In the 1960s and 1970s, a French intellectual produced a series of books and articles that, if nothing else, presented an affront to the very notion of disciplinary division. Trained as a historian, this intellectual’s first major book offered a theory of the novel. He then developed a grand hypothesis of cultural origins without doing any fieldwork or having any training in anthropology and ethnology. He continued writing literary criticism until 1978, when he co-authored a book about, among other things, Christianity and religious theory. The part on Christianity included commentary on numerous biblical verses, despite the author having no training in biblical studies or theology. One might be surprised that these books received much acclaim at all, but they did. But surely, by now, whatever reception the books might have been given, the fad inspired by this author would have passed.

The writer referenced here, of course, is the recently deceased René Girard (1923–2015), perhaps the most atypical member in the ultra-elite Académie française, into which Girard was inducted in 2005. From the 1970s to the late 2000s, Girard continued to write, reflect, dialogue, and reassess. To the surprise of many, some of his most fruitful dialogues have come with theologians and scholars of religion. This engagement has spurred Girard to review, reconsider, and even revise his opinions about Christianity, the Bible, and the nature of sacrifice. Yet nearly four decades after Raymund Schwager’s epochal application of Girard’s thought,
René Girard, Unlikely Apologist

*Must There Be Scapegoats?* (1978), theologians continue to engage Girard and the mode of thinking labeled “mimetic theory.” By any measure, both the number of “Girardians” attempting to apply mimetic theory to theological questions and those theologians willing to engage, incorporate, or caution against such applications seems to be growing. The years 2013–2014 witnessed two major monographs on Girard and theology and the first dissertation written on a Girardian theologian (James Alison).1 The biannual *Bulletin of the Colloquium on Violence & Religion* (cited simply as *Bulletin* throughout the book), which is dedicated to mimetic theory, confirms this growth of Girardians and their work in the bibliography it publishes each issue.2

One can also measure Girard’s relevance through the encounter of major theologians with his corpus. Leading contemporary theologians who have critically engaged mimetic theory in their written work include John Milbank, Sarah Coakley, Rowan Williams, Miroslav Volf, David Bentley Hart, Robert Doran, and Neil Ormerod. This engagement is not new. Already in 1980, Hans Urs von Balthasar, on any short list of the most important twentieth-century theologians, asserted the relevance of mimetic theory for theology, especially soteriology. In volume 3 of his *Theodramatik* (vol. 4 in the English translation), Balthasar declared, “Girard’s is surely the most dramatic project to be undertaken today in the field of soteriology and in theology generally.” 3 Balthasar went on to outline what he considered to be serious shortcomings, including Girard’s failure, at least up to that point, to delineate an account of the Passion that properly understood the place of divine initiative in these salvific events. Girard (and Raymund Schwager), surmised Balthasar, “have brought us to the final elements of the drama of reconciliation, yet without offering a satisfying conclusion.”4 Balthasar reached this judgment by determining that “Girard’s synthesis is a closed system, since it wants to be ‘purely scientific,’ and that Girard’s project repeats the same mistaken dialectic as Karl Barth’s.”5

Balthasar’s judgments affected, perhaps more than those of any other theologian, the reception of Girard in Christianity. For our sake, it is important to note, even if only anecdotally, how Balthasar’s analysis has been received in recent literature. Through his archival research, Mathias Moosbrugger has given a more layered picture of Balthasar’s relationship
to Girard. Moosbrugger discovered a lively correspondence, from 1977 until Balthasar’s death in 1988, between Balthasar and Schwager, two Swiss Jesuits.6 Their correspondence reveals that, by December 1981, Balthasar had already been convinced, as he wrote to Schwager, that “Girard’s insight” [die Wahrheit Girards] could be integrated into his project for a theology of the cross.7

It is not only Girardians who have made claims for the ongoing possibility of bringing Girard into conversation with Balthasar’s dramatic theology. In 2012, Kevin Mongrain, the author of The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar,8 published an article on Girard and Balthasar that revisits Balthasar’s conclusions about Girard’s project in light of Girard’s post-1978 work.9 Here Mongrain argues that, by utilizing a “Balthasarian lens,” one can discern how “Girard is in the genus of Christian theologians who put the processes of spiritual transformation at the center of their soteriologies.” Mongrain also shows overlap between Girard and Balthasar regarding their resistance of “false gnosis” and their seeking “to protect a distinctly biblical theology of spiritual transformation.”10

Two key points can be drawn from Mongrain’s essay. First and most obviously, Mongrain extends the conversation between Balthasar and Girard. Mongrain notes that Girard had read Balthasar’s analysis of mimetic theory.11 Mongrain also acknowledges Girard’s post-1978 alterations, in partial response to Balthasar’s analysis: “The revisions Girard has made to his thought seem to be attempts to answer it from within a shared [with Balthasar] anti-Satanic and apocalyptic framework. . . . Read through the Balthasarian lens, we can see this revision and others like them as Girard’s attempt to make his thought more immune to Gnostic re-writing and, consequently, more capable of offering effective resistance to the speculative theologies of false gnosis.”12 Mongrain notes the evolution in Girard’s thought on issues ranging from the understanding of sacrifice to the assessment of nonbiblical religions, and he offers this evolution as evidence for Girard’s inclusion in the theological community. Second, Mongrain argues that Girard’s work be read as theology: “Girard’s theory is not theological in the narrow academic and highly specialized and atomized sense of disputatio in the scholastic tradition and Wissenschaft in the modern research university.”13 Mongrain points
out that such a definition might disqualify any number of theologians, noting, “Girard writes theology like someone who respects the Biblical narrative in all its messy imprecision as the source of truth about God and history.”

Theologians, according to Mongrain, have not successfully integrated Girard into Christian theology. To make this happen, he implores “a new approach to reading Girard theologically.” Rather than taking Girard at his word that he is not doing theology, Mongrain suggests: “It is best to treat [Girard] as a theologian from the start, and then map him into a pre-existing theological world of which he is more or less already a citizen.” Paired with Moosbrugger’s work, Mongrain’s argument demonstrates that efforts to relate mimetic theory to theology continue apace.

Although largely sympathetic to Mongrain’s imperative both to read Girard through a certain hermeneutical lens and to interpret him as a certain type of spiritual-mystical theologian, I aim to do something slightly different from what Mongrain suggests. This book takes up the relation between Girard and theology in several keys. In one key, it understands mimetic theory as a heuristic. By heuristic I mean a model that allows theological narratives and positions to become more intelligible. In this key, mimetic theory, like phenomenology, different social theories, or, to go back several centuries, Aristotelian science or Neoplatonic metaphysics, helps theology to understand what it is and to explain what it means. Within the realm of apologetic or fundamental theology, mimetic theory makes theology intelligible, and, by so doing, makes it more persuasive. Yet it would be extremely shortsighted to conceive the relationship between mimetic theory and theology as merely heuristic. Girard himself gave voice to these concerns when he wrote, “Theologians should refrain from making use of the mimetic reading for parochially ecclesiastical interests. . . . [If mimetic theory] is perceived as a mere servant of this or that theology, ancilla theologiae, its effectiveness is nullified.” Girard thought his insights had such import for the social sciences that he did not want his writings circumscribed by faith claims. In chapter 2, I take up this question in greater detail. For now it suffices to say I agree with Mongrain that theologians have been thrown off Girard’s theological scent by Girard’s emphatic avowal, further problematized by
Girard’s contradictory statements that his conclusions originated from legitimate and purely scientific enquiry.

In another key, I show how mimetic theory, when put in dialogue with particular theologians, can advance theological discussion in areas where mimetic theory has been “applied” less regularly. On this level, I present a dialogue with theology that recalls earlier theological efforts. There has developed something of a “canon” of books that bring Girard into dialogue with various theological themes. Such books are not merely introductions to the theological implications of mimetic theory, but they are also attempts to apply Girard’s insights to particular questions and thus advance the status quaestionis. Vintage examples include Schwager’s Must There Be Scapegoats? and Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption, and James Alison’s The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes. In the past decade, one could add Mark Heim’s Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross (2006), Brian Robinette’s Grammars of Resurrection (2009), and Robert Doran’s The Trinity in History: A Theology of Divine Missions (2012). In comparison to Alison and Schwager, these theologians are not Girardians sensu stricto—they do not begin their theological explorations from Girardian presuppositions. It would be more accurate to say that they want to bring Girard into conversation with both classical Christian theology and with other contemporary theologians.

I toggle between the efforts of Schwager and Alison, on the one side, and Heim, Robinette, and Doran, on the other. Like the latter group (and one could say the same of Schwager), I had already done the work necessary to “join the theological guild” before discovering Girard. My training in the subdiscipline of fundamental theology yielded a sense, as I delved deeper into Girard’s work, that mimetic theory could bring something important to bear in questions of fundamental theology. This training also enabled the process of showing those who have entered theology through the Girardian door that Girard’s corpus, however groundbreaking it may be, works in concert with the efforts of other leading theologians. After chapter 1, in which I outline Girard’s intellectual project, each subsequent chapter not only discusses Girard’s contribution to a given topic but also aligns it with other efforts by leading theologians from this and the previous century.
In this sense, René Girard, Unlikely Apologist: Mimetic Theory and Fundamental Theology advances on Michael Kirwan’s Girard and Theology, both by exploring topics omitted by Kirwan and by offering a more extended conversation on these topics.19

Besides explaining the keys in which Girard’s work engages theology, it behooves me to provide the reader with some clarification of the area of theology in which this engagement takes place. To speak in the most general terms, Christian theology performs two basic operations. The first operation attempts to “make reasonable” revealed objects of faith, like different creedal or biblical claims, through appeals to authority, tradition, and other theological doctrines. When done well, this kind of theology gives its readers and hearers a deeper appreciation for Christianity’s mysteries and a greater awareness of the logical connections between various articles of faith.

The second operation borrows from other discourses—often philosophical—in order to give greater rationality to the tenets of faith, or to lend persuasive power to its worldview or its fundamental assumptions. Various theologians, most famously Aquinas, have applied Aristotle’s theories of human action in order to understand more deeply how human beings become habituated into the virtues that make a person holy. Analogously, John Paul II’s theology of the body used phenomenology, among other resources, to explain more persuasively the Church’s sexual teaching. Liberation theologians, likewise, have used Marxist and critical social theory to reshape Christology and moral theology.

Making explicit these two theological operations helps to locate the place of fundamental theology within Christian theology proper. Beginners learn Anselm’s definition that theology is faith seeking understanding. In this framework, one begins with faith and moves toward understanding. Theology thus comes in the form of explanations about the nature of belief itself, or about the understanding of different doctrines. If, for instance, one is animated by an incipient belief in God’s saving love or the redemptive element of Jesus’ death, theology aims to deepen this belief by giving accounts of the Trinity, or the Incarnation, or by showing the reasons behind the morality that follows from these beliefs, or their basis in biblical texts. Church communities hope that such forms of theological reflection on belief and on specific doctrines or creedal points will not
merely provide a kind of intellectual superstructure to safeguard faith, but that they will deepen the belief of those who engage in theology.

Fundamental Theology

Not all, however, begin their theological explanations from a stable position of faith. The content or form of belief is itself shaky or confused. **Fundamental** theology steps into this aporia. Unlike theology proper, fundamental theology asks questions about the very nature of belief and about the anthropological claims underlying this belief. The conditions of modernity demand that theologians not only assist in the deepening and broadening of already existing faith, but that, in addition, theologians must address the unbeliever and engage the reasons and the framework in which unbelief and even hostility toward the Christian message have become viable alternatives to believing. Here fundamental theology operates as a border discipline, attempting to speak theologically, not so much as *faith seeking understanding* but rather *unbelief seeking belief*. It forestalls questions about scripture’s authority in relation to tradition, and it attends to questions of whether or not humans have the capacity to hear the word of God and record it. It also explores theological presuppositions about the relationship between scripture and tradition, faith and reason, Christianity and other religions, the nature and process of divine revelation, and the authority of the scriptures. The underlying premise is that fundamental theology investigates the fundament or foundation of theology prior to more traditional theological reflection, that is, the distinct theological spheres of questions included under such topics as soteriology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, Trinitarian theology, and so on.

“*Apologetics*” is the more familiar term for at least part of that to which fundamental theology lays claim. At least since Paul preached in Athens (Acts 17), Christians have been doing “apologetic” theology. Apologetics, however, does not always understand itself as a properly theological discipline. One can be a perfectly good apologist as a philosopher, or a natural scientist, or a scholar of religion. Although such famous modern apologists as G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis were believing