

THE RAVEN FOUNDATION

Exploring the New Paradigm: Girard and the Christianity of the 21st Century

featuring theologians Brian McLaren and James Alison
recorded at the 2013 Colloquium on Violence and Religion
held at the University of Northern Iowa

Suzanne Ross: I'm Suzanne Ross of the Raven Foundation and it's my pleasure to welcome you to this panel discussion with James Alison and Brian McLaren. This is the concluding session of the 2013 conference of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, held this year at the University of Northern Iowa. I'd like to especially welcome those who are joining the conference for this event either in person here at Bengston Auditorium or via live streaming.

The Raven Foundation is partnering with the Colloquium to bring you this session as an expression of our shared mission to explore, criticize, develop and apply René Girard's mimetic theory. While the Colloquium encourages academic research, at the Raven Foundation we explain how mimetic theory transforms not just how we think but how we live. Through our blog articles on current events and trending topics we hope to demonstrate the power of the mimetic insight to illuminate the origin and mechanism of scapegoating violence in order to build a more authentic and sustainable peace. James and Brian will be leading us in a discussion about the incredible power of mimetic theory to accomplish a much sought-after transformation in how we read the Bible and understand the saving power of the cross.

James Alison, Catholic priest, theologian, and author has spent his career working out the implications for Christian doctrine and the Christian life of the mimetic insight into desire and the sacred. Often cited for his work on being Catholic and gay, his approach is honest, truthful and healing. James uses metaphor and imagery to invite us to imagine not only what the flourishing of gay life within the church might look like, but to discover together the shape of church that is emerging in our time. And for James, church is not a particular denomination but any community that is formed not by expelling victims, but by receiving its identity and unity from the presence of the crucified and risen victim in our midst. If that intrigues you, and I hope it does, I'm happy to say that James has created a new video curriculum for small groups around that thought called *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice*. We at Raven have had the honor of serving as James' producer for the project – we have some copies of the books and DVD plus book sets for sale here today.

Brian McLaren – author, speaker, activist, and public theologian – is a former college English teacher and pastor who is widely recognized for the impact he has had on conversations about the paradigm shift in Christianity. In many ways, his 2001 book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, framed the big questions that continue to guide the conversation. In 2005 Time Magazine named him one of the top 25 most influential Evangelicals in America. His influence has continued to be felt both within Evangelical circles and beyond, which is good news for those of us who admire his intellectual honesty and pastoral spirit. In his latest book, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World*, Brian uses mimetic theory to challenge Christian identities that rely on and nurture hostility to other faiths and others in general. Hostility has so infected Christian identity he argues that the cure is to “faithfully reformulate orthodoxy by treating its oppositional, hostile, and

imperial malignancies... Perhaps,” he wonders, “five hundred years after the Great Reformation, we are on the verge of the Great Reformulation.” (156-157) *Why did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha and Mohammed Cross the Road* is available for sale here today as well.

I hope you can see why Raven is honored to sponsor this conversation – James and Brian combine truth-telling with humility, modeling for us how to maintain a generous spirit as we traverse the heated terrain that can surround profound change. Please join me in welcoming James Alison and Brian McLaren.

Brian McLaren: Good evening everyone. I’m going to make a few comments as we begin, just on a personal nature, and then James will do the same. We will have some interaction, but really, the bulk of our time will be in conversation with all of you. My background is from a very conservative Evangelical strain of the Christian faith. I grew up in a little fundamentalist sect called the Plymouth Brethren, which few people have ever heard of, except Garrison Keillor came from the Plymouth Brethren, and if you have read his Lake Wobegon stories about the Sanctified Brethren those were my people. It was not a great fit for me growing up for several reasons. I loved science. This was not a great place for a six-day creationist kind of context for a young kid to grow up loving science. I loved literature, had a very vivid imagination. I became very interested in philosophy in high school, and, worst of all, I liked rock and roll. That was pretty much a death sentence for my future in fundamentalism. I was kind of on my way out of religious commitment entirely but I had a kind of dramatic experience in the Jesus Movement in the 1970s. I went to university graduate school in literature. My plan was to teach college English, and I did my graduate work on Walker Percy. Some of you might be familiar with him, a brilliant Catholic novelist, and while I was in graduate school I was part of a little community of people who started a new congregation.

I had no intention of being a pastor. I was very happy, I felt very lucky to have a job teaching, and after a couple of years, though, I left teaching and became founding pastor of this little interdenominational community. Things were going along alright until the early 1990s when I had a kind of, I would say, a personal spiritual and theological crisis. The inherited forms of Christian faith that I was still working with then were working less and less well for me, and that was intensified by the fact that as a pastor I was working with so many young adults, especially people involved with higher education, students, graduate students, faculty for whom Christian faith was not working at all either, both people were in the faith and on their way out and people who were outside the faith and trying to find a way in. And that really opened for me a period of great struggle and questioning. It’s, I think, hard for anyone who is a deeply committed member of a religious faith, whatever that faith is, to go through a period of doubt. It’s especially hard when you make your living as a proclaimer of that faith to go through those kinds of questions. I was very fortunate to have a congregation that I felt I could be as honest as I needed to be, and I was very, very fortunate that I kind of survived that period.

About 1996 I kind of hit the bottom and was beginning, I had done a lot of deconstructing, and was beginning to reconstruct my faith. That’s when I started writing some books, and a lot of rethinking I was doing was around what would have been in terms of modern and postmodern, talking about the ways that the Christian faith had largely embedded with a modernist kind of enlightenment rational analytical framework. And many of the problems that I and others were having with the Christian faith, there were issues with the faith that were also issues with kind of the modern categorization and modernist approach. Around the turn of the century, I began seeing, though, that that term “postmodern” was really one side of the coin, and the other side of the coin was postcolonial, and as soon as I had to deal with the colonial dimensions of faith, that started me thinking a lot more about issues of violence.

I would hesitate to mention this person's name except that he recently passed away and so I don't think he'd mind me mentioning his name. But a very respected Evangelical leader and scholar. I know there are a lot of almost cartoonish figures in the Evangelical world, but this was a sagely gentleman named Dallas Willard. Some of you may know his name. And Dallas and I became friends, and we were at an event together – in fact, we were kind of in a panel, something like this – and one of the questions to Dallas was, “What parts of our theology do you think we need to rethink as Evangelicals?” And Dallas, without a split second hesitation said, “Doctrine of scripture, doctrine of heaven and hell, and doctrine of atonement.” Well, I was not surprised that he said doctrine of scripture. That was one that I knew we needed to rethink. Doctrine of heaven and hell, I was not surprised he said that. I was very surprised he said doctrine of atonement because I hadn't really thought about that doctrine yet. In Evangelical Christianity atonement is a very central and somewhat complicated formula that is very deeply involved with violence.

And I would say – I forget exactly the year that was, 2000, 2001 – I would say that was really the beginning of me realizing that there was some deep rethinking about violence and its relationship to God and its relationship to central issues of the Christian faith, such as the crucifixion of Christ. That was really the beginning of a rethinking for me. Around that time I started reading a number of books on atonement and violence. Many of you would know Tony Bartlett and eventually I met Michael Harden who is here, and others who kept referring to this fellow René Girard. And so I had mostly encountered Girard, as a lot of people do, through short snippets of his work that were quoted in other people's work, and I think the first time I tried to read one of his works, I think I maybe made 20 or 25 pages into it before putting it aside for something that I found a little more accessible. But eventually I was able to come back and dig in a good bit more deeply, and I was a preacher, still a pastor at the time – I left the pastorate seven years ago – but as a pastor one of the big challenges was, “How do you read different texts from the perspective of mimetic theory? And so this for me was really a place where my reading of Girard impinged upon my pastoral life and forced me to look at texts a lot differently. It forced me to sort of downgrade the value of a lot of my sermons over the years, where I had to say well, now I think I was 100% sincere and pretty much backwards on that text.

A huge help to me, and I'm sure many people in this room, was the work of Paul Nuechterlein and the Girardian Lectionary – what an amazing resource that is – and so, that really was my journey in this. And I started speaking about Girard a bit and talking about Girard, and what has been fascinating to me, speaking as a Protestant, is to see the kind of rapid rise in mimetic stock, if I could say it that way. I'm just quite surprised at the speed of uptake and at the spread of interest in Girard's work. Almost any place where I mention him, a few people will already have been exposed to mimetic theory, but whenever I raise the subject people come and want a reading list. By the way, I'm very glad that James Warren, who is here, that his new book is available as an accessible introduction, and it's especially why I'm so excited about this new resource that Raven Foundation and James have put together. I think this will, along with a lot of other good resources, help that process continue even faster and farther.

One final observation, maybe about the state of things now and where I think things might be going in the Protestant world, and then I'll hand you over to James. You know, in the Protestant world one way to describe Protestantism is that just as monarchies were trying to figure out a way to organize and govern, the people who lived in monarchies were trying to figure out how to organize and govern themselves without a king, and very often the way they did that was by establishing a constitution. I think Protestants tended to dispense with the Pope and some of the hierarchy of the historic church in hopes that the Bible could become the constitution. And in many ways for those of us who were raised Protestant there will not be change in the Protestant attitudes toward violence until Protestants

figure out a good way to deal with violence in the Bible, and especially violence attributed to God. And so for Protestants the work of mimetic theory and the work of people like you all in this room I think is profoundly important because there are not many ways out of the violence in the Bible. I am not aware of any ways out of it that pose any of the promise that mimetic theory does. But I think that dealing with violence in the Bible, and obviously in Christian history is supported by ways that the Bible is read, it works out differently in conservative and liberal sections of Protestantism.

Among conservative Protestants there is a deep need to deal with this issue of atonement. If I can say it this way: The traditional Evangelical penal substitutionary atonement theory that says that God requires violence in order to forgive, this is so deeply embedded and the fear of losing it is so great I could say it like this: If we don't need Jesus to appease an angry God, then why do we need Jesus at all? And if we don't need Jesus to appease an angry God, then the jig is up for Christianity. And this is quite a – I know that's a bit of a reductionist statement – but I think it's very, very deeply rooted in Evangelical circles. But here's what I'll tell you: More and more Evangelicals are realizing the problem of that. I think more since September 11, 2001. I think this realization of lodging violence in the nature of the creator is, people are realizing it's problematic. And because of the rigor of Girard's own work, and added to that, the work of people in this room and James leading among them, I'm very pleased to notice, for example, on prominent Evangelical blogs where people are rethinking things because of mimetic theory.

In more liberal or progressive Protestant settings, because of the whole issue of Biblical criticism, you might say that over the last 150 years more liberal Protestants have been uncomfortable with the Bible. You know, for so many reasons, Darwin, Freud, Marx, a whole lot of reasons they've become uncomfortable with the Bible, seeing it as an anti-science text and anti-sex text and anti-women text, and so on. But unfortunately, what's often happened and is a kind of suppression and marginalization of the Bible and the sense that as you throw more and more of your cargo overboard, there is less and less reason to stay on the ship. And for people in more liberal Protestant settings, the same rigor of mimetic theory is helping them go back and rediscover treasures in the Biblical text that in some of the most horrific passages that they were first to jettison, suddenly now become resources for a very healing message.

My hope as we move forward is that in the coming years there could be a convergence of what I would call progressive or post-Evangelicals, missional, mainline, or Protestants who are not just focused on institutional survival but rediscover some deep sense of mission and substance in their faith, people from the peace church tradition, and the churches of the social justice heritage to gather with maybe what we would call Vatican II Catholics, the kind of people I think that are appreciating James' work. And to me the possibility for a convergence and emergence that provides is, well, let's just say, it needs to happen post haste because the problems we've been dealing with this week, problems of the planet and great threat from human exploitation, the problem of violence that we read about in our headlines every day, and the problem of this growing gap between rich and poor, these are problems that government and business and even civil society as we know it are not able to face without a deep and spiritual motivation. So that's why I think your work in this group is so important, and it's one of the reasons I'm always honored to be anywhere I can near people like you and especially people like James. So let me turn it over to James.

James Alison: When Brian and I met to talk about these issues, we were still in the pontificate of Benedict, and we have now shifted into the pontificate of Francis, for those of us who are Catholics and even for those of us who are not Catholics, who at least get the reference. And really a change of tone at

least that I think only backs up what you're saying and brings out the convergences that were involved, so that's the first point which I'd like to make which is why what I have found really exciting about Girard's thought has been able to offer us.

When I studied my theology with Jesuits 25 years ago, I was wonderfully taught. I think it was part of the world following the Second Vatican Council in which there were kind of two tectonic plates at work which weren't really linked with each other. One was quite traditional and straightforward understanding of Christianity and what the Biblical message was, had to do with Jesus dying and rising again, and this having something to do with sin, but real exploration of what that was really about other than that one must believe it, and then rather more exciting understanding of how the Church must be involved positively in the modern world, documents such as *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, again for those are Catholic and had been involved with that. But there wasn't really, I want to say, an organic link between the basic understanding of Christianity and the social effects which the Church was now insisting were part of the life of the Church, and quite rightly. And that gap meant that it was actually quite easy for people to create a divide between those two and say, "Oh, the people who are into that social stuff, that's like sort of social activism without really being involved in Christianity. If you're being involved in Christianity you wouldn't be so interested in that social stuff." Then we're back to a gap between Christianity of the sacristy and social work out there.

What it seemed to me that Girard was offering was at last a way to solve that deficit which the second Vatican Council had left us with, it was Christianity in search of its own carigma, if I can say that. Which is that at last it is again possible to imagine how what the people behind Vatican were pushing for was in fact really deeply involved in what is absolutely central to the Gospels, and how the basic announcement of the Christian faith does, in fact, give grounds for all the things that the Council Fathers thought it gave ground to which hadn't been sufficiently elaborated at the time. That seemed to me to be a wonderful and a very great challenge because it meant recovering a whole new paradigm of what the announcement of salvation is about, and these things take time. And I think that that's what has been really exciting over the last 25 years for me, has been spending time with René Girard's thought trying to work through how that paradigm shift can take place.

One of the, if you like, problems, that is not a problem of Vatican II but a problem of the wider world within Vatican II took place, as that it was the tail end of a certain sort of enlightenment world in which things were objective out there or subjective in here, but there wasn't any way of accounting for relationship between the two of them that was very clear. And, of course, all announcements of Christianity had more or less fallen into that with the talk about God being a matter of what was out there and what was left for one to do afterwards was to have morals, so that you have got objective accounts of what God and Jesus were about or objective accounts of the church or objective accounts of the infallibility of the Bible, and then a great insistence on what Christianity was really all about which was behaving properly according to a list of rules. What this did, it seemed to me, was to make Christianity boring, apart from anything else. That's what it was because it's an impossible ideal, and basically we're left with morals. And we've all grown up in that world, more or less, and we all know what that feels like in a lot of different ways.

What it seemed to me that René's thought offered us was at last a way out of that world of objective and subjective with facts on the one side and morals on the other, which had completely colored our whole approach to Christian life and in the classic understanding our complete approach to Church authority, presuming the Catholic understanding that Church authority was the bishops and the magisterium was on the side of objective facts and our behavior was on the side of morals, meaning obedience. Again,

comparatively easy to understand paradigm, but completely inadequate to the realities of modern life, as we've all discovered. What Girard's insight, it seemed to me, enabled us to begin to start to explore is in the very basic formulation of his first insight, we desire according to the desire of another. Therefore, the relationship between the objective and subjective alters completely following the individual model with which you are familiar and how we are so often run by what is outside us and how the same issues in our personal life are reflections of and continuations of issues in our social life which are constantly communicating with each other, and therefore need to be dealt with together. How that is absolutely necessary when one is to live a reasonably healthy spiritual psychological life of any sort at all. It seems that the ability which Girard is offering us to enable therefore the treatise on grace basically to be re-understood starting from outside ourselves lying within the imperative nature of the modern world which is that it should start with the self, though us discovering ourselves as selves in the process of being received rather than selves as starting point. The whole postulation that it doesn't start with me seems to be an amazing place in which to begin the rediscovery of the Christian faith. So that's the, if you like, for me the first point of the possibility of a completely new understanding of grace and starting from the other rather than starting from the self. That was Girard's brilliant insight in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and it seemed to me the working out of the theological consequences of that has been endlessly fecund for it.

The second area, which is one which Brian mentioned as being so central, is the question of the atonement. If, in the objective model, Jesus did something like an offstage backroom deal with the Father of some sort in order to pay for sins and then left us with morals, then we really are stuck, as you say, the jig is up. It is probably better to be atheist than it is to be stuck with those gods. But the real question is how might it be possible to imagine Jesus going up to his death as being quite simply an act of generosity from God who knows no violence towards us at all. What is the shape of that self-giving towards us in our lives, and how does the knowledge of that being loved enable us to start becoming self-critical, though starting from someone's love towards us and enabling us to be forgiven is a completely different movement. And it seems to me that part of my challenge as a Catholic was to try to begin to understand how the possibility of us living that reality out of someone coming towards us, giving himself for us, and us being let go from our violence. How that is embedded, can become embedded, in the life of the Church, the practice of the sacraments, all of which begin curiously with very, very little change of dogmatic definition, if any change at all, but a complete change of psychological direction how these are able to be lived by us. Well, that seems to be the second aspect, atonement as part of an embedded process of us receiving someone doing something for us and our being enabled to start living that out for others, which seems to me to be a more sacramental way of understanding this.

The third area which I'd like to mention which is again, and what you said is that this is by no means only thanks to René, but I think it's principally from him, is the possibility of a new hermeneutic of the scriptures and the bringing together and keeping together of the testaments in ways in which they can nestle within each other without some of the violence and hatred that we have seen which has been very often cause of real damage and pain to our Jewish brothers and sisters, and has been simply and completely wrong. One of the wonderful things that I think has happened over the last 20 or 30 years in biblical theology in general has been a rediscovery of how deeply rooted in the Semitic language most of the Greek of the New Testament is, and how unaware a previous generation of interpreters were, of how inclusive the texts of the New Testament are to the Hebrew scriptures, and therefore, how much more there is a self-conscious nestling already there which it seems to me that realizing helps us to recover in ways that René himself never imagined, but he pointed the way for. The possibility that it might become possible to make sense of how Isaiah and John could have been talking about the same

thing and how the same throne vision of God coming towards God's people seen by Isaiah was also seen by John and how these might speak to us, that seems to be one of the amazing things which René's insight has given.

And then, my final point with relation to this, of course, is that I've been doing this for a number of years now, and usually what happens is that people come up and say to me, "James, that's great, that's wonderful. But what has this got to do with the Church in which we actually live, the Church which is so unlike anything that you are describing? You know, you must be high on something, but it's got nothing to do with what I know or can see around me." And I think that that's one of the things where René's insight is even more powerful in that it enables us to work through the scandalous nature of our church's lives, and I mean that in the real sense. I don't mean scandalous in the journalistic sense, although there is plenty of that, but I mean the inner ways in which we have found ourselves tied into repetitive and repulsive things that depend on each other, scandal in the strict Girardian sense, whereby we depend on things and we hate them at the same time, and constantly find ourselves stuck with that. So, what I really found extraordinary is the way in which Girard enables us to understand that there is only one way out of skandalon which is by forgiveness, and how what does it look like to be involved in sticking with something, sticking through the scandal, not being frightened with the scandal, ultimately leaves one to force one to choose sides and be against someone, how to live through the time and the space of the skandalon in the way that forgets and sets us and other people free.

In other words, how, and this is particularly important for Catholics and Protestants, as Brian said, the sacredness of the scripture and the use of scripture as constitution, the constitutional texts as a particular problem, or the Catholic problem tends to be an idolatry of the Church, the precepts of the Church as an objective set of facts which must be held onto against all high water. In all of that we find ourselves locked in idolatry towards our Church leadership whether by adulation or by execration. Adulation or execration are simply the twin sides of the same thing. So the possibility of us learning actively to start to form communities not over against each other through living through our respective skandala seems to be one of the richest things which Girard has offered. And obviously, that's been for me a personal journey because if it weren't for René's insight I wouldn't have been able to live through the gay issue, which as you know has been one of the issues which has riled really all religious groups in the modern world to one extent or another and all certainly of the major monotheistic groups that have been, let's say, in internal rows of one sort of another concerning it. And it has presented itself in different sorts of ways as a skandalon because it brings together questions of belonging, questions of what is sacred, questions of desire, questions of what people hold onto as part of the world that matters to them, the ability to be able to inhabit that space and not be scandalized by it, which seems to me to be the only sane way forward. It seems to me one of the things that's fairly obvious just to judge by demographics.

The world you know through evangelization there would be no basic Christian faith for the younger generation of people if we are not able to give testimony to having been able to overcome that in that way ourselves. This is one of the really wonderful things for me about René's thought is that just quite a simple not particularly important basic application such as that made it possible to be a bearer of the Christian faith and mixed with this rather frightening sacred waters without being completely scandalized and terrified and run away. That's really what I wanted to offer you. It's been an enormous privilege to me in the life of my own Church. One of the things about being a kind of a nonperson in my Church over the last 15 years is that it has given me time to come up with this course, to have the time that I wouldn't have if I was a real person, and that's a huge privilege because hey, how many people get the time, say 15 years, to write a book, and then the wonderful good fortune to find friends like Keith and Suzanne Ross who have gone through the bother of putting together the film so as to make it available for you. So, that's it. Once again, I thank them very much indeed.

Brian McLaren: Can I ask one question, I really want to open it up soon to others, but could you give us some sense of how you think mimetic theory is being spread and accepted, rejected, just what's the response in the broad range of Catholic thought?

James Alison: Well, my sense, I know this always seems slightly surprising, but actually I was very glad because Grant and John, who are here, helped me back this up. Curiously, it's actually very mainstream. The central tenets would be very mainstream, I think, in Catholic understanding. We have had a couple of quite straightforward presentations of René's thought by the papal preacher on Good Friday on a couple of occasions with, I'm afraid, one unfortunate silly little addendum which then got him into trouble with the press if only he hadn't felt the need to make those little added comments. But it's not a problem because the atonement issue hasn't acquired the same sacral status in Catholicism because it's not a formal, it's not a constitutional definition. It would be a Catholic doctrine that Christ died for our sins. That would be a dogma. That would be something that if you didn't believe that you wouldn't really be part of the ordinary Catholic sense. But how that is to be understood has been, since the beginning of the Church, open to a wide variety of interpretations and there isn't, if you like, a constitutional description. You must believe it in this particular way and no other with the result that that element has been less controversial, and I'm ashamed to say it, but I dare say that if I had been straight it would have been much easier to make the whole thing much more mainstream much more quickly. Very friendly readers in the Catholic setup would be perfectly delighted to be much more public about it if it didn't mean having to touch this icky person, but that's the name of the game, so that's just part of the realities of life.

Brian McLaren: I could press this just a bit further because I think from my coming from this very conservative Protestant background, I think I'm remembering a breakfast I had with a Jesuit who had read a couple of my books several years ago and he said to me, "Oh Brian, you think that the religious right is all Protestant." He said, "Some of the meanest religious right people are Catholic," and he then gave me a list of websites, and I didn't know about these people, and it's scary. But you know, when folks here in the U.S. think about some of the big figures who I think embody certain elements of scapegoating in public affairs, very often they are people, you know, I'm thinking of people like Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and others with a Catholic background. And I wonder how you would see this, to them a radically different understanding of what it means to be Catholic and Christian. How would you see that spreading and having an effect on them?

James Alison: Hm. That's a very good question. I don't know where they get their emotion from. But we do hatred. We're pretty good at that. What I've noticed in this country is how polarized these things are, particularly in this country, how much the life of the Church is defined along political lines and I think that's a particularly strong thing in this country, which is not necessarily the same, but it can be. So I think that's just one of the facts of life here, which is that people's theological agendas are very often curiously linked to their party's platform for the next election cycle. And I think in one sense what I hope is that this is a much more grassroots thing. This is how we enable people who really want to build communities not over against each other to do so without paying too much attention to the blowhards from whatever side. One of the things at least that we are used to as Catholics is tuning out blowhards because there are so many of them and many of them have miters, and they can be guaranteed to come and see things that at sometimes are completely farcical.

Brian McLaren: So part of what I hear you saying is that it's almost on the level of liturgical life, the preaching life, and community life, and so on that this alternative vision of, I like how it says it on the

series “Jesus, a Forgiving Victim, An Introduction to Christianity for Adults,” that an adult understanding of the faith would be gradually shifted away from violence and away from this kind of us/them, polarized, hostile identity and that that would change the norm in some way.

James Alison: Oh, I’m glad you said “Introduction to Christianity for Adults,” because as a Brit I want to call it “An Adult Introduction to Christianity,” but I’m told that in America adult in those sectors would mean sort of exotic or (laughter and applause), so that rules out . . .

Brian McLaren: Might have increased sales.

James Alison: That’s what people do who are looking for results to help them.

Brian McLaren: It sounds like part of your vision, and I think this is, I’m going to guess, this is part of what brings together groups like this, is that there is this grassroots shift that happens, you know, that we don’t expect change to come from the top down, and maybe not from the bottom up, but we just expect it to come up in all levels and spread at all levels.

James Alison: Yes, I think one of the things that is a perfect example is an example which you brought out, which is Paul Nuechterlein’s website. I think one of the most attractive things is that the people who are used to hearing the Bible from a different perspective suddenly read one of René’s takes on a Bible passage, and boom, whoa, this actually means something. That’s common experience, and it’s an experience that preachers who are always looking for help for next Sunday, I mean no wonder, something that people can actually pick up on and say, “Whoa, here’s something which you can start to explore.” And I think that this is René’s genius, there is something premodern about his approach with the result that it doesn’t, the kind of conversion which René talks about and which I think we aim for, we’ve experienced ourselves and aimed for, is not a very typical, how would you say, enlightenment conversion experience of the sort before I was bad, now I’m good, or before I had it all wrong, now I have it all right. And that works both ways. You’ve seen people who’ve switched dramatically from having been fundamentalists to being what one might call fundamentalist enlightenment figures, and vice versa. People who’ve gone from being strong advocates of modernity suddenly become very, very fundamentalist in their approach. And it seems to me that one of the geniuses of René is enabling organic move beyond one’s own fundamentalism, always recognizing that most of us start with at least some elements of fundamentalism, but without despising that. I think that is so important, that we have a non-contemptuous approach to our own fundamentalism, and there is something profoundly ecumenical both in your church and in mine.

Brian McLaren: We have mikes here and I think the best thing is if we can have people come to the batter’s box and be on deck.

James Alison: You will need to be heard by those who are watching the webcast.

Sandor Goodhart: Thank both of you for your discussion today. I think we’re, as always in Girardian circles, I have the feeling we’re on to something of fundamental importance. And I see a way that what both of you are saying can be brought together. I refer to Brian’s statement that one of the things that Evangelical Protestantism has to try to work to overcome is the violence attributed to God in the Bible. I want to relate that to what James said about the kind of end of a certain model of thinking, a certain paradigm of thinking, that depends upon an objective world out there and a subjective world in here. It seems to me that to begin to think about a violence attributed to God in the Bible we have really three

things to think about, at least three things to think about. One is violence, one is God, and one is the Bible. And it seems to me what we're talking about is the potential for a new paradigm through René Girard's thinking for all three of those understandings, moving away from what I, in my own work, characterize as a kind of idolatry in the understanding of God and idolatry in the understanding of violence and idolatry in the understanding of the text, to what James and others have talked about as creation in the context of God, as the sacrificial and its relationship to violence in the context of the violence, and a text as a means to the infinite Other, to a religion of adults, to a means of accessing a text as a face and therefore as a relationship, a relationship that can obtain even in the process of reading so that as the Hebrew rabbis would say, "We regard the text as a site of instruction." And it seems to me that's a useful way for a Christian to begin to think about reading. It's a strong understanding of reading, reading as a site of instruction, as a place where the interaction begins. But it would seem to me to depend upon a reformation of very precisely these three modes, a re-understanding of violence in its relationship to the sacrificial, not as something but as the sacrificial gone wrong, as the sacrificial not working, in a world defined by the exposure of the danger of the sacrificial which is often called religion has often called idolatry. And thirdly, as a re-understanding of the text as an access, not as a thing, not as something we can put across the table and say talk about this text and that text, but as a window, as an opening, as an opening precisely to the infinite.

James Alison: Amen.

Brian McLaren: I'll just make one brief comment. I think this is, it's going to be such a huge struggle for Evangelicals for whom, you know, for whom the Bible really is the . . . I was in a discussion with Evangelical theologians some years ago sitting around a table, and a very well-respected Evangelical said, "I would rather lose my Christology than my doctrine of scripture." Now, you understand what that means to him. In a way the greatest revelation of God is not Jesus, it's the Bible. What he meant pragmatically is, "If I lose Jesus but I still have the Bible, I'll get Jesus back." But the assumptions that go behind this are so invisible to so many sincere, good-hearted people, largely because first, Protestants were fighting with Catholics, Catholics were their rival, and then conservatives and liberal Protestants were fighting each other. And you know, when you're in the middle of a fight it becomes very hard to become self-critical about your own presuppositions because you're always in a fight, you know. So, this to me is where, when people can demonstrate an engagement with a biblical text that is not dismissive on the one hand and kind of naïve and presumptive on the other, that actually generates a challenging and inspiring and necessary ethic, and generates humility rather than arrogance, and generates some kind of convergence rather than polarization. Just demonstrating the use of that I think has enormous moral . . .

James Alison: To back up on something which you and I have long talked about, Sandy, my experience is that there is a hunger for Bible readings of the sort that René offers, and people are relieved. The principal reaction is relief. "Oh, so there was something really true going on here after all." In other words, they say there is a way of taking the Bible seriously without it being terrifying. And I think that that's one of the keys. The chapters of the course, the essays of the course in which I basically look at the scriptures, I call "Who's afraid of the big bad book?" because so many people have been afraid to read the Bible for exactly the reason you describe. Either it means far too much or it means far too little, but it's not been a site from which the voice of the Almighty has been able to speak through, and that's what I think that René enables us to recover.

Britt Johnston: I have to confess to being scandalized by secularity. It seems that secularity has the moral and the intellectual high ground. Many people view the problem, "You're better off without

religion because then you don't get into all these fights, and somehow it just makes more sense." So what I always want to do is, the temptation for me with Girard's theory is to go after secularity and deconstruct it and show how, you know, how rotten and violent it really is, you know, so people can see how much better Christianity is. And so, I would like you to affirm me in that enterprise or (laughter).

Brian McLaren: One of the most honest questions ever asked.

Britt Johnston: Or teach me how not to be scandalized. Thank you.

Brian McLaren: Well, I'll offer a comment. What I said about liberals and conservatives and Protestants and Catholics probably could be true about people of faith and seculars and the religious. That when we're in a fight with each other we're probably guaranteed that neither side is being properly self-critical. And one of the, to me, most powerful insights from René Girard is that we all have this violence in us, and we all have this tendency toward rivalry in us. It's at work in all of us. And when we reach this, some awareness of the power of imitative desire and rivalry and violence and scapegoating to keep us all afloat individually, economically, politically, religiously, socially, ecologically, when we realize how pervasive this is, to me there is this profound humbling that occurs. It certainly occurs among the religious, but I think it occurs among secular people too because it's not as if it goes away when you get rid of the religion. We still have this deep problem we're all struggling with. You know, there was an interesting meeting, and there's a lot we can say pro and con about this meeting, but back in the 90s many of you might remember hearing that Carl Sagan and I believe E. O. Wilson, and some others, from a secular scientific world, called a meeting with religious leaders about the environment. I forget what year it was but it was in the 90s. And they basically gathered religious leaders and said something like this: Listen, we're scientists and we know that the climate is on the verge of going over the edge. We know we're facing multifaceted ecological crises, and we scientists can bring the data to the table to say that we've really got a problem, but we don't have much specialty in changing people's behavior. That's your job. That's what you're supposed to know something about. So, for the sake of saving the planet and saving humanity could we stop fighting on each other long enough to figure out how to help people change their behavior? And that tone, it seems to me, might be a way for us to come together on this. The religious people see very clearly the arrogance of secularists talk down at them and make them feel insulted and inferiors of the brain. But, guess what? The secular people are sometimes flipping through channels and they see religious people saying things about them too that are equally insulting and demeaning and dehumanizing, and so it seems to me maybe part of a conversation like this is that we actually find some common ground and say, "Hey, here's a theory that both of us can get where we are coming from that might help us deal constructively with our common problems."

James Alison: I think that you've placed the problem in exactly the right place. David Dawson, who just left, in a brilliant book that he just wrote. I think he ends the book on the same point. Once the scapegoat mechanism has become a secular, an ordinary secular tool, as it has, one of the questions with which he ends the book is there any place for anything other than the secular. For me that really is a challenge around the word church. Is it possible to navigate through violence which is present at least as much in secular as in religious circles, in a way that is at all safe and affirming and enabling other people to live in their world. If there isn't, then church is simply a pretense, a façade. If it is, then it's only going to be by us working through the secular and religious scandals at the same time, being able to navigate those very difficult to serve ways. It's only if we do that that there will be a Christianity and a form of, no doubt, difficult to recognize religious living in the future. I think that I have faced that question. You should be scandalized by what you're scandalized by. The question is, "Are we going to

be able to navigate it?” For me at least that is also the key interfaith question when having a discussion with people of other faiths, “What is your remedy for navigation? What’s the shape of your surfboard?” Does that make sense? Because how we survive that question is absolutely key to how we cope with violence and humanity in the modern world.

Speaker: I’m particularly interested in the idolatry of the church and of its symbols within the church. I get violent thoughts about that, and I’m wondering if I should scapegoat that idolatry or whether you have some better ideas about some processes we can use to get beyond that.

Brian McLaren: Let me make a brief comment on that and say something about how I think Girardian theory helps a great deal on this. But I had, this is when I was still, when my Evangelical credentials were still a lot better than they are now, and I was speaking at an Evangelical conference in Colorado somewhere, and I wish I could remember where because I’d like to go back and get a picture. But there was a church right next door to a synagogue and they shared driveways right next to each other, and in the little bit of grass in between the two driveways on the church property they erected a huge cross so that anyone driving into the synagogue had to go basically under the cross. And I just remember driving in that driveway thinking, “This is not Christian, you know, to force Jews to have to drive over a cross to get into their synagogue.” I remember, you know, something in me said this just doesn’t seem very Christian. This doesn’t seem very right. So at that moment the cross became a symbol, I hope unintentional, but probably very highly noticed by the members of that synagogue, the cross became a symbol that we call the shots around here and we want you to feel our domination, and we want you to feel that you are on our turf. You know, that kind of thing. So if that’s what you mean by symbols that end up having a certain violence to them, and when you mention the virgin birth, you know, the whole standard understanding that this is kind of an anti-sex, anti-woman, in some ways anti-human way of responding, but here is where the understanding that if the cross was originally a symbol of violence and the ability of Romans to unite people in fear and disgust over naked, dehumanized rebels, that that symbol gets overturned by the early followers of Jesus, and they in a sense make a parody of the Roman symbol by then letting it become a symbol of peace and forgiveness. And then you think could the virgin birth be understood as the statement that the violent patriarchal systems of men who run the world and send their children off to die for their comfort, if that whole system was being bypassed, whether you take it literally or figuratively, if that whole system is being bypassed, suddenly the story of the virgin birth and cross alike are these profoundly anti-violent symbols, and rather than rejecting them or minimizing them or letting them be owned by forces of violence, I want to expose the abuse of those symbols and rediscover their truly subversive and peacemaking quality. And so far, I mean, I keep, I’m sure there is something maybe that you can’t do that with, but so far I haven’t found any. So far I keep finding the very symbols and religious artifacts, if you will, that are so often used for violence can be powerfully repurposed in peace.

James Alison: Anything to do with idolatry is always to do with a pattern of desire and not an object. It can usually be reinterpreted, one way or another. A little example you mentioned the Virgin Mary and I’m an Englishman. I have a queen. The difference between England and America, only one queen. And I have a queen. I’ve heard preachers in my own pew rail against the Virgin Mary, the cause of the Virgin Mary, because she is the queen of heaven. The same people would be absolutely shocked if you were, it seems to me that it’s greatly preferable to have holding very high veneration for the peasant girl from Nazareth who was the mother of our Lord than it is to venerate a very rich Anglo-German lady of public fame. I’m not opposed, I’m rather fond of Elizabeth, particularly in her now dotage, but it seems to me that, as it were, people who were against one sort of idolatry very quickly can fall into others. The

important thing is to remember the patterns of desire relating to objects. That's just my personal queen on queens. There we are.

Ann Astell: I also want to thank you for what you shared with us thus far. I've just been listening very attentively. I have a question about conversion. René Girard has talked about his own personal conversion, and I have also heard James speak rather elusively, you know, about experiencing a kind of conversion when he encountered the writings of René Girard. And you, Brian, have alluded to a crisis and a conversion. So, I was wondering if you could share a little bit more about how Girard's theory, either illumines a conversion experience that you have personally had or if you want to share another person's conversion story, or either illumines it or in some sense is entailed in the conversion itself.

James Alison: For me, personally, I think a huge, there was a period when I was living in Bolivia in the 1990s, the early 1990s in Chile, when I think that the impact of René's thought was hitting me in ways more than I had wanted it to, as it were. And how to get off the victim trip, is how I describe it. It's so easy to cast oneself as a heroic victim and a martyr. It is such a strong contagion, we do it in a variety of ways. When discovering myself doing that and seeing how completely phony it was, here was something that seemed, that it was René's understanding that said ah, this is all about not only just not victimizing people, but getting out of the whole world in which victimhood has meaning. And that was a major loss of identity and the beginnings of the possibility of new identity but nowhere near advancing much. But that was a key thing. So becoming aware of my own involvement in victim narrative and discovering how fake I was and it was, and how what we are being offered, and this seems to me to be part of what philosophy is about, isn't it? The whole victim trip, nonsense, get it behind you. It doesn't matter whether you're innocent or guilty, or whether you're good or you're bad. Certainly one thing you must avoid doing is becoming holy in your own eyes by being canonized by being a victim, which is a great temptation. Even if you are undergoing persecution, which you can normally arrange for yourself to make yourself feel holy, which I was pretty good at that. So being let off the victim trip, if you like. Does that begin to answer?

Brian McLaren: That's a really interesting question. I'll tell you what comes to mind is a bit of a general statement. It does have a very personal dimension, but I'm thinking of the title of James' book *The Joy of Being Wrong*. We hear so much about conversion in a lot religious settings, especially the one I came from. Conversion is going from being wrong to being right. But my experience with Girard, and really, I'd have to say this has been my experience with the Gospels and the New Testament, is a conversion from being right to being wrong, in the sense that instead of having this awareness, "Now I get it," it's "I thought I got it, and now I realize I didn't get it at all and what's going to be the next way that I find out I'm confused." And it's a different kind of discovery process, you know, and there is something about that that is liberating in a very different way. It's a lot of pressure having to be right, and there is a certain liberation, and I really think this is what's inherent in that old word repentance, which means rethinking. So to enter a life of repentance means this willingness to rethink, oh that too, oh that too, oh that too. You know, I'd have to say as a, you know, a white, straight, middle class male, you know, so much privilege came my way that I was completely unaware of, and I was socialized in a world when I would then compete with other white, straight, middle class males so that it's just a wonderful system to keep white, straight, middle class males from having much reflection on ways they could possibly be wrong. And, you know, this is one of those things, maybe you're not ready to handle this until you turn 40 or something, I don't know, but my goodness sakes, I feel this so much now. You know, the older I get how many winces I feel about, "I can't believe I did that, I can't believe I said that." And, you know, when you're a pastor a lot of those are things you did from the pulpit. Oh, God, have mercy! Anyway, that's been a big part of my experience.

Miguel: Pop culture images. It seems to me a lot of Protestant and Catholic problems have been fighting over words. Catholics use documents and dogmas, formulas like that. Protestants fight over words, versions of the Bible verses. So where do images come in? Maybe that's toward the future. Could you help us think futuristically in terms of maybe there's a way to understand conversion, but so much of pop culture mimetically I think is influential for youth and everybody. One thinks of the dent of violence through Superman movies or Superwoman movies, and that plays on the unconscious and the soul, the feelings. So what would be your thoughts and your words about mimetic theory, popular culture, and words versus images?

Brian McLaren: I'll just start by saying I don't know what your plans are for this colloquium in the future, but wouldn't a film be a tremendous area to focus on at some point, if you haven't already. I know Raven Foundation is interested in this, and I have a number of friends, we stay up late at night talking about this whenever we're together, about trying to pull together some script writer and film directors to help them become more conscious of the ways that they use violence in film, and I think an awful lot of work can be done there. Probably film and television are two of our main ways of either reinforcing patterns of violence or challenging patterns of violence in our world and culture today. We've got a lot of work to do there, so I think your instinct is very wise to say words are important, but let's see how this gets translated onto the street. My goodness, if you're a big film buff you just start thinking of films. I remember the first time I felt this was before I had really been exposed to mimetic theory at all, but I remember I saw the movie "Firewall." Has anybody seen the Harrison Ford film "Firewall?" It was a terrible film, but I remember walking out of there thinking, "This is not only a terrible film, this is an evil film, because this is an evil film that's about rich white people whose wealth is interfered with by people with accents from other countries, and any level of violence is legitimate to help rich white people create a firewall around their wealth." And I walked out of there thinking, "This is the kind of film that gets a lot of people have bombs dropped on them because of films like this embedding and forming the psyche of human beings." Oh, my goodness. So, you know, you think about the power of violence in films like that. But then you think of other films that intriguingly pull the rug out from under it. If you think of that Clint Eastwood film "Grand Torino," you know, you think of a film like "Grand Torino" where, you know, and especially just knowing Clint Eastwood and his history and thinking of that film . . . I, I . . . So much we could say about this, but it's a great issue to raise. Okay, could I say also, I lived in Washington, D.C. for most of my adult life, and I had this dream maybe there is some wealthy person here listening who would like to help us. But wouldn't it be great in Washington, D.C. to have a monument to the victims of our wars. You see how many monuments there are, visual images of generals who led us in war, and even the soldiers, and when I'm in D.C. I often lead people on a tour of war memorials, and it's an absolutely stunning thing if you're ever there to just observe the war memorials that you can do in a half a day or two-thirds of a day, walks centering on the Lincoln Memorial and you end up at FDR Memorial and MLK Memorial. But we just do this tour and you see, you not only think about the war but you think about when the monument was built and what the monument says and our attitude toward it. And, oh my goodness, you can do some theology in front of those memorials. But you think, "What would be the semiotics of having a monument to the victims of our wars?"

James Alison: I'm often tempted by that. In the center of London there is a place called Trafalgar Square where Admiral Nelson is on his column and there are four plinths at the corners and on three of them 19th century generals that had great fame at the time but no one can particularly remember who they are now, and a fourth plinth which has been empty for a very long time, and they keep on coming up with competitions to put new things on it. And it seems to me that the person should be Gandhi. If

you're going to have these generals then you should have the person who managed to undo the British Empire on the plinth in the square and that would be an interesting visual image. I have a very, I'm a very infantile film watcher, so I'm not able to, I think "Ratatouille" was wonderful. I thought it was a really, really brilliant film precisely because someone from the place of shame was producing the banquet. It was one of the most wonderful films and most completely in line, I think, with what we're about here that I've seen for a very long time. If it gets a bit more grownup than that, it's a beyond me.

Speaker: Thank you very much for your comments. I have a good friend who has worked in the area of the American criminal justice system and mass incarceration, and through her work she has really opened me to think about that as being, at least in this country, one of the spaces that we most scapegoat, and have systems of false righteousness by which we know ourselves to be good. And it makes me think a lot about the language of safety and security and that these are words I think in our country that often become disrupters in our own self-reflective ability, our own ability to know our own complicity in any kind of violence as these words of safety and security whether it's with regard to immigration or justice system, but these are words that, we say, yes, we should be self-critical, but when it comes to safety now it's okay to have blinders about whether we're involved or not involved and that's precisely, but to not ask any question of our own involvement is precisely what contributes to a lack of safety. And so, I'm wondering where this language of safety and security in the ways it disrupts our discourse on the political scene, religiously, and it seems to be a barrier that we have a hard time talking around. If my safety is threatened then nothing else matters anymore, and I think that James, a lot of your work regards death and fear of death, how we're unaware that triggers so quickly that this language of safety triggers that, and I think that your work on our relationship to death is really crucial in helping us to overcome.

James Alison: There was a very interesting book a few years back by Martha Nussbaum called *The Fragility of Goodness*. I don't know if some of you remember it. It was actually something very close to what Whitney was talking about with his key presentation here. How dangerous our notions of goodness are. What it might look like to be so able to be non-innocent enough to be able to look at just how dangerous our notions of goodness are. I think you're absolutely right. We're talking about things that are straight across the religious and the secular sphere with no, there is a seamless link between the dangerousness of the good in all that. Because it is much more difficult to create, to be part of, to find yourself in, than it seems. It's very difficult to be nonreactive and creative and to start imagining what another way of doing things might be. Very difficult indeed. And I'm afraid that, as you say, our first reaction is, "Okay, I'll get around to that eventually, but for now..." There's always the "for now."

Brian McLaren: Your comment also strikes me that it highlights the power of demagoguery, so if the way to build an identity is through hostility toward the other, then the way to lead within that identity is by stirring up fear about the danger of the other, and then presenting yourself as the one who will keep us safe from the other. And what a great racket, especially if you can exaggerate the danger of the other, then you've got a pretty good product to protect people from the danger that you know isn't so great. And when, if you can keep people afraid of the other, they won't be afraid of you and all the power that you want to amass. The power of demagoguery in politics and religion and economics as well, it's really, really staggering. Staggering in our debates about sexuality. I mean, it is just amazing that people don't fall out of their pews, not in a Pentecostal fervor, but in laughter, where people blame gay people for marriage problems in the United States, the rise in divorce rates. I mean, you just see how silly that is. People should be falling off their pews laughing. But it works, and so, this is extremely, it really is worth your raising that issue. But then we have the problem of discerning what should we actually be afraid of, you know. What are the real dangers? And that is such an interesting question that

I think we're struggling with right now. It's in our headlines right now. Should we be afraid of terrorists, or should we be afraid of the attempts to protect us from terrorists? Or should we be afraid of both? So you have that whole fear-based thing. But then, to me, and this to me is the place where we all wish that our faith communities would be more active, and that is to say let's identify the dangers and now let's imagine a truly constructive way of dealing with those dangers. What somebody called preemptive peacemaking, where you start to say if this could result in a catastrophe, how do we start building strength to avert that. How do we create reconciliation when the fragmentation is minor before it becomes violent, which is, I think, what Jesus was saying in the Sermon on the Mount when he says if you've got a problem with somebody get it resolved fast, don't wait till it goes to court, to say chains of hostility and revenge can be so powerful, have a very early approach to dealing with tension. We've got a lot of work to do, though. You know, it strikes me that in some ways scientists are ahead of the rest of us in this, when we think we know that some day an asteroid will come too close and cause catastrophic injuries. You know, I mean the odds are there. And thank God there are scientists who are thinking, "How do we get rid of an asteroid if we, you know, can detect if it's coming our way?" Or then we think, "What would be the analogies to that asteroid that are a little closer to home already, and what would happen if we applied that kind of foresight?"

I think that's not a bad way to end our time and send us off with plenty to think about.

Suzanne Ross: Thank you so much, Brian and James. It was a delightful and fruitful conversation and I do, on Martie's behalf, want to encourage you to save your responses, conversation, and further questions for James and Brian until we get over to the reception and talk with each other with some food and drink in your hands, and we will get the party started.

The Raven Foundation

The Raven Foundation was founded in 2007 by Suzanne and Keith Ross. The foundation is committed to making religion reasonable, violence unthinkable and peace a possibility by spreading awareness of the transformative power of mimetic theory. The organization's goal is to foster peaceful individuals and harmonious communities that will reject scapegoating and violence as ways to form identity and achieve real and lasting peace. The primary outreach is through blogs that provide social commentary on current events, politics, religion, scandals, and popular entertainment. In addition, the foundation holds live events for the public to learn directly from scholars applying mimetic theory to literature, religion, history, psychology or peacemaking. The foundation website is www.ravenfoundation.org.

Colloquium on Violence and Religion

The Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R) is an international association of scholars founded in 1990. It is dedicated to the exploration, criticism, and development of René Girard's mimetic model of the relationship between violence and religion in the genesis and maintenance of culture. COV&R is concerned with questions of research and application. Scholars from diverse fields and theoretical orientations are invited to participate in its Conferences and publications. Membership includes subscriptions to [CONTAGION](#) and to the organization's biannual [BULLETIN](#) which contains recent [Bibliography of Literature on the Mimetic Theory](#), book reviews, and information on the annual COV&R conference as well as on relevant satellite sessions in conferences of diverse disciplines. The website is <http://www.uibk.ac.at/theol/cover/>.

Homebrewed Christianity

Tripp Fuller of Homebrewed Christianity recorded this event. Since March 13, 2008, [*Homebrewed Christianity Podcast*](#) has been bringing the best nerdy audiological ingredients for the development of faith including conversations between friends, theologians, philosophers, and scholars of all stripes. Tripp is married to Alecia and they have a son. Tripp and Alecia are both graduates of Campbell University, the Divinity School of Wake Forest University and ordained ministers. He is working on his PhD in Philosophy of Religion and Theology at Claremont Graduate University.