

Review: The Kierkegaard-Girard Option

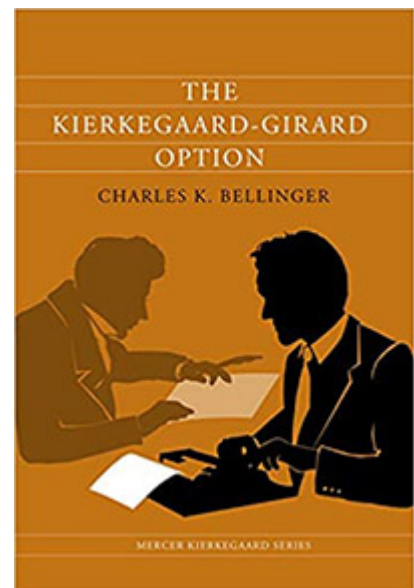
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The Kierkegaard-Girard Option

By Charles K. Bellinger (Mercer University Press)

Why are human beings violent? What leads otherwise peaceful people to do violence? These are questions Charles Bellinger seeks to answer in a set of collected essays. To do so, he examines the work of two paradigmatic philosophers—Søren Kierkegaard and René Girard. Both philosophers wrote volumes on the nature of humanity and the role of violence among people.

Both philosophers give considerable attention to imitation. Girard contends people want what others have to the extent that culture and society are ordered around the desire to imitate others, what is commonly called “keeping up with the Joneses.” Such desire sets up competition for limited resources, which inevitably leads to violence. Girard and Kierkegaard analyze at length the psychology involved in imitation and violence.



Scapegoating is a primary topic of Bellinger’s book, particularly as the concept is developed by Girard and a third philosopher, Kenneth Burke. According to both, humans instinctively sense their limitation and turn on

others in violence, making someone else pay the price for what is lacked.

Bellinger writes: “Scapegoating is the act of blaming others as a way of not facing clearly and honestly one’s own guilt. Scapegoating is a flight from self-awareness.” Scapegoating is the human propensity to project blame onto an innocent other—often the nearest and most vulnerable other—as a result of people finding themselves vulnerable. This often leads to violence meted out on a nonresponsible party.

Bellinger provides an accurate reading of Kierkegaard, who many evangelicals have misread as being dangerous to Christianity. Chapter 8 is a needed corrective, demonstrating the seriousness with which Kierkegaard viewed the individual’s responsibility before God and subsequently to other people.

Though Bellinger’s questions are fascinating and pertinent to current events, this is a book of philosophy and may be tough going for those not so inclined.

Some readers will take issue with Bellinger’s recital of Girard’s view that Satan is not a personage but is a psychological principle. Others likely will take issue with Bellinger’s seeming reduction of Kierkegaard’s thoughts to nothing more than psychology and his over-psychologizing of Christianity. Both sets of readers should reserve judgment until after Chapter 9 in which Bellinger finally gives voice to his own conservatism, particularly in relation to abortion and same-sex marriage. In response to those advocating for pro-choice and same-sex marriage, he offers arguments worthy of consideration.

Eric Black, editor
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