine that she criticizes argues that Jesus takes on the entire sin of the world, and God punishes Jesus in our place, the ultimate scapegoat. This represents the clearest (and arguably most distorted understanding of Christianity) account of the scapegoat mechanism. Mimetic theory, along with Brock's critique of the atonement as a form of cosmic child abuse can condemn this atonement theology as nothing other than the scapegoat mechanism divinely sanctioned.

While it is not necessary to claim Girard as a feminist theologian, it is necessary that scholars put his work into dialogue with feminist and womanist theologians. These theologians are allowing us to hear the voice of the victims of the scapegoating history. Hearing these voices is arguably one of the important features of bringing the two together. Girard's original insights as found in his earlier works such as *Violence and the Sacred* need the explicit and concrete voices put forward by these feminist and womanist theologians. If mimetic theory does not engage these voices on the margins, it runs the risk of covering what it proclaims to reveal – the victims of the scapegoat mechanism.

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