

MYSTĒRION

THE THEOLOGY JOURNAL OF BOSTON COLLEGE



VOLUME I — ISSUE I

MYSTĒRION: THE THEOLOGY JOURNAL OF BOSTON COLLEGE

VOLUME I, ISSUE I

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Mystērion: The Theology Journal of Boston College

Volume I | Issue I

Inaugural Editor's Note

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INAUGURAL EDITOR'S NOTE

DENNIS J. WIEBOLDT III *

When I first arrived at Boston College, I never thought that I would study theology. During my college application process, I learned that Boston College was a Jesuit, Catholic university with certain core requirements in philosophy and theology, but I—like many other students at Catholic colleges and universities across the United States—initially viewed these courses as mere graduation requirements. Fortunately, however, I decided to enroll in Boston College's foundational course in philosophy and theology, Perspectives on Western Culture, during my first year. Not only did this course initiate a long process of discernment about my academic interests and goals, but it also made a profound impact on my life outside of the classroom.

Taught by a doctoral graduate of the Theology Department, my Perspectives on Western Culture section brought together a small group of first-year students from around the country to study classic texts in philosophy and theology. We did not know one another on our first day of class, but we would soon embark on a year-long inquiry into one of the perennial questions of human existence: What does it mean to live a good life? I cannot recall exactly how many students were in my Perspectives section, but, at every class meeting, it became increasingly clear that the different life experiences, religious dispositions, and academic interests that we all brought to our assigned readings would contribute to the long-term impact of the course on our college experiences.

Even amidst COVID-19, Boston College's Perspectives Program endured. In part due to my favorable experience in the course, I subsequently enrolled in one of the Theology Department's spring undergraduate electives—Religion and American Public Life. Taught by Mark Massa, S.J., Professor of Theology and Director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, this course helped me to better appreciate the continued importance of questions about God, self, and society, even in what some (perhaps correctly) believe is a secular era.

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Given the intellectual and personal formation that the Perspectives Program and Massa's introductory elective helped facilitate, I declared a double major in history and theology by the conclusion of my first year. Since then, I have taken numerous courses in both the History and Theology Departments at the intersection of politics, religion, and the law that have broadened my academic horizons and prompted me to grapple with questions about my own faith and position in our hyper-plural society. Indeed, when I am now asked about particularly profound aspects of my Boston College experience, I often credit my first-year theology courses with setting me on a path that has allowed me to deepen my Catholic faith and approach my responsibilities to society with a new frame of reference.

I have chosen to begin this inaugural editor's note with a personal reflection because it truly represents the experiences and values that inspired this journal's establishment. Boston College is a proud inheritor of the Jesuit, Catholic intellectual and spiritual traditions, but I have always found life at the University to be marked by respect for those of other religious beliefs, an honest desire for truth, a willingness to engage in dialogue about important issues in our lives, and a commitment to the service of others. Insofar as these values undergirded this journal's establishment, they so too should be the values that guide it in the future.

Volume I, Issue I of *Mystērion: The Theology Journal of Boston College* features essays from undergraduate students at Boston College, Fordham University, and Princeton University that address important (and difficult) theological questions. Among other topics, this inaugural issue explores the relationship of feminist theology to American religion, the historiography of the now-infamous Salem Witch Trials, the role of prayer and language in the human experience, the Catholic Church's evolving position on questions of church and state, and how comparative theology can help us better understand human suffering and liberation.

Like my first-year theology courses, this inaugural issue of *Mystērion* brings a diverse array of perspectives to bear on questions that have challenged even the most renowned theologians. In doing so, it is my hope that *Mystērion* inspires more students to spend time thinking about the questions of human existence that impact us all—no matter

who we are or where we come from—and to share with others the insights we have gleaned for ourselves. We may not always be right, but it is critical that we continue to challenge the ideas of our time and of times gone by so that we can come to an ever-more-full understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

This process of inquiry, reflection, knowledge production, *and knowledge sharing* is precisely what Fr. Michael Himes—a long-time Boston College theology professor and the inspiration for this journal’s name²—encouraged members of the Boston College community to embark upon so eloquently in his 2009 ‘last lecture’:

What is the last and what is the definite message that has to be said? Well, I think it’s this. It is a statement that I’ve spoken about many times, preached about many times, [and] prayed about many more times than that. [It is] a statement which appears repeatedly in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It’s the statement of Jesus that if you hold onto your life, you lose it, but if you give your life away, it becomes everlasting life.³

And the thing I wish for you is that sometime in your life, you get a chance to say to people who mean an enormous amount to you, what it is that has been truest in your own life ... because it is at a moment like that you know that everything you gave away has been given back in spades.⁴

This journal would have never been established without the tireless support of the Boston College Department of Theology and its students. For their helpful guidance throughout this last ‘launch year,’ enormous thanks are due to Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies Jeffrey Cooley; Michael P. Walsh, S.J., Professor of Bioethics Andrea Vicini, S.J.; *Mystērion*’s Graduate Advisors, Grace Agolia and Tiffany Lee; and *Mystērion*’s Editorial Board and Communications Director. Finally, thanks are also due to *Mystērion*’s authors, current and future, whose work has the potential to positively impact and inspire those who come across these pages.

² “About the Journal,” *Mystērion: The Theology Journal of Boston College*, last modified January 2021, <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/MYST/about>.

³ Michael Himes, “A Last Lecture,” filmed 2009 at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, video, 2:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hs3UCUqy8cg>.

⁴ Himes, “A Last Lecture,” 51:50.

Mystērion: The Theology Journal of Boston College

Volume I | Issue I

Article 1

The Woman's Bible: Once Failed, Now Scripture

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THE WOMAN'S BIBLE: ONCE FAILED, NOW SCRIPTURE

MICHAEL FORDING *

Abstract: Published in two parts in 1895 and 1898, *The Woman's Bible* presented Elizabeth Cady Stanton's views on the biblical foundations of patriarchy and sexism. The text was reviled by prominent clergymen upon its publication, and women involved in the suffrage movement distanced themselves from it. Nevertheless, the *Bible* was revived in the 1970s by second-wave feminists. It is natural to view this text as paratextual to the Bible; this paper, however, reads it as its own scriptural text, just as the second-wave feminists did. The text served as scripture for feminism, particularly for those feminists who were also concerned with Christianity and the Bible. The *Bible* targeted an American Christian audience of both men and women, assuming a good knowledge of the Bible. Its invited uptake might have been for readers to reevaluate biblical "truths" regarding women. Regardless, it certainly was taken up this way: clergy at the time of publication strongly took issue with it, while feminists reacted differently decades later. The *Bible* has many paratexts, especially in light of the feminist literature that draws on it. This paper examines the dynamic history of *The Woman's Bible* through the lens of its scripturalization. Its maintenance was almost non-existent for decades, so it provides a unique insight into the impact of reviving a scriptural text after a period of little use.

Introduction

One hundred years after the first volume of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* was published in 1895, Anne Todd celebrated the book and its author in the *Daughters of Sarah* magazine, noting how "[Stanton] sought to reclaim the Scripture for Christian women," and that "*The Woman's Bible* must be seen as visionary."² Todd, a graduate student at the time, was not alone in this sentiment. In 1993, prominent feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza edited *Searching the Scriptures*, a collection of feminist Bible scholarship in two volumes, "in preparation for the 1995 centennial celebration of the publication of *The Woman's Bible*."³ Along with other books and articles, these works represented thorough engagement with *The Woman's Bible* among feminist scholars

* Michael Fording is an undergraduate student in the Department of Religion at Princeton. Special thanks go to Professor Seth Perry and Michael Baysa for their advice and comments.

² Anne Todd, "The Woman's Bible: 100 Years Ahead of Its Time?" *Daughters of Sarah* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 51.

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), ix.

beginning in the 1970s. With just a glance at this history of the text and the scholarship surrounding it, one quickly notices the decades-long gap between its publication and its conspicuous revival.

When Stanton published the first volume of *The Woman's Bible* in 1895 (the second volume came in 1898), it was not met with reviews of its "visionary" quality. Rather, "[p]rominent clergy reviled it, Stanton's fellow suffrage leaders disassociated themselves from it," and it "f[ell] out of print and out of notice."⁴ For more than a half century afterwards, no canon of feminist biblical scholarship and criticism developed, but in 1974, *The Woman's Bible* "saw its first significant reprinting, by the Seattle Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion."⁵ Following this reprinting, Stanton's *Bible* encouraged eager feminist scholars to examine the book in a social setting completely different from that of the 1890s. One who notices the gap between the initial publication of *The Woman's Bible* and its revival might also take note of the dramatic level of attention the text received in the years after its reprinting.

The history of *The Woman's Bible* raises important questions about how it developed from a book forgotten and failed to a text that has served a leading role in feminist theology and biblical studies since the 1970s. Rejected by clergy and by Stanton's suffragist colleagues at the time of its inception, this paper argues that the rebirth of *The Woman's Bible* through second-wave feminist scholarship displays a remarkable history of scripturalization. Indeed, scholars began to use the *Bible* as their own scripture, and many maintain it as such today.

First, it is necessary to define some of the key terms used in this paper. My use of "scripturalization" is derived from Vincent L. Wimbush's 2012 book *White Men's Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery*. Therein, he defines this term as "a social-psychological-political structure establishing its own reality."⁶ For the purposes of this paper, scripturalization encompasses the initial processes by which a text becomes a scripture, and

⁴ Emily R. Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past: A Historiography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 5, 6.

⁵ Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 2, 11.

⁶ Vincent L. Wimbush, *White Men's Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

the ongoing processes by which its scriptural status is maintained and used.⁷ My use of the term “failed scripture” is linked to scripturalization. Given that scripture might be framed as a relationship between a text (*The Woman’s Bible* in this case) and its reader(s), a scripture fails when this positive relationship is not established and thus the intended reception is not realized.⁸ In this paper, “second-wave feminism” refers to the feminists of the 1970s. While much (if not most) of the source material herein was published in the decades after the 1970s, the origins lie firmly within the second wave.

Genre of *The Woman’s Bible*

The Woman’s Bible, while not intended to replace the Christian Bible, possesses essential characteristics that facilitated its later development into a scripture for second-wave feminist scholars. Unlike other scriptural texts of the nineteenth century, such as the *Book of Mormon* and *Science and Health*, *The Woman’s Bible* contains no claims of divine authorship or inspiration. A review of four generic qualities—imagined audience; establishment of credibility; assumed expectations, knowledge, and dispositions; and invited uptake—however, contributes to our understanding of how the text’s structure facilitated its later development.

First, the imagined audience of *The Woman’s Bible* (at the time of writing and publication, of course) was White American Protestants, especially women. In fact, Schüssler Fiorenza notes in her preface to *Searching the Scriptures* that “Cady Stanton’s work . . . on the whole engaged mostly Protestant white women from the United States.” This is not particularly surprising given Stanton’s background.⁹ Stanton was raised in the Calvinist tradition, but she had certainly rejected traditional Calvinist doctrine in favor of more liberal theological views before the 1890s. This position is visible in the makeup of the committee that Stanton assembled to produce *The Woman’s Bible*.¹⁰ The committee consisted of three ordained Universalist clergywomen and “[m]any members . . . interest[ed]

⁷ This framework also comes from the work of American religious historian Seth Perry (Princeton University). See *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁸ This framework of scriptural failure is derived from the current work and research of Professor Perry.

⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, ix.

¹⁰ *The Woman’s Bible* was technically written by a committee of women, of which Stanton was chair. The great majority of the text, however, expressed primarily her ideas and was written by her. Anne Todd notes that “the project was almost solely hers alone.” See Anne Todd, “The Woman’s Bible,” 48.

in New Thought or Spiritualism.”¹¹ The composition of the committee, coupled with Stanton’s roots in Protestantism, showcases the audience likely imagined by Stanton: White American women with Protestant backgrounds.

Second, Stanton establishes her credibility in two ways: (1) by using the King James Bible (the Bible likely most well-known by her neighbors and imagined audience), and (2) by attempting to bolster the influence of her name (as a leader of the suffrage movement) with the committee that she convened. In other words, Stanton’s status in the women’s movement established an initial level of credibility expanded upon by a committee she formed to promote the idea that *The Woman’s Bible* was not the intellectual offspring of just one critic. The use of the King James Bible is also important to note because it allowed Stanton to show how the words of the translation used by many Protestant denominations could be interpreted in a drastically different manner.¹² It is fair to suggest that readers might have less readily accepted her work if she had used another English translation with which they were less familiar. Stanton had achieved some credibility as a result of her decades of work in the suffrage movement, and her name would allow for the *Bible* to be published and disseminated without trouble. Her profile in the movement, however, did not guarantee that all of her work would be viewed by every reader as credible and worth reading. This potential shortcoming was mitigated by “those committee members she convinced to work on the project.”¹³ Notwithstanding the fact that Stanton wrote the vast majority of *The Woman’s Bible* herself, the status of her committee as the “author” helped to legitimize the text as a valid criticism of the Bible’s perceived sexism.

Third, the dispositions, expectations, and knowledge that Cady Stanton took for granted in her audience primarily included a Christian familiarity with and reverence for the entire Christian Bible. Without this familiarity, *The Woman’s Bible* would have no ability to meaningfully reach readers. Stanton also expected some degree of support from the suffrage movement and, importantly, understood that *The Woman’s Bible* would be a controversial publication. This paper has already discussed the significance of the King James Bible to the writing and reception of *The Woman’s Bible*, but Stanton took for granted that her audience

¹¹ Mace, “Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past,” 9, 10.

¹² Todd, “The Woman’s Bible,” 48.

¹³ Mace, “Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past,” 9.

would know not only the words of this Bible, but also its orthodox American Protestant interpretations. Stanton's views were certainly not orthodox, but the most effective method she could use to express them, at least to her thinking, was to "literally [cut] out relevant passages" of the King James Bible and provide her commentary underneath.¹⁴ In doing so, Stanton assumed that her readers would know the Christian Bible well, and she also expected that they would find her commentary controversial. During the three years between publication of the first volume in 1895 and the second volume in 1898, there erupted "a storm of controversy that at once appalled and delighted Stanton," at least partly due to her excitement that the publicity would lead to increased readership.¹⁵ Anne Todd notes that "[t]he opposition only fueled her efforts" in the years between the two volumes.¹⁶ As these scholars point out, Stanton's work was controversial from the start; even if she was somewhat delighted by the publicity generated as a result of that controversy, the woman's suffrage movement was not. For *The Woman's Bible* to garner widespread and long-term legitimacy, it would have been necessary for the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and related groups to openly support it. However, NAWSA passed a resolution in 1896 declaring the lack of any "official connection with the so-called 'Woman's Bible,'" in an attempt to retain those religiously conservative NAWSA members opposed to *The Woman's Bible's* "religious radicalism."¹⁷ Stanton took NAWSA's support for granted, but when intense controversy emerged, NAWSA had to prioritize its members. The other two expectations (familiarity with the Christian Bible and a controversial response from the public) that I have outlined, however, were indeed realized.

The invited uptake of *The Woman's Bible* is multifaceted, but it especially encouraged its readers to critically reconsider the biblical passages used to justify the oppression of women. This reconsideration was not intended to target solely sexist interpretations of certain parts of the Bible by American Protestant clergy, but rather the Bible itself. Historian and theologian Dorothy C. Bass writes insightfully about Stanton's goals for the uptake of *The Woman's Bible*. She notes:

¹⁴ Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 9.

¹⁵ Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 10.

¹⁶ Todd, "The Woman's Bible," 48-49.

¹⁷ Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 10.

Stanton, who was by this time in her eighties, had been arguing for half a century that the chief cause of woman's oppression was 'the perversion of her spiritual nature,' her enslavement to a misogynist religion. The keystone of this religion, and thus by extension the keystone of woman's oppression, was the Bible.¹⁸

Stanton intended for her *Bible* to be a critical commentary on the Bible from a feminist perspective, as Bass argues, and she invited readers to take it up as such. Nevertheless, even before the first volume was published, the American public was skeptical that Stanton was trying to effectively rewrite the Bible. For example, the *Springfield Daily Republican* reassured its readers that while "[o]rthodox Christians of various denominations seem quite shocked and worried about [*The Woman's Bible*]," it was "a commentary on the Bible" and not "[a] New Bible for the New Woman' [or] a 'Woman's Version of the Bible.'" ¹⁹ Bass particularly elucidates the problems that Stanton saw with the Bible; Stanton wanted her readers to critically consider her thoughts on those problems and engage with them in the face of a sexist clergy and the Christian Bible that enabled it. Further discussion of both the invited and realized uptake of *The Woman's Bible* will follow, including an examination of the generic qualities of a scripturalized text in order to demonstrate the relevance of the author's intention.

Paratexts

The paratexts of *The Woman's Bible* inform a more complete understanding of the social and religious environment in which Stanton wrote, as well as the evolution of its place in that milieu over time. The second-wave literature that took up the *Bible* as its scripture is, of course, made up of individual epitexts that illuminate the *Bible's* ability to connect with feminist biblical interpreters and religious studies scholars in the 1970s (and later). Similarly, it could certainly be argued that the lack of attention given to *The Woman's Bible* for decades before its reprinting is paratextual. In order to emphasize its intense revival in the latter half of the twentieth century, I will focus my attention on peritexts and the paratexts that emerged immediately before and for some years after the publication of the first volume in 1895.

¹⁸ Dorothy C. Bass, "Women's Studies and Biblical Studies, an Historical Perspective," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 7, no. 22 (February 1982): 11.

¹⁹ "Mrs. Stanton's 'Woman's Bible.'" *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, Massachusetts), June 15, 1895: 6.

The *Springfield Daily Republican* and other publications attempted to defend Stanton's work, but much of the nationwide coverage was not so flattering. The *Charleston News and Courier*, published then as *The Sunday News*, informed its readers that *The Woman's Bible* "has failed to meet the approval of any theologians able to read the language in which the Bible was written," adding that Stanton had laughed when criticized for "her efforts to interpret the language of Moses through the modern speculation about women's rights."²⁰ While this detail was not particularly relevant considering that *The Woman's Bible* did not attempt to re-translate the King James Bible, this snub coupled with derogatory language did serve to discredit the text. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* also noted local women's distaste for the title of *The Woman's Bible* on account of their personal disagreements with Stanton's commentary.²¹ *The Sunday News* subtly reiterated this complaint, commenting that "[w]oman, in the person of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, has laid her hand upon the Bible."²²

These epitexts demand review of a critical peritext: the title of Stanton's commentary itself. The existence of the revising committee assembled by Stanton, which I have already briefly discussed, did not give Stanton the authority to label the text as reflecting the beliefs of or belonging to 'women,' especially since she wrote the vast majority of it alone. In fact, her attempt to portray her ideas as belonging to all women not only ostracized those who disagreed, but also left out important voices. Christiana de Groot has more recently argued that the title is a result of Stanton's view that "all women are essentially the same," allowing her to "universalize[] her own experience ... and claim[] to speak for all women." In doing so, de Groot also argues that Stanton had the "luxury of not noticing that other women's experience could be very different from her own."²³ As the aforementioned newspapers reported, Stanton's failure to grasp the reality of differences between women contributed greatly to the controversy that surrounded her *Bible* from the start.

Two additional peritexts that merit consideration are the list of committee members provided in the book and the typography of the pages (including Bible passages and

²⁰ *Charleston News and Courier* (Charleston, South Carolina), July 7, 1895: 4

²¹ "Little Favor. The 'Woman's Bible' Causes Much Criticism in Cleveland. Opinions of Representative Women," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio), December 5, 1895: 8.

²² *Charleston News and Courier* (Charleston, South Carolina), May 26, 1895: 9

²³ Christiana De Groot, "Contextualizing the Woman's Bible," *Studies in Religion* 41, no. 4 (December 2012): 566.

commentary). The names of the members of the revising committee that worked with Stanton are published on the second page of the original 1895 edition.²⁴ This paratext immediately informs readers that this commentary was written by a committee of over twenty women. Those readers would, however, soon discover that Stanton's name is attached to most of the commentary. This is, again, the physical manifestation of Stanton's effort to establish superficial credibility through her committee. Moreover, while *The Woman's Bible* adheres to the common structure of a Bible passage followed by commentaries, Emily R. Mace has noted that, "contrary to usual practice, the text of the commentary used a larger typeface than the biblical passages."²⁵ This paratext signals that readers should focus on the commentaries and accordingly view the Bible passages as a mere prompt.

Initial Uptake

The uptake of *The Woman's Bible* began even before publication and continued in the years immediately after, only to be effectively paused for decades before second-wave feminists resurrected it in the 1970s. These two uptake periods were naturally characterized by very different trends and attitudes among the people interacting with the text. *The Woman's Bible* stirred great controversy in 1895; both theologians and the public contributed to an animated discourse surrounding the text. Writing in 1982, Dorothy Bass placed *The Woman's Bible* within "a history of estrangement between feminist perspectives and professional biblical scholarship." This view can easily be extended to an estrangement between "feminist perspectives" and mainstream Protestant clergy.²⁶ The *Bible* "inspired discussion in the ministerial profession," ranging "from outright ridicule," such as that observed in coverage by *The Sunday News*, to claims of demonic involvement in Stanton's writing process.²⁷ Newspapers around the country reflected the sentiment of many, particularly women, on the subject. The *Omaha World-Herald*, published then as the *Morning World-Herald*, included the following comments on *The Woman's Bible* in a column entitled "A Word with the Women":

²⁴ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Co., 1895), 2.

²⁵ Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 10.

²⁶ Bass, 12.

²⁷ Mace, 11.

Mary Abbott, writing in the Times-Herald of Chicago, gives to...the 'Woman's Bible'...the most unqualified condemnation," adding that "[w]omen who have the advancement of their sex really at heart might" be frustrated with the "ignorant, egotistical and senile" *Woman's Bible*. "Mrs. Stanton...ought to let us remember her past and to sit for photographs of herself" instead of "exposing her ignorance" by writing this commentary.²⁸

This pointed criticism directed at Stanton and her work apparently reflected the feelings of many women from Cleveland, Omaha, Chicago, and beyond. This rejection of Stanton's entreaty to reconsider the Bible's role in the oppression of women was hardly what she had envisioned. While the failure of women in general to accept *The Woman's Bible* prevented the beginning of its meaningful scripturalization, the suffrage movement's active disassociation from the text proved an even harsher blow.

The Woman's Bible and Scriptural Failure

The suffrage movement's renunciation of *The Woman's Bible* proved to be the nail in the coffin of its scripturalization in the years immediately following its publication. Individual women around the country, as evidenced in numerous examples of less-than-ideal newspaper coverage, held strong and controversial opinions on the *Bible*. The influential movement (in which Stanton had been highly regarded, almost revered) made these opinions official. In withholding support, the movement effectively undermined the potential scripturalization of *The Woman's Bible*. NAWSA did not merely refuse to provide the backing necessary to establish *The Woman's Bible* as scripture, but actively repudiated the text. As a result, *The Woman's Bible* became a failed scripture. As news coverage waned in the years after the publication of the second volume in 1898, the *Bible* experienced for many years an "erasure from history."²⁹ This scriptural failure fits well within the theoretical framework: the processes needed to establish a scriptural relationship between the text and its audience did not develop due to controversy and public resistance from the women's movement.³⁰

²⁸ "A Word with the Women," *Omaha World-Herald* (Omaha, Nebraska) XXXI, no. 67, December 6, 1895: 8.

²⁹ Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 11.

³⁰ This framework of scriptural failure is derived from the current work and research of Professor Perry.

The Woman's Bible and its potential for scripturalization lay dormant for most of the twentieth century, until the Seattle Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion decided to reprint it in 1974. The reprinting ignited a flurry of scholarly engagement by the feminist religious studies and Bible scholars of that era. Indeed, “[w]omen scholars heeded the coalition’s call with eagerness,” and the *Bible* experienced a second uptake.³¹ The American Academy of Religion and a host of feminists began earnestly discussing and studying *The Woman's Bible* in an environment devoid of the controversy previously surrounding the subject. In doing so, these scholars began performing a scriptural relationship with the text. Scholars “began to trace a line of tradition back to nineteenth-century forerunners,” reviving Stanton’s reputation.³² They lauded Stanton as a pioneer, releasing multiple articles and books in the two decades or so after the reprinting, each of which contributed to the scripturalization process. The text quickly developed into a scripture following the relationship established and performed through the 1973 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion’s Working Group on Women and Religion. The text’s establishment as scripture was augmented by important scholars such as Mary Daly and Phyllis Trible, who incorporated *The Woman's Bible* into their own work.³³ In the decades to follow, this relationship was successfully performed as *The Woman's Bible* remained a popular subject for feminist study. Dorothy Bass called it “the foremost example of nineteenth-century feminist hermeneutics” in 1982 (less than a decade after the *Bible* was reprinted).³⁴ The 1990s brought Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s homage to *The Woman's Bible* in the form of *Searching the Scriptures*.³⁵ Other scholars like Anne Todd performed continued praise of the *Bible*’s “visionary” appropriateness, emphasizing its success in transcending time periods.³⁶ The work of these feminist scholars demonstrates the maintenance and use of *The Woman's Bible* throughout the last few decades of the twentieth century, representing the remarkable scripturalization of Stanton’s once-erased contribution to feminist biblical studies.

³¹ Mace, “Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past,” 11.

³² Mace, “Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past,” 11.

³³ Mace, “Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past,” 12.

³⁴ Bass, “Women’s Studies and Biblical Studies, an Historical Perspective,” 10.

³⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures*.

³⁶ Todd, “The Woman’s Bible,” 51.

***The Woman's Bible* and the Characteristics of Scripture**

A brief examination of *The Woman's Bible* in the context of observed scriptural conventions and characteristics is worthwhile and further supports this analysis of the text's scripturalization. A presumption of consequence, one such scriptural characteristic, is straightforward at first glance: Stanton realistically would not have written and published unless she felt confident that her ideas were consequential. Although her reputation was damaged, she accurately judged the capability of *The Woman's Bible* to make a significant impact, mainly as seen in the 1970s. Stanton's unrealized goal of disrupting mainstream American Protestant interpretations of the Bible with her commentary might not necessarily reflect that impact, but as Emily Mace notes, Stanton's "prominent place as a historical predecessor" is undeniable.³⁷ The author's lofty expectations for her text coupled with the continued use of her *Bible* as a scripture by feminist scholars allow for modern observers to ascertain the scriptural convention of a presumption of consequence.

The scriptural characteristic of deeper truth, which holds that a scripture contains a degree of esotericism, is also seen in this case. Stanton offered her interpretation of the Bible's passages concerning women, but also questioned the status of the Bible itself by opining about the parts of the Bible she deemed sexist. The presence of these characteristics of scripture, certainly recognized by the second-wave feminists who took up this text, contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the scripturalization of *The Woman's Bible*.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's commentary on the Bible has experienced a remarkable and complex history of scripturalization. Clergymen, theologians, and Christian women initially disagreed fiercely with her claims, as did her suffragist friends and fellow members of NAWSA. After being forgotten for decades, *The Woman's Bible* was "resurrected," re-emerging into a world that would have been alien to Stanton.³⁸ Feminist scholars of the Bible and religion eagerly studied, discussed, and wrote about it, quickly establishing its scriptural status and relationship. This dynamic relationship was continuously performed and developed, structured on the generic qualities of *The Woman's Bible* and informed by its

³⁷ Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 23.

³⁸ Todd, "The Woman's Bible," 49.

paratexts. The community of second-wave feminist scholars maintained their scriptural relationship with the *Bible* by using it in the publication of dozens of articles and books during the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, and this maintenance and use continues well into the twenty-first century.

Stanton did not set out to create a new religion or denomination, and her goal was not to destroy the Bible and Christianity. She expected that her commentary could be consequential in demonstrating deeper truths about sexism and the oppression of women. Her *Bible's* scriptural status lies primarily within the second-wave feminist scholarly tradition and its successors, but its extraordinary scripturalization is worthy of attention, begging consideration of how particular scriptures develop their status as such, and perhaps whether more failed scriptures might experience their own future revival.

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Fearful Tension: The Salem Witch Trials

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FEARFUL TENSION: THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

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Abstract: In 1692, Salem, Massachusetts descended into witchcraft paranoia on a scale unprecedented in North America. Before authorities could quell the frenzied witch-hunt, over two hundred people had been accused of witchcraft and around twenty-five had been executed. What caused Salem to erupt into such unprecedented and senseless violence? This historiographical essay seeks to analyze three different books about the witch trials—Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum’s *Salem Possessed*, Carol F. Karlsen’s *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, and David D. Hall’s *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement*—in order to answer this elusive central question. The paper begins with an introduction of the central focuses of each author. Boyer and Nissenbaum focus on the rise of capitalism and the accompanying social tensions, Karlsen focuses on the role of misogyny, and Hall focuses on the role of popular folklore and fears of societal declension. After introducing the sources, this paper puts them in dialogue and then offers an ideal synthesis of their central ideas. It will argue that truly understanding the Salem Witch Trials requires balancing the colonists’ religious fears with their underlying social and economic motives.

In 1692, paranoia swept through Salem, Massachusetts. The daughter of Samuel Parris, the minister of Salem Village, was diagnosed by the village doctor with demonic possession after exhibiting inexplicable behavior such as barking like a dog and violently contorting her limbs. The residents feared that the Devil was among them, sewing discord and seeking to destroy their holy society. In a desperate attempt to curb what these colonists feared was impending doom, they sought to purge the source of these demonic possessions—witches—from among them. This purgation initiated a period of mass panic and widespread accusations of witchcraft. Hundreds of Salem residents were accused of being witches and stood trial under the looming threat of public execution.

Witch hunts were not new to the Puritans, but Salem’s witch hunt transcended all those that preceded it. Far from a symbolic ritual of societal purification, the Salem Witch

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Trials resulted in close to two hundred accusations, around twenty-five deaths, and forty-eight ‘demonic possessions.’² Violence and fear tore the small town of Salem apart. When the trials were finally stopped, the town was left with a profound sense of regret and confusion. Something had just occurred “which no one anticipated beforehand and which no one could explain at the time.”³

The Salem Witch Trials have been an important locus for historical and theological scholarship in the centuries following the tragedy. Numerous scholars have attempted to add meaning to and provide an explanation for the mysterious and violent crisis. This essay will analyze three such attempts—Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum’s *Salem Possessed*, Carol F. Karlsen’s *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, and David D. Hall’s *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement*—in hopes of gleaning a multifaceted understanding of the crisis. Through analysis of each author’s distinct viewpoint, a clearer image emerges out of the otherwise opaque Salem mystery. Indeed, we come to understand that on the eve of structural transformation, a town under severe social strain fired one last salvo of a bygone era in hopes of preserving its hierarchical (male-dominated) Puritan dream.

In 1974, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum published *Salem Possessed*, revolutionizing the way scholars viewed the Salem Witch Trials. Through extensive analysis of institutional structures, economic and geographic data, and social trends, they developed a decidedly neo-Marxist explanation for the crisis. Their book sought to undermine explanations of the witchcraft trials that centered on the perception of Salem Village as a morally deviant community among its New England neighbors, instead presenting the outbreak as a result of the severe institutional weakness within Salem.⁴ This institutional weakness, and its accompanying societal tension, were not unfortunate coincidences, but rather, the byproducts of economic exploitation and the emerging capitalist economy. The emergence of this hyper-competitive system deeply clashed with the original communal errand of Puritan New England. Indeed, the Western farmers of Salem, excluded from the growing capitalist economy, felt that this newfound “assertion of private will posed the direst

² Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 41-42.

³ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 21.

⁴ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 51.

possible threat to the stability of the community.”⁵ With no strong political institutions to turn to, the exploited underclass of Salem “unconsciously fell back on a different and more archaic strategy: they treated those who threatened them not as political opposition but as an aggregate of morally defective individuals.”⁶ For Boyer and Nissenbaum, the witch trials were the Western farmers’ attempt to combat economic exploitation through the only method of social agency left open to them.

Boyer and Nissenbaum view the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak as inseparable from the structural aspects of Salem’s community. They assert that the uncontrollable paranoia of the trials makes sense only when viewed as a result of the town’s key structural defects. Belief in witchcraft was prevalent across all of New England. However, only Salem descended into ungovernable madness and accusation. This paranoia was only possible because of the unprecedented institutional weakness of Salem. The most glaring issue was Massachusetts’s lack of “a legally established government.”⁷ While England was in the midst of the Glorious Revolution, Massachusetts’s government remained in deadlock without a governor or charter: “For the crucial first three months of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak, the authorities had no official recourse except to throw suspects into jail without a trial.”⁸ Without any authority ‘coming from above,’ Salem’s inept government was left to deal with the crisis, a task they were fundamentally incapable of performing. Salem was, in reality, composed of two distinct communities: Salem Town and Salem Village. While Salem Town had its own established church and thus a centralized meeting house and authority, Salem Village was deprived of this luxury until 1689, far too late for it to gain real administrative authority in the decentralized community. Thus, while the merchants of Salem Town amassed 62% of Salem’s overall wealth, Salem Village was structurally barred from taking part in the Town’s economic growth.⁹ Rather, Salem Village “provided the food which the Town proper could not supply” and bolstered their coffers with tax revenue.¹⁰ They very much existed as an exploited underclass fueling the progress of Salem Town.¹¹ This feeling of exploitation did

⁵ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 109.

⁶ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 109.

⁷ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 6.

⁸ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 7.

⁹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 87.

¹⁰ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 39.

¹¹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 92.

not sit right with Salem Village's traditional Puritan farmers. Raised to distrust and disdain outward expressions of the private will, these exploited farmers saw such capitalistic progression as the work of the Devil.¹² The capitalist mindset of Salem Town seemed to fundamentally attack John Winthrop's dream of a united and cooperative body politic. As such, Boyer and Nissenbaum assert that the witch trials were the farmers' subconscious response to these economic tensions. However, while fueled by economic grievances, the trials were only allowed to descend into unchecked paranoia because of the crippling lack of structure and authority in Salem. The very institutional weakness that had kept Salem Village economically oppressed became the reason the trials and witchcraft accusations became so uncontrollable.

While Boyer and Nissenbaum indisputably expose the economic crisis at the root of the Salem Witch Trials, their argument is not without its flaws. One of their most glaring missteps is a failure to adequately address the role of misogyny in the witchcraft outbreak. In *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, Carol F. Karlsen aims to address this flagrant omission. Her argument builds on Boyer and Nissenbaum's, attempting to complicate the Trials through a re-analysis of the data through an explicitly feminist lens. In her view, "the story of witchcraft is primarily the story of women."¹³ Karlsen argues that there are clear demographic trends for those accused of witchcraft in New England. From 1620-1725, for example, 78% of those accused of witchcraft were women.¹⁴ More specifically, women over 40 and those who stood to inherit were even more vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft.¹⁵ These statistics make it impossible to ignore the role of misogyny in witchcraft accusations. The very definition of a witch in New England was intertwined with fears of female rebellion against the strict gender norms. In broad terms, witches simply symbolized women who refused "to accept their 'place' in New England's social order."¹⁶ Like fantastical witches' perceived ability to use magic to "disrupt the social and natural order," the women labeled as witches openly disrupted the social order through their real-world actions.¹⁷

¹² Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 104.

¹³ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, xxi.

¹⁴ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 47.

¹⁵ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 65.

¹⁶ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 119.

¹⁷ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 134.

Karlsen generally agrees with Boyer and Nissenbaum that economic concerns undergirded Salem's descent into paranoia and madness. For Karlsen, however, these economic fears stemmed from the perceived threat that women who held property and asserted their independence posed to the patriarchal power structure of Puritan New England. Witchcraft accusations were a societal defense mechanism against women who strayed from the prescribed norm of subservience and passivity. Witchcraft, in essence, was just the perversion of women's traditional societal roles.¹⁸ Those labeled as witches were typically older women who stood to inherit, exercised power in the realm of healthcare, or were successful entrepreneurs. They were typically viewed by the community as "discontented, angry, envious, malicious, seductive, lying, and proud."¹⁹ These were women who exercised palpable power, often directly at the expense of men. They rejected the subordinate role assigned to them, often expressing dissatisfaction with male leaders and the church hierarchy. Puritan society refused to tolerate such empowered women. Puritan society in the seventeenth century was built on hierarchy.²⁰ Ordained by God, the church led the men who were in turn ordained to lead their families. When women challenged their husbands, they disrupted this system and directly challenged God as well.²¹ If women failed to uphold their marital fidelity, they threatened a man's ability to pass property down to his rightful heirs. If the strict gender norms for women were broken, there were serious consequences for the entire community. Witchcraft accusations served to force women into the subordinate role that the Puritan leadership deemed necessary for their holy experiment.²² "If women were to repress their own needs, their own goals, their own interests—and identify with the needs, goals, and interests of the men in their families—then the impulse to speak and act on their own behalf had to be stifled."²³ However, "as the witchcraft trials and executions show, only force could ensure such a sweeping denial of self."²⁴ Ultimately, it was "fear of independent women that lay at the heart of New England's nightmare."²⁵ Those who dared to assert

¹⁸ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 145.

¹⁹ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 152.

²⁰ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 181.

²¹ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 164.

²² Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 180.

²³ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 180.

²⁴ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 180.

²⁵ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 213.

themselves and defy societal norms directly threatened the social order and male prosperity. “By treating female dissent as evidence of witchcraft as well as heresy, the authorities may have effectively silenced Puritan women’s opposition.”²⁶

In contrast to Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen, David D. Hall does not attempt to explain the Salem Witch Trials through an analysis of the crisis using neo-Marxist or feminist ideologies in *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement*. He instead focuses on the role of popular religion and magic in New England society, and how these practices transformed the witch-hunt into a method for dealing with “social strife and sickness.”²⁷ Unlike Boyer and Nissenbaum’s and Karlsen’s attempts to extract the true tension behind the trials, Hall focuses on explaining why the witch-hunt was New England society’s method of dealing with social crises in general. Hall asserts that actual religious belief in New England often deviated sharply from what was preached in sermons and meetinghouses. Rather than dissecting underlying social conflicts, Hall argues that understanding the Salem Witch Trials requires an analysis of the ways New England’s popular religious practice intermingled with folklore and magic. For the majority of New England colonists, religion was functioned as “a loosely bounded set of symbols and motifs that gave significance to rites of passage and life crises, that infused everyday events with the presence of the supernatural.”²⁸ Alongside the Bible swirled a culture full of “tales of witchcraft and the Devil, of comets, hailstorms, monster births, and apparitions.”²⁹ Witchcraft accusations served as a manifestation of the intermingling of Christian thought with stories of magic and wonder. The Puritans believed that purging the society of sin would earn greater favor from God and protect their salvation from the advances of the Devil. In a tumultuous world, tales of wonder and rituals of cleansing—like witch-hunts—served as attempts to respond to social crises and regain what little agency residents of New England could have over their uncertain lives.³⁰

However, Hall does not simply describe the Salem Witch Trials as a routine manifestation of New England’s belief in magic and ever-present fear of the Devil. Rather, for Hall, this deep belief in magic and the reality of witches explains why New England

²⁶ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 197.

²⁷ David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 192.

²⁸ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 18.

²⁹ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 72.

³⁰ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 94.

society instinctively turned to witch-hunts in times of crisis. The Salem Witch Trials *were* an aberration, but one that can be explained through a combined analysis of social tensions and of New England's belief in magic. Hall asserts that because the belief in the supernatural was so pervasive and "so widely credited as real, these stories readily became, as well, weapons in a complex game of politics."³¹ The entrenchment of belief in wonder allowed any member of society the freedom to legitimately interpret events such as strange deaths or ominous comets. For many members of the community without agency in the restrictive religious institutions, prophecy and magic offered avenues of empowerment.³² For the clergy, the prevalent belief in wonder among the laity often proved problematic. But, instead of trying to purge it from society, they attempted to co-opt it and use it to push their central message of "impending judgement."³³ Fearing society's declension, clerics hoped to use wonder to instill a fear of communal sin and imminent doom. With the threat of the Devil lurking, they hoped to impel members of the community to embrace God and actively participate in the church. This message of danger and judgment was coupled with the message of terror promoted in the popular "penny godlies" that circulated New England. These books peddled depictions of "sudden death, the gaping jaws of hell, a Christ who comes in judgement, [and] the torments of despair."³⁴ These messages from the pulpit and from the popular press combined to create "a chilling sense of vulnerability" and despair among the general population.³⁵

Yet this message of fear backfired. Many became disenchanted with the ministry and began to turn elsewhere for the assurances of certainty these messages denied them. Many of the confessing witches at Salem claimed that they had turned to the Devil as a respite from their overwhelming sense of shame. Faced with no achievable path to salvation through the church, many people turned instead to the ideas of wonder permeating societal discourse, one of which was the Devil. In pursuing the Devil, they sought relief from the shame impressed on them from the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Others took a different route to the

³¹ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 94.

³² Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 100.

³³ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 116.

³⁴ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 135.

³⁵ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 135.

same end of religious agency and purity that the church failed to provide—they tried to purge the Devil from society, rather than consorting with him.

While clerical legalism created tensions that pushed many to embrace wonder, magic, and the Devil to gain agency and control in the face of uncertainty, this phenomenon does not fully explain the Salem Witch Trials or the culture surrounding witch-hunts in New England. While some witches confessed to their crimes and truly believed themselves in league with the Devil, the vast majority of those convicted maintained their innocence. Framing witch-hunts as a broader societal attempt to retain agency, Hall asserts that “in using witch-hunts to purge witches, the colonists were resorting to familiar instruments, the fast day and the public execution, to cleanse the land of sin.”³⁶ Even though many of the people convicted were totally innocent, in a culture so rich with “descriptions of declension, it was easy to suppose that everyone was guilty of allowing Satan to invade the land.”³⁷ For New England society, witch-hunting became a means of moral reformation to restore the purity of their fallen land. In a society so ripe with stories of wonder that fueled fears of moral degradation, declension, and the ever-looming Devil, witch-hunts seemed to be the only way to “restore their land to cleanliness.”³⁸ However, Salem took this culture of purity rituals too far. Meant to bring the community together and purge out sin, the Salem trials instead drove it farther apart. Thus, the Salem Witch Trials became a dark manifestation of New England’s belief in magic and wonder, an attempt to enforce societal cohesion that ultimately served as the dying breath of this past culture. In the wake of the trials, the magic that had justified them and the clergy that had perpetuated them lost credibility. For many residents of Massachusetts, it was clear that rather than a purge of the Devil, the trials were a manifestation of his will.

All three of these books attempt to dig under the surface of the mystery of the crisis and explain what prompted such a violent outbreak in Salem in 1692. The residents of Salem themselves struggled to comprehend what they had done. In the wake of the witch trials, they were left with a profound sense of confusion and regret. In this period, New England went through a societal reckoning—a reconsideration of values of hierarchy and draconian

³⁶ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 189.

³⁷ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 193.

³⁸ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 194.

methods of ensuring societal cohesion. Four years after the trials, the Massachusetts government mandated a period of fasting in hopes that the Lord would “pardon all the errors of his servants in the ‘Tragedie’ of the great witch-hunt.”³⁹ While Boyer and Nissenbaum, Karlsen, and Hall all draw different conclusions about the true cause of the Salem Witch Trials, they all start with an analysis of Puritan society and its cultural norms. They all focus on the love of order, the essential structure of hierarchy, and the requirement that individual members of society repress their private will. For each author, the Salem Witch Trials represented a societal response to the breach of these sacred and structurally essential norms. However, beyond this basic agreement, their arguments diverge and develop distinct conceptions of the direst threat to Salem’s Puritan norms.

While Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen disagree about the exact causes of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak, both their books seek to answer the same question: what were the witch trials *really* a manifestation of? For Boyer and Nissenbaum, the trials represent Puritan society’s reckoning with the emergence of capitalism and the demise of their once-hallowed errand to build a holy society. For Karlsen, the trials represent societal fear of female agency and were an attempt to force women into a subordinate role through violence and fearmongering. However, despite these disagreements, both agree that the trials were essentially a collective societal response to a perceived threat to the Puritan social structure. The trials served as an archaic mode of purging the society of those who violated its norms. While the authors’ opinions on who posed this threat to Puritan society differ, the broad structure of their respective explanations for the crisis are remarkably similar. Boyer and Nissenbaum refer to the trials as “not simply a personal quarrel, an economic dispute, or even a struggle for power, but a mortal conflict involving the very nature of the community itself.”⁴⁰ A Puritan was raised to “distrust his private will, to perceive it as the ‘old Adam’ which, above all, constituted original sin.”⁴¹ If the will could not be tamed, then it had to be eradicated from society to stave off spiritual ruin. Karlsen expresses the threat women posed to society in essentially the same fashion. She asserts that Puritans valued hierarchy and order above all else. Like Boyer and Nissenbaum, she also argues that the maintenance of

³⁹ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 195.

⁴⁰ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 103.

⁴¹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 104.

this strict hierarchical system required a systematic eradication of the private will. People who refused to accept their “place in the social order were the very embodiments of evil.”⁴² While all disorderly people posed a threat to the hierarchical Puritan model, Karlsen believed that women threatened it most of all. Just as Boyer and Nissenbaum cite capitalists in Salem Town as the manifestation of the Devil infiltrating the holy experiment, Karlsen uses this same conception of the Puritan value structure to posit instead that empowered women were perceived as agents of the Devil’s desire to “topple the whole hierarchical system.”⁴³ For both Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen, witchcraft accusations served as Salem’s defense against anyone who strayed from the imperative repression of self-interest and dared to impose the personal will on the outside world.

It is no surprise that Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen operate within this similar framework, as Karlsen was directly influenced by *Salem Possessed*. In writing *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, Karlsen built on the facets of *Salem Possessed* that she found unproblematic, reassessing parts that she felt ignored the role of misogyny in the crisis. Thus, parts of Karlsen’s argument assume some of Boyer and Nissenbaum’s most airtight claims, while others openly refute their assertions. Boyer and Nissenbaum spend a large portion of *Salem Possessed* discussing how the town’s institutional weakness and chronic buildup of social tension allowed for such a violent and unique outburst. The genius of their thorough analysis transforms the mysterious and seemingly unexplainable Salem Witchcraft Outbreak into an understandable result of high tensions in a community ill-equipped to handle disputes through the organs of government. This analysis of the divide from Salem Town and the resulting decentralization of power that kept Salem Village from gaining autonomy renders intelligible the witchcraft paranoia that occurred there. Without this context, it is difficult to understand why a similar response did not occur in other parts of New England similarly confronted by the emergence of the capitalist model. The infamous witch trials happened in Salem, and only in Salem, because “the Village’s institutional arrangements were unusual—indeed, nearly unprecedented—in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Salem Village was virtually the first Massachusetts community to enter for a protracted period this gray area in

⁴² Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 181.

⁴³ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 181.

which its separate existence was given legal recognition, but in such a way as to deny it any real autonomy.”⁴⁴ Unlike in communities with real governmental structure, disputes arising in Salem Village festered until they involved the entire community. Through an analysis of town records, geographical data, and land deeds, Boyer and Nissenbaum expose the extent of the decentralization and exploitation of Salem Village, and how this structural instability led to the unprecedented scale of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak.

Karlsen simultaneously takes for granted and critiques this central structural component of Boyer and Nissenbaum’s argument. Karlsen undoubtedly accepts the reality of Salem’s unique institutional weakness and its role in escalating the crisis. However, she also pushes back against Boyer and Nissenbaum by pointing out the issues with their narrow focus on Salem. Boyer and Nissenbaum use the specific conditions of Salem to explain the witchcraft outbreak as a struggle over the very nature of the community, a struggle between the exploited farmers and the beneficiaries of the new capitalist system. While their argument is compelling in the singular context of Salem, it does not really fit into the wider context of witchcraft accusations throughout New England. By adopting a broader focus on witchcraft accusations across all of New England, Karlsen aims to demonstrate how, while the events at Salem were an escalation, they were not an aberration. The victims of Salem’s witch trials fell into the same demographic category as those persecuted on a smaller scale across all of New England: they were typically women who deviated from their societal role of subordination.⁴⁵ While the institutional weakness of Salem allowed for accusations to occur on a larger scale than in other places, “the Salem outbreak created only a slight wrinkle in this established fabric of suspicion.”⁴⁶ Rather than a unique crisis, Salem was simply a more obvious manifestation of pre-established and universally enforced rules for women in Puritan New England. For Karlsen, Boyer and Nissenbaum’s specific focus on Salem exposes serious issues with their argument. By ignoring the role misogyny played in Salem, they fail to see how previous victims of witchcraft accusations in the 1640s and 1650s fit the same description as the Salem witches. Karlsen’s scope is far wider because her underlying argument isn’t about Salem—it is about Puritan New England as a whole. Regardless of

⁴⁴ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 51.

⁴⁵ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 116.

⁴⁶ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 116.

whether they were accused in Salem in 1692 or in Hartford in 1647, the criteria for witches stayed consistent. “However varied their backgrounds and economic positions, as women without brothers or women without sons, they stood in the way of the orderly transmission of property from one generation of males to another.”⁴⁷ By focusing solely on Salem, Boyer and Nissenbaum may have missed the larger trend of witchcraft accusations and wildly misinterpreted the crisis.

While Karlsen pushes back on Boyer and Nissenbaum’s glaring omission of the role of misogyny in the Salem Witch Trials, she agrees that economic tensions played a large role in the crisis. The tensions created by Salem Town’s exploitation of Salem Village fuel Boyer and Nissenbaum’s explanation of the trials. They point to the conflict preceding the witch trials, the appointment of Salem Village’s new minister, as a clear example of the factions on either side of the subsequent witch-hunt. Through an analysis of Salem Village’s tax records, they observe that the poorest residents of Salem Village supported Samuel Parris’ appointment as village minister, while the richest residents largely opposed it.⁴⁸ Similarly, most of Parris’ supporters lived in the northwestern region of the Village, furthest from Salem Town, while those who opposed him lived in the eastern region of the Village, close to the Town. The members of the pro-Parris faction were united in their exclusion from the economic success of Salem Town. In contrast to the Town’s prosperity, they faced shrinking plots of land and economic stagnation.⁴⁹ Deprived of any political agency in Salem’s governmental superstructure, Samuel Parris and his supporters felt that “the total thrust of that commercial development [in Salem Town] represented a looming moral threat with implications of the most fundamental sort.”⁵⁰ Thus, their economic grievances fueled their initiation of the witch trials in an attempt to combat the agents of “private will” they felt had led to their increasingly destitute lives.⁵¹ Samuel Parris himself initiated the entire panic. For Boyer and Nissenbaum, the factionalism at the heart of the trials was a direct result of capitalist exploitation.

⁴⁷ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 116.

⁴⁸ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 82.

⁴⁹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 90.

⁵⁰ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 105.

⁵¹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 109.

Karlsen agrees that economics played a critical role in the crisis, but challenges Boyer and Nissenbaum's assessment of this role. Rather than simply driving the tension that undergirded the trials, she argues that economic clashes served to expose the already underlying "fear of independent women that lay at the heart of New England's nightmare."⁵² In her opinion, Boyer and Nissenbaum expose the centrality of economic issues in men's lives, but totally fail to notice how women "were profoundly affected by these concerns."⁵³ Economic instability exacerbated the resentment men already harbored towards women who refused to remain subordinate. As resources in Salem became more and more scarce, struggling men began to see widows and other propertied women as seriously threatening "obstacles to property and prosperity."⁵⁴ For men struggling to gain enough property to support their families and start their public lives, widows posed a direct barrier to their "inheritances long denied."⁵⁵ Boyer and Nissenbaum posit that the female victims of witchcraft accusations were persecuted for their participation in the burgeoning Salem Town economy rather than simply because of their gender. However, Karlsen starkly asserts that her "research does not support the idea (as Boyer and Nissenbaum's argument about Salem suggests) that these women were beneficiaries of the new economic order."⁵⁶ Rather, those accused of being witches "stood symbolically opposed to—and were therefore subversive of—that order, in that they did not accept their assigned place within it."⁵⁷ Thus, unlike Boyer and Nissenbaum's assertion that female witches simply happened to be beneficiaries of emerging capitalism, Karlsen asserts that "the daughters of Eve" instead became the scapegoats of Salem Village's economic woes.⁵⁸ Faced with economic suffering, men reverted to internalized misogyny to purge the society of any woman who posed a threat to their acquisition of property. In the context of Karlsen's overarching argument about misogyny's role in witchcraft accusations, economic tension simply served to aggravate the underlying fears of female autonomy that threatened the male hold on society.

⁵² Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 213.

⁵³ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 214.

⁵⁴ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.

⁵⁵ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.

⁵⁶ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.

⁵⁷ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.

⁵⁸ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.

These differing views of the role of the economic tensions that plagued Salem in the late 17th century indicate profound differences in how Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen explain the witch-hunt crisis. The Salem Witchcraft Outbreak was undisputedly spurred by economic tensions. For Boyer and Nissenbaum, these tensions pitted the farmers clinging to a dying Winthropian dream of New England society against the emerging merchant class moving on to a new epoch of societal organization. Economic inequalities, tensions over money, and squabbles over land fueled the underlying dispute over the social structure and the morality of Salem. For Karlsen, this explanation of the crisis severely misses the mark, ignoring the suffering of women in favor of focusing on lofty ideas about the morality of society. For her, the economic tensions in Salem instead exacerbated the underlying fear of female agency.

Despite their differences of opinion on what undergirded the trials, Karlsen and Boyer and Nissenbaum both attempt to contextualize the madness of Salem by bringing in modern social theories. While both offer exceptional and relatively accurate explanations of the crisis, they run the risk of eisegesis that threatens any attempt at reading modern theories into past contexts. In positing modern views of economic exploitation and feminism at the heart of the crisis, they miss the dominance of religious motives for the actual people who carried out the trials. Hall's *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement* attempts to explain the crisis not through the lens of modern theories but instead through the mindset of 17th century New England. He analyzes the messages of the clergy, the popular books of the day, and the diaries of New England residents to develop a conception of popular sentiment at the time of the Salem Witch Trials. While Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen's economic and gender-based explanations of the crisis are more fulfilling to the tastes of a modern reader, Hall's work does not fall prey to the dangers of eisegesis and is relatively unproblematic.

Unlike Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen, Hall's book does not focus entirely on witchcraft. Rather, it offers a comprehensive discussion of the role of magic and wonder in New England popular culture. Hall strives to determine which cultural beliefs and religious convictions motivated the perpetrators of the Salem Witch Trials. The residents of Puritan New England were immersed in a culture teeming with deep fears of eternal damnation and dark magic. Popular books warned of the fires of Hell and told stories of those who had been tricked into betraying God. The clergy, hoping to inspire religious participation, co-opted

these cultural fears and used them to push their own narratives of impending judgment. This alarmism profoundly affected the colonists, especially in times of crisis. Strange sicknesses or natural disasters would often stir a profound belief that God was punishing members of society for their sins. The general sentiment of the time was that the Puritans' once holy experiment was moving further and further from God's grace. Thus, Witchcraft accusations became a mode of societal agency over Salem's perceived descent into sin. Rituals like the fast, the thanksgiving, and the witch-hunt, were desperate attempts to establish the holiness of the community and preserve God's protection.⁵⁹ While Hall does not reduce the witch trials to a method of ensuring religious purity, his linkage of magic and Christianity does expose that, for many, magic was fundamentally tied to deep religious convictions. In perpetuating witch-hunts, these colonists were deeply motivated by fears for their own salvation and for that of their families.

Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen fail to touch on the Puritans' relationship with magic or with their Christian convictions. In both of their books, Puritan norms and culture are presented in a very secular 20th-century fashion. Both analyses of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak attempt to expose the underlying economic and sexist motivations as the true heart of the conflict. However, by looking past the professed religious motives of the day, these authors may have completely misunderstood the motives of the trial's perpetrators and mischaracterized the crisis. The closest Boyer and Nissenbaum get to a discussion of the deep religious beliefs of the residents of Salem is their discussion of what they characterize as the moral crisis that emerging capitalism posed. They go on to lay out the Winthropian dream of Puritan society and discuss the norm of repressing self-interest in favor of the common good. For them, this moral issue is supposed to explain the "passionate emotions" that animated the factional disputes in Salem.⁶⁰ However, for Boyer and Nissenbaum, this moral crisis is simply a mask for the underlying economic dispute. Aside from discussing religion's social power, and briefly discussing sexism in European theology, Karlsen also gives short shrift to any meaningful discussion of the role of religious belief in the Salem Witch Trials. This is a massive oversight. There were no atheists in colonial New England. Nor were there any powerful enlightenment deists in the vein of the American Founding

⁵⁹ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 170.

⁶⁰ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 103.

Fathers. While levels of religious participation varied, the colonists of New England were immersed in a religious and supernatural world. They often acted for explicitly religious reasons—which were not simply masking underlying motivations. Their world was one of danger and uncertainty. A mixture of religion and magic helped them explain their existence and gave them agency in a world full of “invisible forces” and “mystery.”⁶¹ While Hall admits that these widely believed tales of magic and wonder became “weapons in a complex game of politics,” he discourages the dismissal of the beliefs of Salem’s residents as a simple cover for underlying motivations.⁶² Salem’s residents truly believed that wonders were signs and predictions of God’s judgment.⁶³ Hall’s analysis of confessions and diaries from the era exposes a deep societal fear of judgment and a sense of vulnerability. While such fear often manifested only in times of crisis, it deeply affected the actions of the colonists. These were deeply God-fearing people petrified of the fires of Hell. They often acted in ways incomprehensible to the modern reader in order to secure their salvation and uphold God’s favor for the community. By failing to discuss the religious motivations of the perpetrators of the witch trials, Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen may have missed the primary motivating factor for the members of New England society.

Accurately understanding the Salem Witch Trials requires a blending of Boyer and Nissenbaum, Karlsen, and Hall’s analyses. Appreciating the residents of 17th century Salem’s religious convictions and deep belief in magic is essential to correctly assess their motivations for and justification of the witch-hunts as an appropriate response to crises. As Hall asserts, these colonists genuinely believed in both magic and portents, and saw the witch-hunt as a way to protect the spiritual health of the community. Hall’s analysis, while essential to understanding why witch-hunts were an instinctive response to crisis, lacks a meaningful explanation of the social tensions in Salem in 1692 that prompted such an unprecedented reaction. To truly understand Salem, and to uncover these underlying tensions, Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen’s commentaries become necessary. While Hall offers a more adequate commentary on the reason the Puritans resorted to witch-hunts, these authors illuminate the deeper level of meaning underlying the seemingly mysterious crisis.

⁶¹ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 94.

⁶² Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 94.

⁶³ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 114.

Both of their arguments explain the tensions that erupted in the witch trials, filling in the gaps in Hall's analysis.

David Hall best explains the real significance of religious practice for colonists in New England. Without his comprehensive discussion of widely believed wonder stories, rituals essential to societal cohesion, and widespread fear of damnation, it is impossible to truly understand why Salem turned to witch trials as a mode of dealing with societal disaster. Neither Boyer and Nissenbaum nor Karlsen fully appreciate the religious motives of the New England colonists; nor do they fully account for the very real fear of witchcraft and the Devil. Hall touches briefly on the way in which tensions between the general population and the church may have caused some to actively seek out the Devil. However, his book is otherwise not concerned with explaining which social tensions truly led to the Salem outbreak. His goal is to demonstrate why the colonists resorted to witch-hunts in times of crisis. The faith of Puritan New England was a faith of action. For the colonists, "religion was a matter of incessant striving to defeat the evil in the world as well as in oneself."⁶⁴ Especially in the face of disaster, the church became a source of understanding, relief, and protection for the common people. Thus, when societal tensions erupted in Salem in the late 17th century, the residents turned to the church to cleanse the land of sin and restore harmony and cohesion. The Great Witch-Hunt was the residents' way of doing so. Without Hall's discussion of the deep belief in magic widespread among both the clergy and the general public, the witch-hunt makes little sense as a response to social tension. It seems like little more than a mask for ulterior economic motives. Discounting the legitimate religious convictions of the Salem residents fundamentally misrepresents the crisis. Hall's analysis is essential to contextualizing the claims made in *Salem Possessed* and *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*.

While Hall gets a lot right, he does not adequately explain exactly what underlying tension resulted in the Salem trials. Hall makes it clear that the witch-hunt was about "cleansing, reconciliation, [and] affirmations of authority."⁶⁵ In closing his discussion on Salem, he touches on how the trials demonstrate "the intensity with which these people valued the coherence of the body social."⁶⁶ The Salem trials failed to secure this valued

⁶⁴ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 121.

⁶⁵ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 196.

⁶⁶ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 196.

cohesion, instead exacerbating social tensions. This failure led to the cessation of witch-hunts in New England. Residents and ministers realized that cohesion was no longer easily enforceable and that crackdowns on growing pluralism, like witch-hunts, would only further damage the community. In the face of this realization, the Winthropian goal of unity lost some of its significance. This lofty ideal of conformity was seen as unachievable and not worth the social turmoil that accompanied its enforcement. In this short wrap-up of the trials, Hall barely scratches the surface of Boyer and Nissenbaum's analysis of the crisis. While *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement* is essential to understand how witch-hunts were a mode of social cohesion and spiritual health, it does not take the next step to truly explain why the Winthropian dream died on Witch's Hill. Hall's argument is the safest and least problematic of the three—it raises little fear of mischaracterization or eisegesis. Yet this very strength results in a shallow interpretation of Salem's social dynamics and the ulterior motives of its residents. To satisfy the yearning for deeper answers about the tensions at play in Salem, and about the ramifications of the crisis, Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen are necessary reading.

Boyer and Nissenbaum's most essential contribution to the discussion of the Salem Witch Trials is their analysis of the tensions over the Winthropian communal values. Hall briefly states that the witch trials led to moral reckoning and a rethinking of Puritan society's practice of strictly enforcing societal cohesion. Boyer and Nissenbaum expand on Hall's limited analysis and fully explain this phenomenon. They depict the specific social tensions present in Salem that necessitated a witch-hunt to cleanse society of sin and enforce coherence. Conflict between Western farm labor and the Eastern merchant class, aggravated by the rise of the capitalist economy, led to serious conflict over the way the community should be organized. Would New England abandon Winthrop's instruction to "rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body?"⁶⁷ Were the colonists willing to renounce their fundamental goal of a well-ordered society and religious errand for a capitalist system based on individual will and economic prosperity? This was the core tension tearing Salem apart. The witch trials served as a final attempt by the farmers to reassert the dominance of the Winthropian dream—an attempt that failed. The

⁶⁷ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 104.

trials served as the dying breath of Winthropian doctrine, forcing the society to accept the pluralism growing in their midst. Hall simply fails to acknowledge this central reality of the crisis.

Boyer and Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed* is also essential to understanding why this tragedy happened in Salem and not anywhere else. While the narrow focus of their analysis somewhat problematically protects their neo-Marxist narrative, it also helps to answer the looming question: Why Salem? Only Salem's institutional weakness can explain why the community fell subject to "a strikingly high level of internal bickering and disarray."⁶⁸ The lack of political agency afforded to the disaffected residents of Salem Village meant their limited outlets for social grievances were "archaic" societal modes of authority, like the witch-hunt.⁶⁹ While Boyer and Nissenbaum's overtly neo-Marxist viewpoint can at times prove constraining, they alone present a satisfying explanation of Salem's unique vulnerability to the paranoid violence of the witch trials.

Karlsen's viewpoint tempers both Boyer and Nissenbaum and Hall's descriptions of the crisis. While Karlsen's argument has twinges of eisegesis (especially in her fifth chapter, where she claims to find evidence of European misogyny in the New England consciousness), no explanation of the Salem Witch Trials can be complete without a discussion of misogyny. Hall and Boyer and Nissenbaum simply gloss over the stark reality that "the story of witchcraft is primarily the story of women."⁷⁰ The very description of a witch was associated with female characteristics. From 1620-1725, 78% of those accused of witchcraft were female.⁷¹ A witch was someone who defied the social norms of Puritan society. They not only expressed dissatisfaction with their social position but often criticized ecclesiastical and political leadership in an outrightly confrontational manner. Women's forced status of subordination made them more likely to express dissatisfaction with their lives and assert their personal will publicly. When they did so, they posed a threat to the colony's hierarchy and social cohesion. Even women who came into power through inheritance, through no fault of their own, represented a threat to Puritan and patriarchal hierarchy. To fully appreciate the religious and social reckoning of the Salem Witch Trials,

⁶⁸ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 45.

⁶⁹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 109.

⁷⁰ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, xxi.

⁷¹ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 47.

it is critical to understand the ways in which these events sought to bind women in a subordinate role. Thus, Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* is necessary to showcase how other accounts of the crisis, like *Salem Possessed*, gloss over gender to focus on underlying social issues.

The Salem Witch Trials present a scholarly quandary. The colonists of 17th century New England lived in a world fundamentally different from ours. Theirs was a world in which religious motives were often the only acceptable public justification for an individual's actions. However, these religious justifications were often sensationalized and covered ulterior motives. Thus, understanding the Salem Witch Trials requires a tricky balancing act of considering the colonist's own religious justifications and motivations among the other social and economic motives that undoubtedly influenced their actions. David Hall provides the explanation of beliefs about magic in New England necessary to understand the cultural phenomenon of witch-hunts. However, it is Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen whose analysis truly dives into the psyche of the residents of Salem to flesh out the underlying social tensions that so forcefully animated the Salem crisis.

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Article 3

Poetry as Modern Prayer: Language's Orientation Towards One Another

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POETRY AS MODERN PRAYER: LANGUAGE'S ORIENTATION TOWARDS ONE ANOTHER

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Abstract: Historically, we have looked to religion for answers to the deep questions of life, but an increasingly solitary valuation of logos has left secular society unsatisfied with traditional answers. Grounded in analysis of the personal value of poetry and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, I first argue that there is an abstract, life-sustaining attribute of *humanness* which we should point towards. Then, calling upon Amy Hollywood's notion of "Secular Death," I explain that this humanness comes from a valuation of ideas which extend beyond the realm of what is logically valuable. Recognizing the aversion of contemporary society to previous sources of humanness, namely prayer, I conclude by asking each individual to be a poet, using the tools of language to pull human persons towards one another.

Introduction

From the first grunt
To the first word
To the first sentence
To the first paragraph
To the first poem
To each other

This was my first poem. It was published on Twitter Thursday, May 6, 2021.

I find poetry so beautiful because its medium, language, is not only entirely intent on bringing people together, but is also the sum of all human development and direction. First, we grunted. The grunt was the first verbal attempt to indicate a relationship with others. The words, sentences, and paragraphs that followed allowed people to get closer to each other, to exchange thoughts and ideas. But the first poet wanted a connection even closer than this sterile and rudimentary baseline. The first poet wanted to plunge into the deeply human experience that connects all of humanity. They wanted to share, at least partly, in emotions. Poetry is an attempt to look others in the eye and say: 'We may not know exactly what you are thinking or feeling, but we understand what it is like to be alive.' The COVID-19

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lockdown has brought the necessity of this connection to the forefront of my mind. Combined with the social trends of secularism and scientification, COVID-19 has made most visible the unfortunate decrease in the resilience and vibrancy of intentional communities that value a shared sense of humanity. In particular, the religious communities in my home city of New York were battered by restrictions on meeting size beyond those placed on commercial businesses. Imposed by then-Governor Andrew Cuomo, these additional restrictions seemed to suggest that the value added to New York by these religious communities is less important than what private businesses might otherwise provide.

I do not believe that this shift necessarily means that modernity and shared humanity are incompatible. Looking to the horizon, I find hope in the persistence of intentional communities that invite people to participate in deeper relationships with each other and with humanity.

Poetry and Adoration

While walking back to Fordham University's campus one Thursday evening, I noticed that the front door of a local parish, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, was open. This seemed unusual, so I stopped in to pray. I paused in the foyer, looking through the windows of the doors to the nave to watch at least three dozen people participating in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. I almost turned around then, intimidated by the largest adoration group I had seen since youth catechism classes. I felt like an intruder, a passerby who had not been invited. I interpreted the front door as an invitation to share only in the space, not in the community, of the church. In the end, however, I sat in the back pews for a few moments of silent adoration. Perhaps this experience has stuck with me because it showed me that prayer is a bit like poetry: both draw people together.

I want to revisit this anecdote for several reasons. First, it highlights the importance of looking for *people*, rather than *spaces*, as we emerge from this pandemic. Upon reflection, I find it odd that seeing the people praying behind an open door made me hesitant to accept the invitation. This faltering stems primarily from the decentering and monadizing nature of social distancing, which has gripped us for over a year. This experience has been decentering in the sense that we have been removed from the social values we once considered central to our being, and monadizing in that we are each hardening into our own separate and

indivisible entities.² Since the pandemic began, I have attended mass in-person only four times. Even the few masses that I did attend felt hollow and sterile due to the distance between parishioners and the lack of the communal activities like singing, which elicits the same emotional response as poetry.

Despite the discouraging hollowness of the COVID-19 masses held there, I make my way to the tiny (and often empty) Blue Chapel of our main academic building at least twice every week. Ironically, I find solace in conversations with friends as we confess that we find ourselves in similar straits—returning to this empty, yet sacred, space to seek humanity in a place where people are not physically present. How odd is it that we consider this small, rarely visited, top-floor room sacred in itself, but without anyone to fill this space, its sacredness might never be recognized? Especially now—as the unlit sanctuary lamp conveys a dismal reminder of the absence of this space’s previous caretaker—I struggle to find humanity in the emptiness of the Blue Chapel.

I must contrast my experience in Fordham’s Blue Chapel with that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish, where, despite the Parish’s requirement of silence and social distancing, humanity persists in the presence of those who invite others to join in a spiritual communion. Although my experiences upon entering the open doors of the Blue Chapel and Mount Carmel were certainly different, there is a humanizing value of the doors’ invitation that reminds me too of the power of poetry. Indeed, whereas the presence of other persons is ultimately important for recognizing our shared sense of humanity, the invitation also plays a role, even when no one is present to extend the invitation. The paradox of the invitation of all and yet specifically each can be seen in a saying used frequently at Accepted Students Day by the president of Fordham University, Joseph McShane, S.J.: ‘we are called to look each student in the eye and tell them that they are the most important student that has ever stepped foot on this campus in its 180 years of existence and then look at the next, say the same thing, and have it still be true.’ Poetry does just what Fr. McShane describes: it tells each listener and reader that he or she is particularly worthy of sharing in the writer’s deep emotions. Similarly, Our Lady of Mount Carmel’s open door during

² In Leibniz’s philosophy, a monad is the most simple constituent part of the universe, whose properties cannot be changed by forces external to it. See Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz & Nicholas Rescher. "Index of Key Terms and Ideas." In *G. W. Leibniz's Monadology*, ed. Nicholas Rescher (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

adoration allows people like me—who had never before been inside—to feel uniquely invited into a sacred spiritual communion. The invitation of poems, like church doors, forms symbolic connections between those in the inner community and those in the greater community. Though personal experiences with poetry and adoration impact only those reached by their limited scopes, they draw individuals in with the intention of orienting them outwards—toward the broader human experience shared by all people. The gesture of leaving the door open and inviting others in reminds those participating that this shared experience brings those present closer not only to one other, but also to all of humanity.

Both poetry and adoration also pull individuals towards a center: each other. Indeed, just as adoration draws the participants towards God—who, the Church teaches, accompanies us at all times—poetry pulls readers towards the poet. The value of poetry, adoration, and similar others-oriented practices emanates from their ability to hone the skills that not only make us good persons, but too reveal our fundamental humanity, our *imago Dei*. Decreased participation in religious practices like Eucharistic adoration and the Mass leads those without religious dispositions to look towards a more common, shared tool of connection: language. It is the principle driver of organized society, but its uses extend far beyond organization. The writer, most particularly the poet, is the secular priest.

Value Beyond Logic

Hannah Arendt's description of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* comes to mind as a particularly helpful tool for understanding the power and importance of language in maintaining and fostering a personal relationship with others. Eichmann was notably inarticulate, not so much due to a lack of education or oratory skills, but because of his strict adherence to "language rules."³ He refused to engage with the ideas and emotions of others, relying entirely on the sterilizing language of the Nazi Party. An eviction became a 'change of residence,' a concentration camp became 'labor in the east,' and murder became a 'final solution.' In this way, his strict adherence to language rules was a manifestation of his inability to recognize the humanity of others, rendering him unable to reflect on the evil

³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 86.

inhumanity of his own actions. As Arendt notes, “[Eichmann’s] inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.”⁴ Eichmann’s inhumanity came primarily from an unwillingness to engage with the thoughts, ideas, and emotions of others. Language rules posed a barrier for Eichmann. They operated as thought-terminating clichés which disabled the cognitive dissonance necessary to foster emotional attachment or empathy. These strict and limiting language rules seem to both stem from and reinforce a perspective in which Eichmann views himself, the Nazi Party, and Nazi culture as more human than humanity itself—a view that negates the need to connect with those superficially placed below him and which therefore cripples his ability to express his own humanity.

Eichmann’s belief that he is more human than humanity stems from a teleological view of history, a concept first identified and critiqued in Herbert Butterfield’s famous historiography, *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Butterfield identifies a dominant strain of history-writing that views the span of history as a forward march towards a “glorious present,” and to the future.⁵ An interesting part of the teleological view of history is that it demands evangelism in the name of moving the world forward. This evangelical perspective of progress was the driving force for imperialism and forced conversions, both of which sought to eliminate ways of life considered inferior in order to replace them with those deemed appropriate in the eyes of the “glorious present.” Within the context of modern theological, philosophical, and spiritual discourse, it seems as if there is a mass of people who might subscribe to the same dangerous teleological mindset that limited Eichmann and the Whigs, just with a different concept of the “glorious present” (and, hopefully, less gruesome results).

In the Western philosophical tradition, one important ‘end goal’ involves the use of logic (*logos*) to evaluate and systematically prove certain truths: the end-goal can be identified by the word “logos”—the idea that which we can evaluate and prove systematically: A to B to C to D, our answer. The Greeks counterweighted *logos* with *pathos* (emotions), but this is often sidelined in contemporary discussion. Think, for example, of

⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 27.

⁵ Hubert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931). See also Simon Blackburn, “Whig view of history,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

“facts don’t care about your feelings.” Our modern, secular world prides itself on being more logical than those which came before it and those contemporaries it looks back on. However, I contend that we too need to re-develop a desire for emotions, faith, and the incomprehensible, all of which can often seem frivolous in our current value system. Within this worldview, it seems we have developed past the need for emotions, faith, and the incomprehensible—the intangibles of *pathos* which become frivolous in our systematic framework of value.⁶

Humans still face a question to which our A to B to C process can offer no logical or comprehensible answer: death. As Harvard Divinity School scholar Amy Hollywood notes in her “Secular Death,” “only the incomprehensible is comforting in the face of how hard death is.”⁷ Indeed, the Bible, Quran, Torah, and Upanishads were once sources of those incomprehensible answers, those that exceeded just pure logic. Hollywood specifically cites the Psalms as the source of answers provided by Abrahamic religions because of the high “range of human emotions” that they contain by virtue of their poetic form. Describing herself as “Post-Christian,” Hollywood takes into account the secularization of society and asks: “What’s the aging hipster’s version of the Psalms?”⁸ In other words, she asks if we set aside the religious as no longer valuable, where do we look for solace in the face of death? Anecdotally, Hollywood offers the absurd example of Edward Lear’s poem for children, “The Owl and the Pussycat,” which provided comfort to her father as he awaited death in hospice. It is a childish and nonsensical poem that suggests no obvious explanation for why her father would find peace in it. But, precisely because it seems absurd to place value in such a poem, this example exemplifies that there is more to the human experience than that which fits within the neat box of “logic.” As Hollywood seemingly implies, sustenance for life comes in valuing that which goes beyond logic, like theology and poetry. In their incomprehensibility, “The Owl and the Pussycat” meets the Psalms.

⁶ Amy Hollywood, “Secular Death,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 44, nos. 3 and 4, (Summer/Autumn 2016).

⁷ Hollywood, “Secular Death,” 9.

⁸ Hollywood, “Secular Death,” 4.

Finding incomprehensible comfort in a time that seems strictly logical is difficult, so I suggest we turn to the beloved character and theologian Shug Avery from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* for support:

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds ...it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything ... And I laughed and I cried ... It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh ... Oh, she say, God love them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did ... God don't think it dirty? I ask. Naw, she say. God made it. Listen, God love everything you love—and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration ... I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.⁹

As Avery recounts her journey away from the old 'White God,' part of our communal journey towards secularism, she does not claim that God is the trees or the color purple, but rather points us to the idea of God being most present when we are in awe of creation. She tells us that the wonder previously reserved for a distant God should be experienced by sensing things of the earth, like the color purple. I like to think that Shug is telling us that God's most awesome creation is not Godself, but rather the human experience, however we might choose to live it. Through this concept, Shug asserts that the absurdity of our existence equals the absurdity of God, and that the Divine attributes of God can be found in the human experience. To bring us back to Professor Hollywood's question, as the aging hipster approaches his or her own mortality, the incomprehensible place he or she must look for comfort, the incomprehensible thing that his or her poems attempt to theologize, can only be found in engaging with human existence. To come to terms with death, one must recognize the absurd value of human life.

Conclusion: The Central Paradox of Poetry and Prayer

As I think about how we can best capture the value of humanness, I often refer to Imani Perry's question, "How many more Pietas?" Discussed in an interview about the murder of Black men and boys in the context of Perry's *Breath: A Letter to My Two Sons*, the religious image of the Pieta—Mary holding the body of the murdered Jesus of

⁹ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple: A Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) 1982.

Nazareth—can extend beyond an explicitly religious context.¹⁰ Though the language of ‘Pieta’ is obviously religious in origin, referring to the famous image of the mother Mary holding the body of the murdered Jesus Christ, the point she is making can be taken out of a religious context. Perry recognizes that the value of each Black life lost to police violence is equal to that of Christ: absurd, near ultimate; however, her use of the plural “Pietas” shows that we can understand people as ends of ultimate value without diminishing the individual value of each human person.

Perry’s work illustrates the central role that language has in that deeply personal, yet universal, relationship with humanity I have thus far discussed. It demonstrates the paradoxical connection we are called to have with each other, but also with the rest of a much larger community, one that exceeds the pure rationality of logic. How can we value each person ultimately without diminishing the value of the other? Her language creates a sense of shared motherhood, perhaps the strongest human connection we can envision—through her words, we begin to sense the anguish of Gwen Carr at the loss of her child, Eric Garner, and we feel an inkling of Mary’s similar pain as she lost her own Son, Jesus the Christ. We must share in the fear of every mother and father of a Black boy. We must share in their (and our) human experience.

We are caught in the web of interconnectedness identified by Martin Luther King and profoundly spun by poets thereafter. In this web, we find the often overlooked analytical skills of the poet. Poetry’s analytical side is a little more hidden than its emotional—yet the boundary between analytical and emotional is in no way fixed. Analyzing poetry is easy enough, but in order to write poetry, the poet must analyze the world. A poet cannot just focus on the river, such as the one depicted in “It Is Well With My Soul” by Horatio Spafford, but instead must find the patterns in the river that mirror the Crucifixion, the last judgment, the human experience, the poet’s own life.¹¹ A poet is mindful of ideas, questions, answers, and people outside of the usual realm of discussion, always looking for a pattern that brings them into conversation with one another. The analytical nature of poetry and the sympathetic stance of the poet make poems radically inclusive—no one is excluded from emotion.

¹⁰ Imani Perry, “More Beautiful,” interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, The On Being Project, September 26, 2019, audio.

¹¹ Horatio Spafford, “It is Well With My Soul,” 1873, Hymn.

Like the universal sense of emotion that poetry seeks to touch, no one is excluded from prayer. God's omnibenevolence bestows a level of concern for both the interconnectedness of the community and the value of the individual. As society calls less upon the power of prayer, however, it is important to look too to poetry to actualize that profound humanness that is difficult to locate and which is the necessary connector between individual value and universal meaning and intelligibility. This humanness is not an attribute that we can exhibit "more of" on our own, at least in the sense that seeking to increase one's own humanness without orienting oneself towards other persons is impossible. Language, particularly poetry, was created with the intention of bringing us closer together, of opening doors, and therefore not only points the listener towards the central features of humanness, but also, in doing so, pulls each human towards the other, making us more human.

I am most certain that the world needs more poets, more people who look at the world and see all of humanity in each person, and each person in all of humanity, without contradiction. The world needs more people that think sympathetically and systemically with an intentional direction towards each other. The world needs you, and I pray the world needs me.

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Article 4

***Dignitatis humanae*: The Catholic Church's Path to Political Security**

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DIGNITATIS HUMANAE:
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S PATH TO POLITICAL SECURITY

SEAN O’NEIL *

Abstract: The Catholic Church has always had a complicated relationship with the political states in which it operates. While much of the Church’s history has shown that the institutional Church’s power relative to the state fluctuates as it has sought to retain political autonomy, it was in the centuries after the Enlightenment in which the most serious threats to the Church’s temporal security began to arise. Considering these alarming trends, the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*) revisited the Church’s relationship with the state in an attempt to secure the Church’s political security in the twentieth century and beyond. Primarily focused on the right to religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae*’s authors construct an argument based upon individual claims to religious liberty that ultimately allows the Church to confer upon itself similar protections. Though *Dignitatis humanae* cedes political authority, it reasserts the Church’s primacy in religious considerations, as well as the disparate judgmental capacities of religious and secular authorities. In concluding, this article will argue that *Dignitatis humanae*’s significance is two-fold: (1) the Church relinquishes claims to secular governing authority, but (2) elevates its true source of political protection—its individual members—to the forefront of its concern.

Introduction

In response to questioning from the council of Hebrew elders about his preaching of the Gospel, Saint Peter noted: “We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.”² Although many passages from Holy Scripture indicate a critical start to the relationship between the Catholic Church and the states in which it operates, Peter’s observation demonstrates that the early, politically impotent Church began with an understanding that its Savior was crucified by the edict of a state government.

If the Crucifixion represented the low-point of the Church’s political prowess, its zenith came three hundred years later when Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and

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² Acts 5:29-30 (NSRV).

subsequent establishment of the faith marked Christianity's most explicit unification with and influence over civil institutions. That peak would be short-lived, however, as the Roman Empire soon splintered and the Church seized under internal divisions—once more throwing its political prowess into question.³ Indeed, only Constantine's famed donation allowed the institutional Church to establish the Papal States as a stable center of temporal autonomy from which to govern. Nevertheless, the Church's political influence beyond its territorial borders ebbed and flowed from the third through the seventeenth centuries. Ideas promoted by thinkers like John Locke and Voltaire further jeopardized the Church's secular position by seeking to entirely divorce religion from earthly governance.

The jarring events of the early eighteenth century forced the Church to come to terms with the implications of separating church and state. The French Revolution demonstrated how radical, unfettered state secularization could challenge the Church's privileges and authority among temporal states and profoundly endanger the clergy. Spurred by these alarming trends, the institutional Church reacted to the Enlightenment by supporting a conservative political order which explicitly opposed nascent liberal regimes. These efforts did little to stem the tide of liberalism though. Acknowledging the futility of its efforts, the Church turned instead to the ever-shrinking Papal States, negotiating with encroaching civil governments in an attempt to ensure the Church's longevity.

At the Second Vatican Council, the bishops responded to the ever-popularizing trends of national secularization and codification of church-state divisions, seeking to secure the Church's political status in a new world order. *Dignitatis humanae*, building upon concepts set forth in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), asserts that religious freedom is innate to the human condition. This concept established the principle around which the Church exhorted civil governments to organize themselves. Assured by the Church's ultimate eschatological authority, the Council ceded political power in order to secure the respect and cooperation of states.

³ Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 47. First published 2002 by Yale University Press.

Authority, Conscience, and the State

It is important to understand precisely why the Church identified religious freedom as having “its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature.”⁴ *Dignitatis humanae* recounts how societies around the world increasingly recognize “a sense of dignity of the human person” whereby “men should act on their own judgement, making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion.”⁵ That judgement, “impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek ... religious truth,” must contend with the reality of faith which necessitates “a personal assent ... to adhere to it.”⁶ The faithful person must rely on “the true judgements of his conscience” to “seek the truth in matters religious,” but must also arrive at those truths without undue influence or coercion.⁷ Once a person’s faith is freely proclaimed, a religious individual can then “participate in the law” borne of “the truth that is unchanging”—namely, how to live in light of God’s commands.⁸

The Church’s hesitancy to completely rely upon the judgmental capacity of individuals stems from notions articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*. The Constitution exhorts Catholics to use their human reason to reach the most consequential truth—that which allows them to ultimately commune with God. However, individuals fallen from the sins of Adam and Eve may veer “astray [from the righteous path] through ignorance.”⁹ In short, men and women will inevitably judge wrong some times. Nevertheless, that wrong judgement does not destroy all hope of finding one’s way to God. Misjudgment rooted in a faithful attempt to do good, rather than in the “blinding ... habit of committing sin,” does not result in “losing ... dignity.” Rather, straying from what is right enhances the dignity men and women possess by enticing them to approach God in a “personal way,” “not by blind impulses or external

⁴ Vatican Council II, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae* (7 December 1965) §2, at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html

⁵ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §1.

⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §2, §3.

⁷ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §3.

⁸ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §3.

⁹ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium Et Spes*, (7 December 1965) §16, at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

constraint.”¹⁰ Both the majesty and the danger of religious freedom lie in the deeply human process of employing the conscience to move towards God—the process of choosing incorrectly, and then boldly choosing again.

Although the Council acknowledged the importance of individual conscience, it too recognized that a proliferation of erroneous moral decision making could result in the rationalization of sin. In this case, civil governments would then need to restrict religious freedom to prevent the morally bankrupt from abusing religion to justify their contemptable behavior. This scenario would also allow the state to restrict the Church itself on the grounds that it authorizes the logic adopted by errant Christians.

To safeguard the discernment process that individuals undertake to know God, even against the possible encroachment of a state which might “act in an arbitrary fashion or in an unfair spirit of partisanship,” the Church leans on principles articulated in other conciliar documents, especially as they relate to ‘Tradition.’ To the first point, *Gaudium et Spes* makes plain the potential of fallible individuals choosing righteously through sufficient dedication and reason, given that they “carefully attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.”¹¹ Therefore, “only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness,” and thus individuals must be given the space and spiritual guidance to do so.¹² The responsibility of responding to and facilitating the discernment process falls upon the Church, making the Church integral to the faithful’s success. To the second point, *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, reiterates how the Apostles implored the faithful to “hold fast to the traditions they have learned by word of mouth,” a call made feasible only by the establishment of religious freedom sufficient to permit transcendent conversations between like-minded believers.¹³ The Church acknowledges its inability to serve its followers at every turn and provide every answer, but the Catholic Tradition demands the intergenerational sharing not only of institutional wisdom, but also of interpersonal wisdom.

Through the process by which “men explain to one another the truth they have discovered,” individual consciences might be bolstered and held accountable, affirmed by

¹⁰ Vatican Council II, *Gadium et Spes*, §17, §16.

¹¹ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §14.

¹² Vatican Council II, *Gadium et Spes*, §17.

¹³ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei verbum*, (18 November 1965) §8, at the Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

the advice of faithful peers who have struggled and discerned properly.¹⁴ The Church acknowledges the possible shortcomings of religious freedom, but consistently asserts its necessity. This right is worth advocating for because it allows men to “act with greater responsibility in fulfilling their duties in community life” by “order[ing] their whole lives in accord with the demands of [religious] truth.”¹⁵

Religious Freedom from the Individual to the Community

Having established the rationale for religious freedom as an *individual* right, the Church then needed to secure protections for religious *communities* to ensure that Tradition might survive between generations. *Dignitatis humanae* envisions the religious community not as a superfluous association of men, but rather “as a requirement of the social nature both of man and of religion itself,” without which men could not actualize their beliefs.¹⁶ These communities primarily serve to “assist their members in the practice of the religious life, strengthen them in instruction, and promote institutions in which they may join together for the purpose of ordering their own lives in accordance with their religious principles.”¹⁷ The document further attributes the cause of community to the way in which “the social nature of man and the very nature of religion afford the foundation of the right of men freely to hold meetings and establish ... organizations under the impulse of their own religious sense.”¹⁸ Thus, *Dignitatis humanae* presents the religious community as inextricably linked to the individual experience and indelibly exempt “from coercion in matters religious,” insulating associations from the same corruptive forces that individuals are shielded from.¹⁹

In an attempt to encourage governments to accept this extension of religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae* asserts that “the common welfare in society consists in... those conditions of social life under which men enjoy the possibility of achieving their own perfection.”²⁰ Properly fostering these conditions would allow “society to profit from the moral qualities of justice and peace which have their origin in men’s faithfulness to God.”²¹

¹⁴ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §3.

¹⁵ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §2.

¹⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §4.

¹⁷ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §4.

¹⁸ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §4.

¹⁹ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §4.

²⁰ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §6.

²¹ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §6.

Intended to assist men in finding their way to God and to help them retain their faith once converted, religious communities logically become integral to the state stability as they serve as bulwarks against social turmoil. Therefore, by making religious communities indispensable for the operation of the state, the Council is then able to pursue its ultimate goal: establishing the right to religious freedom for the Catholic Church in its entirety.

Separate Realms, Unequal Power: The Church's Right to Religious Freedom

Having defended the right to religious freedom for both individuals and communities, the final, most-pressing priority for *Dignitatis humanae* was to extend this right to the Church as a whole. This goal was informed both in the historical memory of the Church's relationship with the state and amidst the growing recognition that political autonomy was no longer a viable method of temporal security. In defending this argument, however, two problems were presented. The first was the practical dilemma of how to make the intellectual leap from an individual right to an institutionally-acquired protection. The second issue was more of a question: If the Catholic Church was to relinquish its claim to temporal authority, what consolation prize would be offered to the Church for giving up on a centuries-long goal of retaining political power?

The first obstacle to establishing religious freedom for the Church was resolved rather transparently: the Council directly claims that the Church has “freedom for herself in her character as a ... spiritual authority... [with a] divine mandate ... [and] as a society of men who have the right to live in society in accordance with the precepts of the Christian faith.”²² This line of reasoning is borrowed directly from *Gaudium et Spes* insofar as after discussing individuals, communities, and the world, the Church clarifies its active participation at each level of organization. From *Dignitatis humanae*'s affirmation of the Church's involvement at each level of societal organization, it naturally follows that the institution ought to be afforded the rights granted to religiously-affiliated entities. Therefore, the Church renders unto itself the very right it proclaimed to be true at the individual and communal levels.

Having relied on religious justifications up until this point, *Dignitatis humanae* then calls for the tenet of religious freedom “to be recognized as the right of all men and all

²² Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §13.

communities and sanctioned by constitutional law.”²³ The Church proffers its ultimate aim of altering state constitutions to vociferously defend individuals, communities, and the Catholic Church from “any effort to deter citizens from the profession of religion.”²⁴ Setting forth such a goal demonstrates the Church’s inability to contest political discrimination in states given how preemptive protections need only be established in instances wherein the potentially aggrieved parties would have no influence or recourse in cases of persecution.

In response to the question raised above, the architects of *Dignitatis humanae* turned to Holy Scripture. Though somewhat obscured in the footnotes of the document, the pseudo-triumphalist argument that the Council would offer renders settling for the right to religious freedom over direct political authority palatable so long as the Church’s claims to spiritual power, eschatological foresight, and soteriological veracity remain uncontested.

The Compromise: Abandoning Political Power, Reasserting Eschatological Clarity

While discussing how Christians can enjoy religious freedom while participating in temporal societies, the Council looks to the model of Christ and His Apostles. The Council was especially concerned with irreligious individuals or adherents of different faiths over whom the Church would have no dominion if it lost political power. Indeed, the Council point out that Christ did “denounce the unbelief of some who listened to Him, but He left vengeance to God in expectation of the day of judgement.”²⁵ Meant to allay Christian anxiety and action towards false or disbelievers, the passage from Holy Scripture referenced in *Dignitatis humanae* is instructive in attempting to understand why the Council would encourage inaction. The passage the Council relies upon is Mathew 11:20-24:

Then [Christ] began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent, ‘Woe to you Chorazin. Woe to you Bethsaida. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sido Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than you.’²⁶

²³ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §13.

²⁴ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §14.

²⁵ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11.

²⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11.

This passage levels a distant threat. Perhaps the Catholic Church cannot restructure society to its liking at present, but its knowledge of and orientation towards God at least offers a chance at salvation regardless of state interference. The Church's ability to guide the faithful to salvation is contrasted with Christ's condemnation of entire cities for their misalignment with God's commandments. The tension between church and state thus shifts from the Church contesting political power as a means of protecting its mission to an imbalance of eschatological power wherein earthy authorities can never compete against "flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."²⁷ This is the Church's triumph and supreme solace: its faith is of more consequence than any temporal punishment a state could inflict. In fact, the sentence before the 2 Thessalonians excerpt in the document cites provides further insight into the Council's perspective: "For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us."²⁸ There is an innate insecurity with which the Church broaches the topic of religious freedom, and rightfully so; depending on others to secure its future leaves the institution inherently susceptible to the whims of others.

The right to religious freedom for the individual, the community, and the Church can be obtained only through the permission of the state, making its conferral contingent upon a magnanimous government. Yet infringing upon religious freedom subjects the state to divine judgement—likely with an unfavorable outcome. Assured by this belief, the Council can make peace with ceding political authority. The Council's 'deal' retains the ultimate prize of communion with God, letting slip only an ephemeral benefit that would make the Church's work easier.

Conclusion: Power Derived from the Flock

Dignitatis humanae establishes a relationship between the Church and temporal authorities in which "[t]he Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other."²⁹ The Church finds inspiration in Christ's

²⁷ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11. See also 2 Thessalonians: 1:8.

²⁸ 2 Thessalonians: 1:7.

²⁹ Vatican Council II, *Gadium et Spes*, §76.

example, knowing that Christ's "kingdom is not from this world."³⁰ This is exactly why the Church—in the era of Peter and in the present—need not hold any direct political authority. Indeed, Christ says, "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But, as it is, my kingdom is not here."³¹ The Church's pastoral charge does not inherently require political control. Though the path forward (i.e. without influence over the decisions of states) may prove difficult, the Church's reinvigoration through the internalization of Christ's wisdom seeks to advance its manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Arguably the most important element of *Dignitatis humanae* is its defense of the institutional Church's right to religious freedom, one which is predicated on the power of Christ's earthly flock. As discussed above, the Church's strategy of appropriating protections for itself relies upon its connection of human nature to religious freedom, which then supports the right of associative groups to come together for the purpose of forming religious communities. The foundation of the whole rationale rests upon the individual Catholic adherent who forms a constitutive part of the collective upon which the Church establishes itself as independent of state interference. Thus, the individual Catholic and his or her community must be the Church's principal focus.

Some sixty years after the conclusion of Vatican II, the Church has yet to completely actualize its commitment to the needs and concerns of its flock. Many issues—which have elicited cries from the flock for guidance and action—remain unresolved, calling into question the Church's effectiveness in focusing its attention on the faithful. Nevertheless, if the Church seeks to retain a free hand in the religious realm, it must make every effort to train its attention and energy upon the needs of the faithful. The Church's very survival depends on it.

³⁰ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11. See also John 18:36.

³¹ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11. See also John 18:36.

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Defying the Norm: Explorations of Living Liberation

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DEFYING THE NORM: EXPLORATIONS OF LIVING LIBERATION

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Abstract: Using the works of Ivone Gebara and Anantanand Rambachan, this paper explores the concept of finding liberation on Earth. The ideals of Christianity and Hinduism make clear that a liberated life is possible and can even help play a role in denouncing systems of oppression. Anantanand Rambachan writes *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not-One* to emphasize how the *Advaita* truth that the *atma* is united with *brahman* proves the interconnectedness of humanity. Rambachan utilizes the fact of human relatedness to stress the necessity of advocating for others. These authors suggest that working towards social solidarity helps to free not only those oppressed, but indeed all people, as all are equally associated with the infinite *brahman*. Ivone Gebara and her work *Out of the Depths* examines human nature, aiming to highlight the voices and stories of women. Gebara connects daily suffering with moments of salvation while utilizing the interrelatedness of humans to free all from a limited view of God. The works of Ivone Gebara and Anantanand Rambachan encourage a more inclusive theology through the ideals of different religions. This paper uses these works to connect Earthly salvation with the need to promote justice and set the stage for further dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity.

The question of life after death permeates the human mind. In adhering to different religious traditions, individuals are led to various beliefs about heaven, the destination of souls, reincarnation, and unity with an infinite being. However, viewing salvation as occurring only *after* death can dismiss the reality of this world and its human-created societies, thus contributing to great human suffering. Interestingly, theologians Anantanand Rambachan and Ivone Gebara both address salvation as an attainable earthly goal, attempting to outline the path to salvation, specifically to those who have been traditionally oppressed. In her book *Out of the Depths*, Gebara re-examines what it means to be human and how our own human nature is inherently both good and evil. While Gebara derives her beliefs about God, salvation, and humanity from a Christian feminist perspective, she does not denounce older Christian teachings. She instead chooses to highlight the voices of

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historically silenced women. Written from a Hindu perspective, Rambachan's *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two Is Not-One* argues that the truth of *Advaita* and the unity of *atma* with *brahman*, as expressions of the religious life, can be used to imply a more liberative perspective and to promote justice. When read together, Rambachan's and Gebara's works provide a compelling account of the relatedness of human beings and the liberation of the oppressed.

In *Not-Two is Not-One*, Rambachan points to the *Advaita* truth of non-dualism as a means through which to overcome human suffering and ignorance. As self-conscious beings, humans continue to remain perplexed by the inevitability of death, which leads to an intense internal search for self-worth. However, blinded by emotional sufferings, we "seek to overcome suffering through the multiplication of desires, hoping by finite gains to enhance our self-worth."² This very human error is the root of *advaya* (ignorance) because we desire superiority over other beings and material gain to relieve anxiety about our mortality. Rambachan explains, however, that ignorance and suffering also result from a search for the infinite in the wrong place: "we search to become that which we are."³ For Rambachan, the truth instead lies in *Advaita*, which explains that the "human self (*atma*) is identical with the real and infinite (*brahman*)."⁴ Since the human self (*atma*) is identical with the real and infinite *brahman*, the answer to the question of human self-worth lies in the idea of the self as the embodiment of the infinite. Realizing that our very nature lies within the real and infinite *brahman* liberates us from our own mental sufferings. The realization of "one's own self as the self of all beings" allows the individual to view the world with a new awareness.⁵ Since everyone is equally identical with the real and infinite *brahman*, each is also identical with all other humans.

Through the *Advaita* tradition, Rambachan uses both cause and effect and a model of gaining what is already gained to explain the unity of the human self (*atma*) with the infinite (*brahman*) as living liberation (*jīvanmuktī*). First, Rambachan explains unity with the infinite as gaining what is already gained because humans must come to understand a

² Anantanand Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not-One* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 187.

³ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 190.

⁴ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 192.

⁵ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 190.

truth that permanently lies within their nature. An *Advaita* teacher explains that this realization is similar to “the tenth person discovering herself to be the tenth person through instruction, and gaining freedom from the sorrow and fear of thinking that the tenth person is lost, the knowledge of one’s identity with the limitless (*brahman*) frees from the suffering of self-lack.”⁶ Humans free themselves from the suffering of self-lack when they come to find that the answer is their own identity. To deepen this understanding, *Advaita* teachers often use cause and effect to “explain the non-duality between subject and object and to clarify that awareness is not one object in a world of many objects.”⁷ The analogy of the clay and clay pot illustrates that all humans are related to each other in that they originate from and return to the real and infinite (*brahman*).⁸ From the truth that each person identifies with the limitless, all people can arrive at “the understanding that liberation is a particular state of being in this life and world and not a place to be reached after the death.”⁹ Achieving living liberation aids in finding bliss on Earth and alleviates the mental stress of thinking about death, disease, and aging.¹⁰

Rambachan emphasizes the individual soul as infinite with *brahman* to provide the basis for finding living liberation for women and subsequently addressing systemic oppression. According to Rambachan, the human value of women does not depend on their relationships with men because “they equally and identically embody *brahman*.”¹¹ Rambachan points out that *ahimsa* (non-violence), an integral principle of *Advaita*, condemns not only violence but also the societal limitations imposed on women. For example, women have traditionally been advised to bear beatings by their husbands and to accept degradation if their dowries were not paid in full. Using *ahimsa* (non-violence), Rambachan argues that physical violence towards women is inherently wrong because women embody the transcendent. The principle of *ahimsa* can also be applied from a mental standpoint: “justice for women ... requires that we ensure they have the same educational opportunities and liberties as men so that they can realize the fullness of their human

⁶ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 75.

⁷ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 61.

⁸ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 67.

⁹ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 72.

¹⁰ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 21.

¹¹ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 11.

potential.”¹² Homogenous with the infinite (*brahman*), humans possess identical worth. Thus, limitations imposed on women actually limit all human beings. Living liberation for women requires the essential truth that “*brahman* is free from gender specificity, although embodied both in males and females.”¹³ For *brahman* to be present in everyone, humans must necessarily find living liberation for women, even amidst suffering caused by patriarchal values and *avidya*.

Gebara takes a slightly different approach than Rambachan in her search for living liberation. In order to redefine what it means to be human, Gebara’s *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* first addresses the existence of original sin after the Fall and the way that women are regarded as more evil than men. Gebara’s interpretation points out that “for men, evil is an act one can undo. But for women, evil is in their very being.”¹⁴ People often construe the Genesis account in which Eve eats the apple from the forbidden tree as the beginning of the fall of humanity—a woman’s doing. Gebara proposes that all humans are inherently both good and evil, meaning that good did not precede evil. This idea allows for the interpretation that a woman was not responsible for the fall of humanity because evil existed before Eve. Gebara’s argument stems from her understanding that the “transcendence and immanence of evil calls [one] to be converted to the reality [one observes], this mingled reality where no word can be complete, no God can be all-powerful, no good can be completely victorious, and no evil can have the last word over life.”¹⁵ Through this reworking of what it means to be human, humans can find solidarity and unveil the similarities in their common existence. Although Gebara proposes a somewhat controversial idea that the “very imperfection of the human person is what constitutes [their humanity],” her idea becomes necessary to overcome a gendered view of humanity.¹⁶

In considering women’s experiences of evil, Gebara arrives at the conclusion that evil pervades all and hence constitutes part of people’s very being. While she notes that defining evil is difficult, Gebara mentions that evil cannot solely remain a personal issue since “it permeates a larger social structure.”¹⁷ In a woman’s daily life, an example of

¹² Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 106.

¹³ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 109.

¹⁴ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 4.

¹⁵ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 4.

¹⁶ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 58.

¹⁷ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 2.

suffering includes struggling to find food for her family. In one excerpt from Gebara's work, *Beti*, a woman living in Rio de Janeiro, describes an everyday routine wrought with problems that all the village women face: having to wash clothes without soap, taking care of children, arguing with a husband who returns home in a bad mood, and waking up in the middle of the night to remove rats from the kitchen.¹⁸ In women's experience, a "daily domestic reality of evil" becomes apparent.¹⁹ Despite geographical and cultural differences, daily suffering emerges as a common theme for women across the globe. Moreover, these shared experiences expose the evil embedded in larger social structures. Women's everyday lives reveal the transcendence of evil and raise questions about what it means to find living salvation.

If evil exists in real and various forms in this life, *good* and therefore salvation must also be attainable in the here and now. Gebara's examples of women's suffering are usually balanced by moments of bliss. Even if these moments are fleeting, they give women the drive to continue to face the challenges of the day to day. An active relief from suffering, "salvation seems to be a movement toward redemption in the midst of the trials of existence."²⁰ Gebara suggests that salvation is not limited to an after-death liberation but can be actualized in the present to navigate everyday life. This living liberation further illuminates the similarities and relation between all humans. Humans must realize that salvation "will not be something outside the fabric of life but will take place within the heart of it ... intermingled with the confusion of life. Salvation is what helps us live in the present moment even when it feeds a dream of greater happiness."²¹ Whether it's the feeling of getting a good grade after a stressful week or someone simply holding the door for you on a bad day, all humans can relate to these trivial moments of living salvation. Gebara calls humans to not only understand the good and evil inherent within themselves, but also to recognize the liberation of others. She does not claim that all humans have the same experiences, but rather asks for respect in admitting and denouncing the evils that pervade societal systems and daily routines.

¹⁸ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 22.

¹⁹ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 22.

²⁰ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 124.

²¹ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 121.

Although Gebara and Rambachan belong to different religious traditions, both of their theses emphasize the interrelatedness of humans. While humans are unique, Rambachan highlights that they are also extremely interdependent since “human beings are part of a complex matrix that includes ancestors, teachers, other than human living beings and the elements. Our dependence on this matrix for our well-being requires, as the *Bhagavadgītā* explains so eloquently, that we contribute to its sustenance through our generosity to others.”²² Through generosity, individuals can also contribute to the infinite (*brahman*), which is identical in all beings and the world. Since humans are interdependent, Rambachan emphasizes that all people have mutual obligations, arguing that humans too often focus on women’s obligations to men, neglecting men’s obligations to women.²³ In Hinduism, human responsibility derives from mutual obligations rather than from individualism. Therefore, maintaining balance requires both men and women to contribute to the world and to each other. Similarly, Gebara describes relatedness as “the connection, the correlation, the interdependence that exists between and among all things.”²⁴ By adhering to this relational dimension, humans cast off society’s gendered hierarchy. With Gebara’s new definition of human in mind, people must consider “personal and community suffering, everyday resurrection and relatedness as conditions for life.”²⁵ Since all humans are related, it becomes more possible to advocate for justice. Both Gebara and Rambachan stress humanity’s interconnectedness to set the stage for addressing societal issues.

The interdependence of individuals evident in both traditions renders patriarchy limiting to all persons and to religion itself. Through *Advaita*, it appears obvious that “men seek self-gratification by treating women as objects of possession and by exercising power and control over them.”²⁶ This search for self-worth through controlling women is a form of *advīya*, but may be overcome through the non-dualistic truth of uniting the *atma* with *brahman*. Essentially, Rambachan suggests using *Advaita* itself to challenge patriarchal values as restricting to humans’ proximity to the infinite. Gebara, however, takes a different approach in emphasizing that “patriarchal theology has limited the concept of God to a male

²² Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 85.

²³ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 106.

²⁴ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 133.

²⁵ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 110.

²⁶ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 113.

point of view.”²⁷ Instead of stating that patriarchal norms limit all persons like Rambachan, she argues that patriarchal norms may cause humans to limit their own perception of God. In trying to understand human existence, humans create the evil of “making people believe that one knows the will of God, that one can teach it or even impose it.”²⁸ Gebara suggests to better understand each other, humans must accept the mystery of God, viewing the cross and the historical Jesus’s actions as vehicles to provide meaning to women’s liberation. Gebara and Rambachan suggest that humans should look to the highest reality within their respective religions to find peace and challenge patriarchal values as forms of evil or *avidya*. Through either the truth of non-dualism or accepting the mystery of God, Rambachan and Gebara provide a means to find liberation for women while identifying patriarchal norms as limiting to all people or to the perception of God.

While both religious ideals encourage just actions, Gebara emphasizes the centrality of the cross whereas Rambachan proposes turning inward toward the infinite. For Gebara, the cross of womanhood should be used as a form of liberation for women. Traditionally, the cross portrays male suffering as the only means to salvation. However, Gebara proposes the cross as a unifying symbol that “loses its exclusive centrality in order to appear as an ordinary element of life carried by everyone.”²⁹ Living liberation requires turning to the cross as a route to salvation experienced by all in daily evils. Thus, finding living salvation is realizing that “the suffering of the crucified, of a man upon the cross, even if it has become the Christian paradigm of suffering, is certainly no greater than that of prostitutes stoned to death, of a mother whose child is wrenched from her,” or “of revolutionaries struggling for liberty.”³⁰ Looking at the cross with a new perspective shifts the focus from the cross itself to Jesus’s saving acts. Humans strive to “give more importance to his acts of redemption, mercy, justice, and friendship than to the cross imposed by an imperial power as the symbol of his life.”³¹ This definition of the cross extends liberation to women by including those who had previously been included only inherently, not explicitly. Jesus’s acts, rather than

²⁷ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 165.

²⁸ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 140.

²⁹ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 115.

³⁰ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 116.

³¹ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 175.

the cross, allow humans to understand the relational dimension of humanity and to pursue justice amidst the crosses of the here and now.

Rambachan describes acting justly as the core of individual identity and the ultimate expression of religious practice. Acknowledging the presence of *brahman* in everything, humans can conclude that “liberation is the seeing of one’s own self as the self of all beings, a vision that frees from hate. It is the deepest identity that one can have with another, expressing itself as love.”³² Achieving the knowledge of *Advaita* and gaining the gained, humans reach *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth) by realizing the interrelatedness of the world, and thus moving towards love and compassion for one another. Because all people are united and identical through *brahman*, humans see the pain and joy of others as parts of themselves. Eventually, through *moksha*, “ignorance can be overcome, and when it is and when we are awakened to the true nature of reality, there will be a corresponding transformation in the quality of our relationships and greater social harmony.”³³ Conquering *adviya* and suffering, humans can find balance and eternal bliss in the infinite. At the same time, they are called to address problematic systems that bar us from solidarity.

The most difficult question to answer now becomes: How can this understanding inform tangible action? According to Gebara, “knowledge is certainly important in the process of transformation but it is not enough to bring about actual change;” therefore theology fills the gap in a way knowledge cannot for redefining our social atmosphere.³⁴ We must come to a mutual understanding of the realities of beauty and evil to rebuild a more inclusive theology. Reading the stories of those marginalized makes evident the necessity of listening and acting against exploitation. Through the cross, we search for both the beauty and the evil in the mundane details of our lives. Within this search, the “silent oppression endured by women” comes to the surface, centering the voices of the oppressed that have power to dismantle patriarchal theology.³⁵ While analyzing the concept of gender cannot explain all the suffering women experience, it remains a clear step toward inclusive theology.

³² Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 190.

³³ Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 112.

³⁴ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 69.

³⁵ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 175.

We often associate religion with searching for the best way to find salvation after life on Earth. In their works, Gebara and Rambachan emphasize the importance of living liberation, rather than accepting systems of oppression by only seeking salvation after death. In her work *Out of the Depths*, Gebara redefines what it means to be human, using women's experiences of evil and salvation as a guide. She calls for a less patriarchal perspective on theology, which historically can only provide explicit salvation to males. In viewing humans as inherently both good and evil, Gebara stresses the interrelatedness of humans to remove the limitations on their view of God and provide a path to living liberation through the centrality of the cross. In his work *Not-Two Is Not-One*, Rambachan also reveals the interdependence of humans through the *Advaita* truth of the *atma* united with *brahman* present in all humans. When humans search for self-worth through the ignorant belief that finite gains will lead them to the limitless, they suffer greatly. In gaining what is already gained, humans realize all beings equally embody *brahman*, which frees all from mental suffering over mortality. Achieving *moksha* allows humans to take on others' experiences of pain and bliss as their own and challenge the systems that beget human suffering. The voices of these authors are clear in intention. Through comparing the religious ideals of Hinduism and Christianity and using the example of patriarchal values as an oppressive system, Rambachan and Gebara provide profound insights about earthly salvation to build inclusivity and bring about actual societal change.

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Human Suffering: An Exploration of Hindu and Christian Liberation

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HUMAN SUFFERING: AN EXPLORATION OF HINDU AND CHRISTIAN LIBERATION

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Abstract: This article seeks to articulate an intelligible comparison between the Hindu Advaita Vedanta school of thought and the Christian religion to find a better theological understanding of the suffering and the liberation of the oppressed. By utilizing theological resources such as the Hindu Vedas and the Bible, modern sources of oppression of marginalized societies are examined in relation to religious references, so as to address concepts of liberation. This approach defines liberation as both/dually a freedom from suffering after the death of the individual and a freedom from suffering for the oppressed in/during their earthly life. Defining justice in this twofold manner provides an interesting basis for understanding the path to justice for the oppressed in the religious context.

The climate of today's interpersonal society offers little reprieve from oppression and suffering, yet it is for this very reason that an examination of diverse theologies can give us insight and direction in supporting the marginalized. An exploration of the major teachings and traditions of the Christian and Hindu religions makes clear that liberation of the oppressed exists not only in freedom from suffering after death, but also in freedom from suffering in the present life. Texts such as the Christian Bible and the Hindu Vedas (as taught in the Advaita school of thought) reveal how these religious traditions explain suffering and liberation, and how living with emphasis on liberation can lead to earthly equality. In this vein, James Cone's discussion of racial inequality in his *Black Theology of Liberation* can be compared to Anantanad Rambachan's description of inequality in his *Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One*. Such a comparison can help us articulate a theological response to each tradition's explanation of the earthly suffering of the marginalized and the freedom offered by liberation through God.

Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One by Anantanad Rambachan serves as a theological resource from the Hindu Advaita tradition which critiques Hindu society's lack of attention to injustice, which stems from the distortion of the word *Advaita*, "not-

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two,” (referring to the relationship between the self and the infinite) to mean “one.” Rambachan considers the understanding of one’s self as separate from others inadequate, as this view restricts human beings’ ability to see themselves in other people, producing a negative self-world relationship that yields social injustices.² Viewing the self as separate from the other diminishes the multifaceted nature of the person, thereby negating the limitless quality of the infinite, or *brahman*.³ Therefore, liberation in Advaita Vedanta can not only be understood as an emancipation from earthly life into the afterlife, but also as a freedom from injustice in the present life.⁴ Rambachan engages a variety of societal inequalities including gender, sexuality, and age to clarify how the tragedies of social injustice and earthly suffering are connected. Through his research on the suffering of the marginalized, Rambachan’s thesis lays a philosophical foundation or serves as a philosophical resource for understanding evil in the Advaita tradition by describing Advaita as the key to overcoming oppression. This evil of oppression is understood as a societal phenomenon in which systemic misunderstandings of the relationship between *atman*, the self, and *brahman* poison the social world with injustice. Using this understanding, in which religiosity and justice are deemed inseparable, Rambachan’s work aims to provide a religious basis for the proposed solutions to suffering.⁵

A Black Theology of Liberation by James Cone seeks to shift from an exclusively white understanding of Christian theology to one that reveals the perspective of Black society and the Black struggle in America. Cone insists that the Gospel cannot be separated from the earthly suffering of Black Americans, as the basic theology of the Gospels is rooted in the oppression of the Christian community.⁶ Cone effortlessly communicates this thesis by connecting the Black experience in the Christian community with historical events recounted in the Biblical narrative. Throughout his work Cone reinforces the idea that the Christian God is a god of the oppressed community who liberates the downtrodden from bondage. Specifically, Cone holds that God identifies with the Black community and

² Anantanand Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two Is Not One*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 11.

³ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 7.

⁴ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 5.

⁵ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 5.

⁶ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), xi.

liberates them through Scripture from the bondage of whiteness.⁷ Cone's writing reinforces the task of Christian theology: to interpret what it means to have hope in God in the face of oppression.⁸ Cone aims to expose the fallacies of White Christian theology that equate Blackness with evil, refocusing theology on a concept of liberation where Black suffering is clearly relevant and connected to the Gospel. In this way, individuals can reclaim and love the Black identity.⁹

Reading Rambachan and Cone in conversation can help us understand why such a duality exists between liberation from earthly inequalities and liberation in the afterlife. However, we must first compare the root of earthly suffering according to both the Hindu and Christian traditions. Rambachan describes suffering as *dukkha*, defined as the unliberated human condition which can be overcome through liberation, or *moksha*, in which the individual comes to understand their identity within the limitless *brahman*, or the infinite. Put simply, *dukkha* is overcome through realizing the self as *brahman*.¹⁰ In the Advaita tradition, Rambachan explains that the root of mortal suffering is self-inadequacy; human desires bring about knowledge of the self as incomplete, creating inner turmoil.¹¹ However, Advaita tradition teaches that in order to meet/achieve our true desire of the infinite, this earthly *dukkha* must be liberated in this life through the concept of *jivanmukti*, rather than at the end of existence.¹² On the other hand, Cone describes Christian suffering not as the turmoil of self-inadequacy, but more as a state of oppression at the hand of other human individuals. Cone equates suffering with Blackness, arguing that Black people's experience of oppression is rooted in the realization/feeling that their humanity depends on liberation from whiteness.¹³ Rambachan and Cone take vastly differing approaches to present similarly organized accounts of the characterizations of suffering in Hinduism and Christianity respectively. Cone describes suffering as clearly action-driven in that it is brought about through enslavement by the mortal, external oppressor. However, Rambachan presents a

⁷ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, xiii.

⁸ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation* xix.

⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, xx.

¹⁰ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 18.

¹¹ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 23.

¹² Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 21.

¹³ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 7.

more philosophical image of in which the foundation of suffering lies in the soul, and in the individual's misunderstanding of the *atman*'s relationship and connectedness with *brahman*. Nonetheless, both Rambachan and Cone go beyond the common understanding of liberation from suffering in the afterlife to purport that salvation through God liberates an individual from these different pictures of mortal suffering in this life.

Rambachan and Cone then draw on their respective scriptural sources to describe the manner in which liberation from oppression is achieved. Rambachan describes the Hindu liberated life as one characterized by a knowledge of the human self as limitless and identical to all external selves. The *atman* turns away from the assumption that the self is finite and isolated, towards a notion that it is more similar to the *infinite* brahman.¹⁴ This wisdom is gained through an inquiry into a valid Hindu source, such as the Upanishads, under the guidance of a guru.¹⁵ In untying the knots of suffering in one's heart, a person becomes able to recognize all other beings within the self, leaving no room for hatred toward any individual or marginalized group.¹⁶ Rambachan affirms that the Advaita tradition urges Hindus to see themselves within each other with a sense of compassion, as this is the essence and the outcome of the liberated life.¹⁷

Cone describes Christian emancipation quite similarly in that it is also achieved through turning inward to reorient the understanding of the Christian's relationship with God and with the oppressor. Cone asserts that the individual begins to achieve liberation by identifying themselves as oppressed, and then redefining their existence in the context of their relationship with oppression. Here lies a paradox: although freedom is the direct opposite of oppression, only oppressed individuals can be truly free.¹⁸ This truth is due to the fact that, for Cone, freedom is not reached merely when the oppressed is released from persecution, but rather when the individual advocates for the freedom of all others. Therefore, even if an individual is not oppressed, he or she must identify with the oppressed community in order to participate in their liberation. Cone illustrates this point by

¹⁴ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 72.

¹⁵ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 74.

¹⁶ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 79.

¹⁷ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 80.

¹⁸ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 87.

referencing the story of Israel's liberation in Holy Scripture. To identify as God's people, individuals must be willing to challenge any obstacle to liberation through God.¹⁹ Therefore, in Christianity, all people must be oppressed in order to participate in liberation, while in Hinduism, all people must recognize their unity as the infinite *brahman* to be freed. In both the Christian and Hindu traditions, liberation is achieved when the individual identifies with others, as no one can be free until all are free. This illustrates the true communal nature of each religion in that liberation from mortal suffering.

Cone also emphasizes the principle of the image of God (*imago Dei*) as described in the book of Genesis, suggesting that if our image of God includes freedom, this image must also include liberation.²⁰ Cone argues that since we are made in the image of God, we are required to challenge everything that oppresses humanity; this is the way in which God intends humans to live in Creation.²¹ Whether we ascribe to the Hindu notion that the self is identical to God or to the Christian belief that the individual is created in the image and likeness of God, we must ask how we can assert any type of love or desire for the infinite and simultaneously profess hatred of any of the diverse human beings created by the infinite.²² Both authors recognize the connection between the self and God, and acknowledge a fundamental equality between the self and the other in consequence; therefore they find no room for inequality. The intrinsic interrelation between the self and God in each tradition again reveals that liberation through God in an afterlife requires liberation from inequality and suffering on Earth.

Cone's discussion of the *imago Dei* also complements Rambachan's discussion of liberation and childism in Hindu culture, which recounts the grave suffering caused by the sexual and physical abuse crisis in India.²³ The reality of the oppression of children in Hindu cultures is also a subject of feminist theology, as an examination of marriage customs reveals evidence of discrimination against female children especially.²⁴ Indeed, the religious value of the child within the Advaita school of thought is discussed by Rambachan as being rooted

¹⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 100.

²⁰ The concept of *imago Dei* states that humans were created in the likeness and image of God; see Genesis 1:27

²¹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 94.

²² Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 122.

²³ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 149.

²⁴ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 156.

in *brahman*, the ultimate reality and the source of all earthly creation.²⁵ Rambachan goes on to draw an interesting analogy between childbirth and the cosmic creation as written in the Upanishads. In this account, everything created possesses intrinsic religious value by virtue of being created by and in the constant presence of *brahman*.²⁶ From this premise of inherent value, Rambachan presents an argument for equality between members of all ages, even children, and demands justice for maltreatment of children. He grounds his argument in the definition of *brahman* that he goes on to formulate. *Brahman* is equally present in all beings of creation, regardless of age, with no inconsistency in degree.²⁷ In addition, Advaita does not distinguish between level of wisdom or between male or female. Children of both genders require the Advaita belief of *ahimsa*, or non-injury, which requires all Hindu believers to empathize with and to protect all beings of creation, no matter how young.²⁸

Though childism is much less prevalent predominantly Christian societies, Rambachan's argument against childism is complemented by the Christian understanding of *imago Dei* in regard to Blackness. This concept reinforces the necessity of liberation from oppression on Earth through liberation under God. Just as *brahman* enters every created individual, each Christian individual is created by God in His very image. Cone's understanding of humanity in *imago Dei* parallels Rambachan's explanation of the Advaita truth that every human is identical to *brahman*.²⁹ In the context of this oneness with God, believers in both religious traditions are called to turn away from anything that threatens the humanity of individuals, including discrimination against the younger members of our societies.³⁰ As soon as this task is accomplished, Christian and Hindu believers alike will attain liberation from earthly injustices so that liberation with God in the afterlife can be reached.

In the context of today's political climate surrounding social injustice, Rambachan's accounts of liberation from homophobia in Hindu society were particularly compelling,

²⁵ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 150.

²⁶ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 151.

²⁷ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 152.

²⁸ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 154.

²⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 93.

³⁰ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 93.

especially when placed in dialogue with Cone's work on racial inequality. In the Hindu Advaita tradition, human beings are valued not based on their sexuality, but on their ability to discern the truth regarding their unity with *brahman*; thus, Hindus are open to religious pluralism and homosexuality.³¹ Nevertheless, due to homosexual individuals' inability to biologically procreate, homosexuality is stigmatized in Hindu culture, which views the family with children as one of the highest cultural ideals.³² Though Blackness in Christian society is not necessarily stigmatized in this manner, a parallel can be drawn here with respect to the racial gender normativity that exists in both cultures. Indeed, in both Christianity and in Hinduism, liberation is achieved in an afterlife through the emancipation from injustices on Earth, requiring the recognition of the self, rather than any kind of physical victory. Oppressors in both cultures may believe that their eternality is based on social and political supremacy over the marginalized, but this superiority actually makes them unable to realize the self and liberate the marginalized in order to take part in a free afterlife. In both traditions, justice is necessary to reach liberation and reunion with the Creator.

In addition to the evils of childism and homophobia, the problem of sexism in both Hindu and Christian cultures calls for theological inquiry. In the same way that Hindu-dominated societies foster a diversity of theological so too are there a diversity of opinions on the role of women, though many are negative.³³ For example, there is evidence that women face economic and cultural discrimination in Hindu cultures: women must stay inside the home to fulfill their "purpose" of being good wives and mothers.³⁴ Further, Hindu texts, such as the Ayodhya Kanda, normalize female stereotypes, such as the archetype that women are difficult to understand and corrupt men's good nature. These norms are often used to justify abuse, as they present women's value as dependent on their relation to men.³⁵

Though not discussed explicitly by Cone, sexism is also evident in Christianity. Rambachan states that the oppression of women is rooted in a perversion of the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, which states that the actions of human individuals warrant consequences.

³¹ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 130.

³² Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 126.

³³ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 91.

³⁴ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 92.

³⁵ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 94.

However, use of this teaching as justification for sexism is a perversion in that *karma* does not state that every life experience is due to a consequence of action in past lives.³⁶ Therefore, according to Rambachan, the intrinsic value of women is due not to their significance to men, but rather to their very being, which is identical to *brahman*.³⁷ Though Cone does not cite the doctrine of *karma* in defining Christian oppression, he does draw a parallel through his articulation of the way that suffering is wrought by the action of other human beings.³⁸ Liberation from said Christian suffering involves a re-understanding of the oppressed identity, similar to that discussed by Rambachan. As Hindu women are liberated when their value is found in their being rather than in their relation to men, Christian sufferers are freed when their identity is redefined as being oppressed so that they can fully participate in their own liberation.³⁹

In both Christianity and Hinduism, the path to liberation in an afterlife is through the emancipation from injustices on Earth. This process requires the recognition of the self, rather than any kind of physicality. In both cultures, oppressors act under the false impression that they can secure salvation through power over the weak; in reality, this supremacy bars them from attaining true freedom in the afterlife by realizing the self and liberating the marginalized. Additionally, in both traditions, justice is a prerequisite for reaching liberation and reunion with the Creator. The Vedas and the Gospel alike work to reinforce the true inclusivity of God's love, and the necessity of liberation from those who oppose God to achieve reunion after death.

³⁶ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 101.

³⁷ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 101.

³⁸ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 7.

³⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 87.

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