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Letter from the Editors

When we, the editors, met to choose which pieces to include in this volume of the *Denison Journal of Religion*, we faced a complex task. We received many more submissions than we could print in the space allotted, so we were forced to make some difficult decisions. In choosing which essays to print, we considered numerous factors, including the quality of writing, depth of research, effective use of sources, and diversity of subject matter. We made a conscious effort to select pieces that most accurately represent the different interests of students of religion and demonstrate the compelling perspectives that these students offer.

The essays by Laura Perrings and Stephanie Dixon that address the biblical story of the Tower of Babel demonstrate the various interpretations that can arise from the same source, and we hope that their inclusion will encourage readers to engage actively with and be amenable to new ways of understanding sacred texts. [Readers might also want to check out the essay by Al Klingler on “Tower of Babel” in the [Denison Journal of Religion](#) IV (2004): 33-44.] Tracy Riggle’s essay about Desmond Tutu and Patrick Hamilton’s essay about American Sufism examine how religion and spirituality can transform, and be transformed by, individuals and cultures—a concern that is vital for understanding our modern world. The remaining essays by Laura Perrings and Emily Toler consider the importance of historical, social, and political context in understanding religious movements and sacred texts, inviting readers to challenge their own beliefs about how these institutions are subject to change and reinterpretation.

While each of the submissions we received was impressive, we feel that those reproduced here best exemplify the quality and diversity of scholarship that characterize the Department of Religion here at Denison. Happy reading!

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Katherine St. Clair, Junior Editor

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The Tower of Babel

Laura Perrings

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' ⁵ The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' ⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

(Genesis 11:1-9)

The Tower of Babel, as told in the book of Genesis 11: 1-9, is a story that explains the origins of the different nations and languages. Some scholars claim that it is only a parable, and it is true that it differs from the Table of Nations immediately preceding it in Chapter 10 which offers an alternative explanation of how the nations and languages came to be through a genealogy. The difference in storytelling methods and details between Genesis ten and eleven may result from the Tower of Babel text being from the J tradition while the surrounding genealogical text is from the P tradition. Understanding the context for a work such as this story is very important for correct interpretation. Unfortunately, the history of this text is vague and I am uncertain of what the historical context for the story *is*. Amongst scholars there is very little consensus about the history. Some scholars argue that it was an actual historical event and others present evidence that it was written by later authors who saw the foolish

pride of the Babylonians in the grandness of their city and ziggurats and wrote a story to discredit them. I agree with Steven Reimer who argues that the ziggurats currently found at Babylon are not old enough to be the Tower of Babel if the story is about an actual historical event instead of being an imagined explanation for how things came to be (65).

Instead of attempting to present an argument for the proper historical context of this section of Genesis, I shall examine it in its context within the Bible. The situation of the story in the text is very important for understanding its significance and the Tower of Babel serves as the turning point in Genesis from prehistory to history. The story is not only about language, but also about the rapport between humans and God. The relationship between God and humanity changes after this event, with God dealing with one select group of people instead of the population as a whole. The story teaches today's readers about how to be in right relationship with God by demonstrating what *not* to do. Humans should be obedient to, and rely on, God, not attempt to reach him through buildings, and should respect each other. The story of the Tower of Babel is at once about human self-sufficiency, and about the attempt to bridge the gap between humans and God. Humanity is seen in a period when they are able to care for themselves, yet seek to find their purpose in something greater. Thus they built a bridge between themselves and the divine. The horizontal meets the vertical in this story. I will argue my interpretation of the story by discussing what the humans did that was wrong, how God punished them, how it was different than his previous punishments, and how the theme of human pride trying to equal God and our relationship with him is continued through the rest of the Bible and history.

To begin with, I first read this story expecting to learn something about the necessity of different languages, believing that the confusion of tongues was the main theme of the story. I thought it odd that the unity produced by a common language was a bad thing in God's eyes. God chose to disrupt the easy communication between the people, but surely if we could all speak the same language we would not have such a hard time communicating properly. With one language, the people could all communicate very easily. The words they used were very closely linked to the object, action, or idea that was referred to, so there would be very little confusion or opening for different interpretations (Bowker 33). The language used in Babel would have been restricted code with nuanced meaning that only people in the same close-knit community could understand (which in this situation was all of humanity). Restricted code is developed in a group in social solidarity. Today such code is found between close friends, family, members of the army, and in prisons (Bernstein 476).

I believe that communication is essential between people in order to promote understanding. God's decision to disrupt the common language and easy understanding seems puzzling from this perspective. However, a multiplying of languages may be necessary to avoid a kind of linguistic hegemony and cultural uniformity and limited perspective on the real world. Leon Kass suggests that a common language means "sharing the view of the world embedded in a language. It means sharing a common understanding of the world that any pure language implicitly contains" and further states that they would thus have a "common inner life, with simple words accurately conveying the selfsame imaginings, passions, and desires of every human being" (223). Such unity, he argues, can be dangerous because "speech is colored always by human perceptions, passions, interests, and desires," and because "it is a human creation and because it reflects human concerns" it "comes to hold greater sway with human beings than does the given world (that is God's original creation)" (Kass 223). If we all look at the world in the same way and understand it the same way, there is nothing to check it against in order to make sure that the perceptions are right. Therefore, God's "multiplication of languages...institute[ed] otherness and opposition, it is the necessary condition for national self-awareness and the possibility of a politics that will hear and hearken to the voice of what is eternal, true, and good" (239). A single entity, like Adam before Eve's creation, is too self-sufficient and does not have a proper self-awareness according to Kass and requires a differing opinion.

Since it appears that multiple languages and world views are necessary, it is also necessary to keep those different hermeneutical lenses in dialogue in order to understand each other, the world, and God as clearly as possible. As Kwok Pui-lan argues in her book *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, there is not one universal way in which we comprehend the world and the divine; instead there are myriad options from which to choose. The only way to reconcile these various interpretations is to enter into a dialogue with those who have different experiences in order to check and balance each other and discern the truth of the events more clearly through the build up of years of contextual interpretations. The goal with such an approach is to be able to learn to understand each other despite differences in language, race, gender, and ethnicity.

The story of the Tower of Babel results in God confusing the language of the people so that they are forced to separate and populate the wider world. Humanity needs to communicate in order to understand each other and our relationship with God, but we were not in right relation to God before he divided us as I will discuss later in my sections on human pride and the motives for building the city.

Such a closed linguistic community as that which built the city and tower could not facilitate fruitful spreading around the world. Elaborated code was necessary, meaning a more complex code than the restricted one, which can be understood by others outside of the community which produced it. Such a code “arises wherever the intent of the other person cannot be taken for granted” which means that “speakers are forced to elaborate their meanings and make them both explicit and specific” (Bernstein 476). As a necessary ingredient in communication using elaborated code, the speaker must “focus upon the experience of others as different from his own” (477). There needed to be a contrast between groups of people in order for there to be a need for elaborated code, and it frees the people from the confinement of their dominant language by allowing them to communicate with other people. Language then, was a means to an end in the story of the Tower of Babel and tied in another theme, that of the relationship with God. The relationship was best served when the humans were obedient to God and spread out apart from each other.

After the Flood, God commanded Noah and his descendents to spread over the earth and multiply. But in building the Tower of Babel the people were not obeying the order that they should “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). The author of this story establishes that “the whole world had one language and a common speech” and that they were keeping close to each other (Gen. 11:1). The people traveled together instead of spreading out, and found a plain in Shinar where they decided to settle and build a city and a tower to “make a name” for themselves “and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4). According to archeological sources, the area in Shinar is not near any natural stone deposits where building material could be quarried. Thus the people had to use something else, and their material of choice was a new invention called a brick: “They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar” (Gen. 11:3). Most scholars agree that the phrase “make a name” for themselves refers to seeking fame and glory. Interestingly, they are not trying to make the name for their offspring, or even mention building it as a legacy for future generations; instead they are building it for the here and now. So, in a way, they are not obeying God’s command to be fruitful and multiply because they are more concerned with this brick building.

Additionally, the choice to build a city is an indication that they want to settle down. Although there weren’t deposits of natural stone in the Shinar plain, the land there (in the Euphrates valley) was very fertile, so one can deduce they plan to rely on agriculture for their sustenance (Kass 224). Earlier and later stories in

the Bible support an argument that God does not approve of urbanity but prefers for his people to wander because they will have to rely on him more for their well-being. By settling into an agricultural and city-oriented life, the people are expressing their independence and self-sufficiency, yet the tower they set about building is designed to be one that “reaches to the heavens” (Gen. 11:4). Why attempt to reach heaven and God if the people believe themselves capable of taking care of themselves? Traditionally, this has been interpreted as an indication that the people are attempting to reach heaven by means of their own efforts. Several motives for such an undertaking have been proposed by various scholars. It is possible that it is an act of pride, and threatens God’s power because they could become too god-like if they continued to work together. If they reached heaven, it may produce the same effect that God feared if Adam and Eve should eat of the tree of life in the Garden of Eden: “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever” (Gen. 3:22). Another possible motive is that they are creating a form of high ground in case another flood comes (Pinker 90). I find this last argument unconvincing because surely if they sought high ground they could have settled either somewhere that was naturally higher or near to a source of natural stone to make the building easier and possibly sturdier. In conjunction with this idea, it has been posed as a possibility that the people were creating an artificial “high place” (normally a mountain) on which to worship various gods. Later stories of the Bible mention the “bad” kings who set up the “high places” where gods other than Yahweh are worshipped such as Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12:31, “Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites.” Several prophets and biblical writers express how deplorable these high places are in the eyes of the Lord even as the people continuously return to worship at them: “The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD” (1 Kings 3:2). Conversely, some have argued that the tower was a military fortress and that the people sought to reach heaven so they could mount an attack.

I find the most promising understanding is that the tower was an attempt to be closer to God because the people realized that they needed him. In such a case, the lesson to the people is that it is “not the monumental achievements of human ingenuity, but only the human heart [that] can forge a link with God” (Pinker 95). Of these understandings, I also find it likely that the people settled down, perhaps in fear of yet another traumatic experience like the flood (since this occurs within

a lifetime of Noah's children), and began building a city, growing complacent and self-sufficient.

By settling in one place together and commencing construction of a large structure, mankind was not relying on God or populating the planet. Perhaps it was because they had become content and self-sufficient in their city that God decided to put an end to their project. The text hints at their complacency, "For wherever the Torah uses the term...[settled] it means that people are overly at ease" and "Rabbi Helbo said: 'Wherever you find contented satisfaction, Satan is active'" (qtd. in Plaut 85). Cities produce "civilization" and that means that a social hierarchy, militarization, and materialism will begin to flourish. As Reimer observes, "Exploitation, oppression, materialism, militarization, self indulgence, are all attitudes and practices that are condemned by Yahweh" (71). The desire of these ancient humans to make a name for themselves is evidence of the pride they feel in their own accomplishments. Previously, the word meaning "made" used in this instance was only used by God in creating the world, suggesting that the people are attempting to imitate the power of God in their creative efforts (Kass 231). Seeking fame was a means of honoring humanity more than they honored God (Richardson 128). The pride of humanity brought God's displeasure because it did not honor God. The lesson to be learned is that "when men boast of their own achievements, there results nothing but division, confusion, and incomprehensibility" (126). In certain versions of the text, the term for human is translated as "sons of Adam" which implies that the fault they are guilty of is similar to that of Adam, their ancestor. Adam's fault was eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thus disobeying God and attaining more knowledge than he was meant to have. The builders of the Tower of Babel were following in their predecessor's footsteps by failing to listen to God properly. As inevitably happens, humanity began to sin against God once again by refusing to comply with his will.

In response to the actions of the humans, God confuses their languages and causes them to scatter over the world. The tone of the language used in this part of the story is almost sarcastic in describing how God "came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building" (Gen. 11:5). One can interpret this to mean that the Tower that the humans were hoping would reach heaven is so small that God has to come down to see it properly, or, that by coming down he is demonstrating how insignificant the construction is (Jacob 78, Pinker 94). Additionally, God may desire to be present when he issues his punishment against their work, for "a judgement demands a personal and formal investigation of the facts" (Jacob 78). Upon surveying the scene, God remarks, "If as one people speaking the same

language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (Gen. 11:6-7). This statement echoes the human's call to join together in verse 3: "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly" (Gen. 11:3). In these verses either God is mocking the humans, or the humans were imitating God as they were in their choice of word for "make." Surely God's act of changing languages does not take nearly as much effort as the effort required from humanity to build a city. The result of the confusion of languages was logically that the people could no longer communicate, and they separated, leaving the city unfinished because they "stopped building the city" (Gen. 11:8). Thus the consequence of God's action was that his original command to the people was obeyed. Moreover, the people could not rely on themselves as they had in the city and had to rely more on God.

The motive for God's actions was to ensure that the people spread out and relied on him. Distressed by the human rebellion against his command, "God is afraid that the building will lead to human autonomy; such a development would call into question human finitude, which is inherent in being created by God" so he decided to ensure that they could not complete their task Westermann *Practical* 82). However, God's response is remarkably mild compared to his previous actions. Following shortly after the devastation of the Flood, God takes decisive action but does not kill any of the people and so is faithful to his promise of chapter eight verses 21-22 (Kselman 90). I think it likely that God's action here was more of a guiding shove than a wrathful strike. Confusing the languages forces the humans to separate and thus they must always be in dialogue with each other and work together to find the truth. This is a propulsion into "the beginning of a way of life that marks the transition from primeval event to history which begins in Gen. 12" (Westermann, *Practical* 555). This is not done according to the usual pattern, though. In the previous stories, God's judgments that have had profound effects on humanity are followed by acts of grace. In this case, however, there is no act of grace—no new promise by the end of the story (von Rad 152-3). The reader is left to wonder whether or not God still wants to work with humanity: "Thus at the end of the primeval history a difficult question is raised: God's future relationship to his rebellious humanity, which is now scattered in fragments. Is the catastrophe of ch. 11.1-9 final?" (152). These questions and concerns are laid to rest in the subsequent story about the calling of Abram. The punishment is not disastrously bad because the deed was not too bad. They are not killed despite the fact that they "defied God openly, yet, because they practiced brotherhood toward each other,

they were merely scattered” (qtd. in Plaut 128). No “man-made unity” can be the “basis of permanent peace on earth,” only by being in right relationship with God can there be peace (Richardson 128).

The position of the story in the Bible makes it a very significant one. The Tower of Babel is placed between what are traditionally viewed as the prehistory accounts of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah and the “historical” accounts of Abraham and the Israelites. God’s relationship with humanity alters between these two sections of Genesis, and the Tower of Babel is the event that makes this happen. Prior to Babel, God had dealt with humanity as a whole, but mankind continuously disappointed by acting in a way God disapproved of. Adam and Eve ate the fruit, so God kicked them out, then Cain killed Abel, and God punished him by making him an outcast, and then all of humanity became so dissolute that God caused a great flood that killed all but Noah and his family. Once again, mankind is disobeying God, and they are punished by being forced to spread out across the earth as God desired. Subsequently, God chooses Abraham and through him and his people God will bless the rest of the world (Ramsay 31). Thus “the joining of prehistory and history...affords the biblical editors the opportunity to show the rise of Abraham and his descendents in the full context of God’s plan for mankind” (Plaut 79). The Tower of Babel allows prehistory and history to “dovetail” and show the alteration in God’s tactics (von Rad 153). The relationship between man and divine alters and it was “the dispersal of those who challenge the sovereignty of God” that led “to a new history of blessing inaugurated by God in the stories of the ancestors” (Kselman 84). The connection between humanity and the divine would continue in this same vein with the chosen people being the means of blessing the rest of the world until the coming of Jesus.

While humanity tried to create a bridge between the material world and the divine, Jesus, according to early Christianity actually *is* that bridge. Being fully human *and* fully divine, Jesus crosses the gap and alters the relationship again so that Jews and Gentiles alike can reap the benefits of God’s loving grace. According to the book of Ephesians, Jesus is the means of bringing all people together in unity:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:11-13)

The dream Jacob has of the ladder between heaven and earth is in a way a foreshadowing of Jesus' arrival because he would open communication between the divine and the human: "He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Gen. 28:12). The New Testament presents us with the fact that we are flawed humans, and we cannot reach heaven on our own by means of any physical structure we build. It is only through our hearts that we can know God, and, through Jesus, God made the ultimate atonement for our sins so that they should no longer keep us from knowing him. Christians seeking unity between humanity and God find it not in a man-made city but in Christ and a city built by God: "[Abraham] was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10).

For modern Christian readers this story still has a significant message to teach. Even today, people tend to stay in their comfort zones; they settle into one way of life and are unwilling to look at other possibilities just as the builders of Babel did. We still have the same problem of there being only one way considered to be correct by the dominant authority. Ideology determines how we think and act. Babel was an ideology that made the people feel safe, but God split the humans up and sent them back into the wilderness in a type of exile experience in order to remind them to rely on him. Human pride still builds towers to reach the heavens even without a common language, so the issue in the story is not merely that the people were building cities. The problem was that they were seeking self-sufficiency and independence from God instead of recognizing that he was superior to them. Despite the fact that Christians live in a post-Jesus world where people no longer need to be circumcised to be a chosen person of God, Christians still need to consciously choose to obey God and rely on him in daily life. As Jurgen Moltmann says in his book *Theology of Hope*, the promise of God is always in tension with the dominant order—the ideology—in order to call the people forward to something better and more in God. The promise that Moltmann envisions is never completely liquidated, so people are never able to rest complacently in the world they know but are always being inspired to act for something more. The people of Babel became content to stay with what they had in their city and did not work to try to build a better world or to know God—they had bought into the ideology. According to the story, then, Christians must embrace a kind of exilic experience in order to come into right relationship with God and the larger world.

Conclusively, the most valuable aspect of Genesis 11: 1-9 to understand is that the human relationship with God had once again become corrupt. Humanity's

pride led them to build a tower that they thought could rival God's own creative acts and reach heaven. In settling down to build a city, the people selected a fertile plain where they could sustain themselves with agriculture instead of wandering in the wilderness where they need to rely on God. Their ability to communicate directly with one another, since they all spoke the same language, meant that they shared a common understanding of the world and themselves, so there was no dissonant voice against which to check themselves. The building of Babel was a longing for God gone awry. Like Cain who so desires God's favor that he kills his brother, these humans thought they knew how best to know God, but ended up doing the opposite of what they were told. God's action in response was not so much a punishment as it was a means of accomplishing his will and reminding the humans in question that they cannot survive on their own but need God. The sons of Adam are sent out into the world and God chooses a select group with which to interact for the future.

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The Tower of Babel: The Dispersion of God's People

Stephanie Dixon

The book of Genesis is filled with stories of how God and God's creation interact. The book begins with the earth's primordial couple, Adam and Eve. It continues by telling the story of the couple's sons, Cain and Abel, and then moves into the story of the Great Flood and God's relationship with Noah. After the Flood there comes a short but infamous story: the story of the Tower of Babel. What immediately distinguishes this story from those which precede it is the impersonality of the encounter between God and God's creation. There is no main character with whom God communicates. Instead, God treats the whole of humanity. Though this could simply be a stylistic tactic of the storyteller it also might be an indication that this story has a different purpose than those which come before it. The preceding stories provide the reader with insight into human nature; establish truths about the interactions between human beings and other humans and also reveal human beings' perceived understandings of the nature of God. The story of the Tower of Babel, on the other hand, seems almost out of place in light of any of those purposes. One must read the Babel story with a different purpose in mind. Perhaps the story of the Tower of Babel is an ancient people's manner of explaining their perception of the world in which they live – specifically a diverse world filled with multiple successful cultures. Unlike many standard interpretations of the story of the Tower of Babel which paint the inhabitants of Babel as rebellious and prideful people who are punished by God for their sinfulness, this paper celebrates the success of the Babel civilization and insinuates God's confidence in them to fill the earth.

Before assuming that my interpretation is the right one or better than what many other Biblical scholars have discerned, I will give a synopsis of the opposing point of view. Many people interpret the story of the Tower of Babel as an interaction between God and creation – particularly God's punishment for sinful human pride. Some, like Bryon Sherwin, still see the function of the story as explaining the diversity of cultures in the world. He says, "It is possible to see the tower story as an etiological answer to the problem of how this linguistic diversity came about. In other words, the tower story explains not only *why* but also *how* people came to speak many languages – because God confused their language as

a punishment for building the tower. Until the tower, they spoke one language; and now they speak many because of God's punishment of the tower builders" (Sherwin 106). What interpreters, such as Sherwin, depend on, though, is that punishment is the reason behind the dispersion of humanity. Consequently, these interpreters also must establish a reason why humanity deserved to be punished. There are a number of explanations. Some say that the Tower builders were trying to penetrate heaven to challenge or even kill God. This reason is rationalized by the fact that the Tower builders were of the post-Flood generation. In light of their context, Sherwin says, "As a result of knowing that God destroyed virtually all life on earth, they came to the conclusion that they could no longer rely on God. For them, God was just too dangerous to have around. God could do it again, maybe not with water—because of the promise to Noah. The next time it could be with fire or earthquakes" (Sherwin 105). In what seems to be an effort at self-defense, the humans conspire to build a Tower with "its top in the heavens" so that they may either contain God in God's "rightful domain" or even go so far as to kill God¹ in order to protect themselves and protect their precious world (Pinker 90). If such were the intentions of the people, God would have to punish the humans for intruding on God's domain.

Another reason which scholars give for God's punishment (through dispersion) of creation has to do with God's disdain for urban life, or more specifically, for the consequences of urban life – namely opting for the "temporal over the lasting goals, for the artificial over the real, for the manufactured over the natural" (Sherwin 108). Scholars assert that these kinds of options devalue the human being and exalt commodities. God naturally places more value on God's own creation – nature, the earth, living beings – and expects humans to do the same. Aaron Pinker, explains that the sin of the Tower builders is essentially in the same category as the sin of Adam and Cain; reaching out to the artificial, to the man-made not the God-given" (Pinker 90). The Tower builders valued their own construction more than the world given to them by God, thus, God had to punish creation and re-assert God's ultimate authority.

One final sin identified by such interpreters of the Tower story describes the Tower builders' disobedience to God's command to "be fertile and multiply" (Genesis 9:1). By building a city and defining it with a Tower, God's creation was attempting to settle itself in one place and was blatantly ignoring the earlier story's command to disperse and fill the earth. As scholar, Jack McKeown says, "The

¹One midrash describes how the Tower builders "stood on the top of the tower and shot arrows into heaven to kill God, and how the arrows they shot up came down with blood on them, convincing the tower people that they had indeed murdered God" (Sherwin 105).

divine landlord does not approve of what his tenants are doing, mainly because they fail to recognize his authority. He exercises his authority by withdrawing their ability to communicate. The end result is that the human beings, once secure in the confines of Eden, are now scattered over all the earth" (McKeown 63).

Such interpretations are supported by precedented human behavior which has been demonstrated time and time again in the earlier biblical stories. As Pinker says, "Mankind's record to that point was purely negative. Man was expelled from the Garden of Eden for his misdeeds, and then largely wiped off the earth's surface for his transgressions" (Pinker 91). If man has been, at its essence, consistently sinful and notorious for acting counter to the will of God thus far, it is not a far leap or unreasonable presumption to imagine that the Tower builders' construction of the city and Tower of Babel is not approved of by God and God's response to the construction is a form of punishment.

Though these arguments have been defended and developed by multiple scholars, I still question their justification and assumption of sinfulness. If the actions of the Tower builders were truly despicable in the eyes of God and God found their construction so offensive that it was necessary to administer punishment, then given God's track record in punishments, why was the consequence for their sinfulness so mild? If God had once destroyed humanity completely why would God not at least destroy the Tower or the city but instead simply confound their language? Exploiting this weakness for the sake of entering the argument, I now offer my interpretation of the Babel story.

For reasons, probably stemming from personal bias and my preferred way to view God, the standard interpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel seems highly unappealing. The God who punishes Tower builders who seek to enter the realms of Heaven and attack a God that they can not trust is irrational and gratuitously punishes those who are incomparably inferior in terms of strength and power. The God who disperses humans who value their own creation over God's is immature and selfishly punishes humans so that God's glorious works are not overshadowed. Finally, a God who reprimands creation because it pridefully focuses on itself and seems to forget about God is insecure and desperate and nearly prostitutes himself in order to receive attention. In any of the three cases, great liberty must be taken and significant assumptions must be accepted in order to create sin worthy of God's punishment and even then, the sin and consequent punishment seem questionable.

If we put aside the theme of pride and punishment and instead focus more specifically on the meaning of the construction and the dispersion we may dis-

cover that the story of the Tower of Babel is really less about the Tower and more about explaining how the success of human creativity and God's utilization of that creativity for God's own purposes led to the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures in the world. Instead of seeing God's dispersion of the people of Babel as a "response to pride and an act of punishment" we might see it as "the intention of God all along", especially in light of God's command to be fruitful and multiply (Hiebert 31). As Pinker suggests, it could be "that the story of the Tower of Babel is actually a depiction of mankind at its best, an expression of God's towering pride in His creation of man—an affirmation that the human race is ready for the monumental task to be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it" (Pinker 89). This is the assumption that the rest of this paper will work from.

Drawing on Theodore Hiebert's analysis of the story, the first indication that the Babel story serves less as a tool for developing the reader's understanding of God's interaction with people and serves more importantly to explain the diversity of the modern world through the creative power of language is the text's deliberate linguistic composition. Hiebert begins, "This story is about language; in particular, it is about the existence of a single, uniform language spoken by all people (Hiebert 33). As the first sentence of the story emphasizes, "The whole earth had one language and the same words" (Genesis 9:1). The Tower builders' unadulterated unity through language is important because it is symbolic of the unity within the community – their unity in thought and action.

The action of the community is described in verses two through four which describes their intention to settle (v. 2), build themselves a city and a tower (v. 4), and avoid being scattered (v. 4). Despite the various interpretations which introduce ulterior motivations, "the actual motive for the human project, stated explicitly in the narrative, is the people's desire to stay in one place" (Hiebert 36). Though the text does state that humanity desires to "build... a tower with its top in the heavens" it is a far reach to assume that a tower "with its top in the heavens" means anything more than a tall tower. To insinuate that humanity wanted to literally build a tower that provided them an entrance to Heaven so that they might enter heaven and wrench God's power away from Him fills some substantial absences of asserted intention with specific actions. It seems inconsistent with the benign motivations – to settle and avoid being scattered – that have been explicitly asserted and also paint humanity in an unreasonably ambitious light. Why would people who are vocally intimidated by the thought of being scattered be so audacious as to assume that they could 1) build a tower as high as Heaven or 2) address God face to face?

Ellen Van Wolde supports the above interpretation of the story calling humanity's community building focus "horizontal ambition" (Van Wolde 100). As opposed to striving to thwart God by building "vertically" up towards God and Heaven, textual clues seem to affirm that humanity was more committed to establishing a city and protecting themselves from their fear of being disorganized, unsettled and susceptible to scattering. If any projection about the motives of the builders can be made, the most logical is that they intend to build a safe and stable place to settle and grow. Though Pinker admits that such horizontal ambition places the builders' focus "on the perpetuation of the human race, while in reality God has already guaranteed existence and expected population of the world," their misunderstanding of God's provision is simply that, a misunderstanding but not sin worthy of punishment (Pinker 92).

Further establishing humanity's construction of the Tower and the city of Babel as legitimate ventures and not affronts on God, we must address the issue of human pride which is, in some interpretations, inherent in the claim that the builders intended to "make a name" for themselves. Pinker finds the text to be crystal clear. He writes, "The text clearly states their intent: to build a city to settle and a tower to be an object of reference, well known and of fame, so that those who venture out, like shepherds, would find their way back" (Pinker 92). He reads necessity into the building of the Tower. This necessity is imaginably real considering that the probable economy of the builders includes shepherding and their vocalized fear and motivation for building the city is to avoid scattering. With a tall, large and unmistakable landmark such as a tower, those who might venture beyond the city can leave knowing that they will be able to find their way back. Hiebert says, "Viewed in light, the phrase 'let us make a name for ourselves' expresses no conceit of defiance but rather the impulse toward cultural homogeneity at the heart of the human project" (Hiebert 40). What Hiebert calls "cultural homogeneity" can simply be summed up as their desire to preserve their unity, one language and the same words.

There is debate about whether the builders of the Tower were aware of their post-Flood identity or more importantly of God's command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth". Scholars who would defend the position stated in the first half of this paper use the post-Flood identity to prove that the Tower builders were consciously disobedient to God and therefore deserving of punishment in the form of forced dispersion. In contrast, there are two trains of thought which assume humanity's innocence – one assuming that they owned their post-Flood identity and one asserting their independence from it. Pinker argues first in favor of their innocence regardless of their knowledge of God's command. He says,

This is a story that reaches out to the roots of the human race, to the initial stages of its rebuilding following the destruction of the Flood. Here is a group of people, that is, all the people, speaking one language, each of whom had but a few possessions. They have proliferated enough to out-grow the dwelling space in the caves of Mount Ararat and the food that can be produced from its arable land. They are not a breakaway group; they are as yet too few to split, they think; and they are very concerned of being lost, of drifting away and losing contact. Though descendants of Noah, they start with a *tabula rasa* to a great degree, and have to rediscover almost everything by themselves (Pinker 95).

To a great degree, Pinker grants the Tower builders legitimacy for their raw human concerns. If they are essentially survivors of the greatest act of destruction the world has ever seen, Pinker grants them some flexibility in following God's command. Though God ordered for humanity to fill the earth, at this point in time, they may have felt that there simply were not enough of them to break out into small clans and maintain any hope or chance of actually surviving and successfully filling the earth. In their judgment they may have deemed it more appropriate to hesitate, increase their numbers and disperse at a later time.

Hiebert makes the other claim – that the Tower builders were not aware of their command to multiply and fill the earth – which is supported through studying the sources of the stories. He asserts that the two stories come from two different traditions or two different authors which were not in communication. The stories were not necessarily understood with respect to one another until the Bible was compiled at a later time. Hiebert says, “We may not take the people’s wish to stay together... as a transgression of God’s command to fill the earth” because “the story of Babel makes no reference to this command, even when God appears to diversity humanity and populate the earth” (Hiebert 56).

Whether the Tower builders knew about God’s command or not, Hiebert’s point that the command is never brought up in the story – even when God descends – brings up an important point. Regardless of the builder’s knowledge, God does not remind humanity of the command or name disobedience to the command as something which is even under consideration. When God descends to earth in verse six, God’s observation immediately addresses the “builders’ cultural uniformity, not on their pride of imperial pretensions. God does not speak about the tower or its height, about the hubris of its builders, about their challenge to divine authority, or about their imperial power. Rather, what God notices first upon his descent and considers most remarkable is humanity’s homogeneity” (Hiebert 43). God, in fact, nearly mimics the narrator’s observation from verse

one saying, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language” (Genesis 11:6). Whether or not the builders were indeed disobedient seems irrelevant both in interpreters’ eyes as well as in God’s.

After commenting on the civilization’s uniformity in speech and action God continues by recognizing the implications of such uniformity – namely, the construction of a tower and the formation of a city. God asserts, “and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (Genesis 11:6). Like interpreters who contribute to the position summarized in the first half of this paper, we might read a sense of defensiveness into God’s comment. Some scholars assume that God’s assessment is drenched in dread for what humans are capable of and a desperate need to subvert such evil. Though it would be unrealistic to pretend that humans, unified in voice and deed, are only capable of constructive acts like building a city or a majestic landmark, – think about Nazi Germany – it is also unfair to the builders of Babel to think that God might not have been the least bit impressed with the ingenuity and constructiveness that His creation demonstrated through cooperation and planning.

We must take into account the reality of how the construction of Babel must have played out as well as the timing for God’s intervention. Pinker reminds us that the builders specifically say “Come let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly” (Genesis 11:3). He further explains,

If we assume that the bricks had to be dried for a year in the sun... it is clear, then, that the project took a number of years, and required much planning and organization. More importantly, it required discipline and dedication, perhaps a religious fervor to complete such an undertaking. The religiosity and piety of the builders of the Tower of Babel made them forego personal need or comfort for the sake of building a house for god (Pinker 97).

Pinker’s observation makes two points. First, as he implies, the builders’ dedication to a project that obviously took a considerable amount of time and hard work to complete is something to be admired and, – possibly more importantly to God – something to be used for God’s purposes. Whether the dedication was directed toward God or not, God could take the exhibited character of the builders and re-form it to fit God’s needs.

The second point which Pinker’s observation suggests is that over the course of the many long years of construction, God never descended or intervened. God waited until after the Tower was built² and the city was reasonably established be-

²“It appears that the Tower was completed – nothing in the text intimates to the contrary. We are told that the building of the city was stopped, but not the Tower” (Pinker 97).

fore he came down to earth to inspect. Though the story implies that humanity's creation was so miniscule God had to descend even to see it, God, the omniscient, must have known what was going on in the world below but chose not to stop it. The non-intervention of God implies that God approved of what was going on or at least was curious enough about how it would turn out that He let it continue. Then, when God did finally descend, his comments, though not explicitly laudatory, also do not condemn the construction or express regret for letting it develop so far. In fact, the comments seem to imply that God is impressed with the humans' creativity. Pinker reads positive judgment into God's assessment asserting that, "Greatly pleased, God then stops the building of the city, and disperses them to use their skills to build more cities, to fill His world with people and civilization" (Pinker 97).

While Pinker's assessment is obviously biased towards a positive reading, it does not violate anything explicitly in the text. After acknowledging the potential which his creation possesses God confounds their language so that they will not understand one another (v. 7) and scatters humanity over all the earth (v. 8). God's recognition of human capability implies his subsequent supposition that "the human race, left to itself, is intent on preserving one uniform culture, and that recognition spurs God to action" (Hiebert 45). We will never know whether or not the people of Babel would have filled the earth by their own initiative, but, in terms of the purpose and meaning of the story, the hypothetical is unimportant.

What is significant is the kind of insight that the story gives us about the storyteller and those ancient peoples' understanding of the diversity they encountered in their world. The people who knew this story recognized the diversity in their world and not just the fact that there were many different people but that there were many extremely successful civilizations. The storyteller's perception of this was not that there were many different gods with their own people but that their one God was responsible for dispersing humanity throughout the earth and hoped for the success of all the people of the earth. In the first interpretation we still get the impression that God is responsible for the earth's diversity but by naming the dispersion as a punishment we also get the impression that diversity is not necessarily a good thing but is a consequence of human shortcomings. In the second interpretation, however, – the one which I prefer – the dispersal of human beings throughout the earth is, as Hiebert says, "the consequence of God's design for the world, not the result of God's punishment of it" (Hiebert 56). In this interpretation, diversity came into the picture as God's ultimate intention once God judged humanity capable of sustaining itself throughout the earth. Diversity is a natural

step in the process of development. "God's initial assessment of human efforts recognizes simply their initial success at preserving a common culture. God's subsequent introduction of cultural difference, through linguistic and geographical diversity, is presented as God's intention for the world and narrated in a straightforward fashion" (Hiebert 56). Seeing that God dispersed the people after He judged human competency affirms that God is intimately involved with creation – God knew that His creation was ready. The diversity in the world is then also, not haphazard but intentional and deliberate.

The story of the Tower of Babel is really less of a story about a tower and more of a story about humanity and diversity and God's involvement with both. The story offers an explanation of how and why the world is filled with diverse people and languages. Answering "how?" is easy because in any interpretation, the agent is obvious: God dispersed humanity throughout the earth. Answering "why?" is more complicated but, after careful consideration, it seems that humanity was scattered throughout the earth because God saw what human diligence and thoughtfulness could potentially produce. With one language and the same words, God's competent and creative humans were capable of successfully building a great tower and surrounding city. With more languages, more words and the resources of all the earth, God was confident that humans could take his commandment to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with unique, diverse and resilient civilizations. Thus, humanity was released from Babel by God's commission.

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Desmond M. Tutu: Theological Model for Justice in the Context of Apartheid

Tracy Riggle

In our current age of modernity, the role religion can play in transforming the world is certainly highly debated. There are those people who relegate religion to a sphere of unimportance, deeming it a study only applicable to antiquity. There are others, however, who insist upon the continuing validity and importance of religion. The question around which this work will focus is what kind of impact religion can have on our modern world of injustice. The goal of this research is to highlight religion's propensity to be what Lloyd Steffen refers to as "life affirming" (Steffen 5). Religion which is life affirming acts as an alternative to a demonic religion which promotes violence and injustice by valuing the lives of certain individuals over others. In a period of history characterized by events such as September 11th and the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has become an immanent concern for scholars and members of the faith community alike to reevaluate the role religion plays in affirming life as opposed to denying or destroying it.

What Steffen and many others have come to realize is the crucial choice that religious people are faced with: whether they choose to accept a form of religion that promotes equality and justice as opposed to one that continues to endorse hatred and violence in the name of God. From Steffen's perspective it is a matter of choice whether or not human beings become part of a "life affirming" or "demonic" religion. Taking this analysis one step further, it is my contention that any understanding of the Christian religion that endorses violence, inequality, and injustice is an improper understanding of the Christian faith as a whole. It is, in effect, not Christianity at all. For this reason, those who call themselves Christian must resist the temptation to collude with the "demonic" and must critique those societal structures that promote values and practices which exacerbate our world's wounds.

Despite the tendency for media to concentrate on a negative portrayal of religion and behind the numerous examples of violence committed in the name of one's faith tradition, a growing number of people in our current age are active in transforming and bettering society in the name of religion. One such example is Desmond M. Tutu, humanitarian and former Archbishop of South Africa. Tutu

has become a well renowned activist for racial equality, justice and reconciliation and has had an impact all over the globe with his transformative religious beliefs. Desmond Tutu, in the context of South Africa's dehumanizing Apartheid system, stood up for his religious beliefs and motivated others to do the same. The result was a uniting of the black community in South Africa and a viable challenge to the country's corrupt government. Tutu, in a coalition with Nelson Mandela and other political activists, partook the long and arduous battle to eliminate the Apartheid system and ultimately fostered the creation of a new South Africa, free from a racist and oppressive governmental system - all in the name of his Christian faith.

Despite the susceptibility for religion to unite with the demonic, Tutu reminds us that things do not have to be this way. Underneath our mask of skepticism, believe it or not, people do take notice of individuals like Tutu who use religion to transform the world into a more just place. This type of transformation is happening every day, we simply must open our eyes to allow for this possibility. It was because of Tutu's strong convictions as a Christian that he was able to empower others in organizations such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC served as the organization responsible for mending a broken South Africa in the post Apartheid Era. It was through this commission that Tutu was able to use his theology, and especially his strong belief in reconciliation, as a tool for the creation of a more united South Africa.

It was the oft-quoted theologian Jürgen Moltmann who once wrote, "Peace with God means conflict with the world" (Moltmann 21). Whether it be in the context of South Africa or anywhere else across the globe, the current world in which we live is one that desperately needs repairing. The daunting task that all Christians face is saving religion from those who seek to align it with demonic forces. Moltmann's claim is profoundly valuable in the current age because it reminds us how very far we are from realizing the full potential of Christianity. Our world is unfortunately often characterized by bloodshed, hunger, hatred and divisiveness. Given this current state of affairs, "peace with God" must necessitate *action* in the world. Appreciating the seriousness of Moltmann's claim, it no longer becomes acceptable to settle for the current demonic turn religion has taken. Taking this claim to heart places upon members of the Christian community a responsibility to engage the world, face injustice head on and bring it to and end -the very same goal of Desmond M. Tutu.

Apartheid

Dehumanization means treating people as if they are things. It means deny-

ing human beings their status as unique individuals with the ability to learn, the right to live and most of all the right to survive. Dehumanization is the strongest form of oppression and it is the goal most aptly achieved by the system of Apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid meant people were seen for what they are instead of who they are. One's worth was evaluated based on one's skin color, as opposed to one's ethics and personality. Apartheid meant, for all people, that first and foremost individuals were judged based on pigmentation and all other characterizations were evaluated as subsidiary considerations. For those deemed "white," this initial judgment based on pigmentation resulted in a human existence completely different than what was experienced by those individuals who found themselves outside the bounds of this limited category. To be deemed white meant initial power, status, and privilege in South Africa due to the assumptions of greater intelligence and propensity for productivity. To be deemed "coloured" or even worse to be branded "black" meant less freedom, more heavily restricted civil liberties, and the stereotypic characterization that those non-white individuals were less intelligent, less capable of making their own decisions, less productive, and more prone to destructive behavior. Because of this form of dehumanization, people in South Africa were never simply seen as people. There was always a qualifier and in South Africa the qualifier was most certainly the arbitrary category of race.

It was within this context of Apartheid that Desmond M. Tutu was fully embedded. Tutu's many experiences, education within the Anglican Church, African upbringing, and profound sense of spirituality and piety formed his theology and enabled him to challenge the South African government not as a politician, but as a theologian. Tutu cannot be torn from his environment for it is this context which is integral to his entire spirituality and system of beliefs. Ultimately, it was Tutu's theological beliefs that would help the future Archbishop of South Africa challenge the government head on and help bring Apartheid to its final days. It was Tutu's strong conviction that theology should affirm life for all people that led him to take this challenging risk of faith.

The Theology of Tutu

If we could but recognize our common humanity, that we do belong together, that our destinies are bound up with one another's, that we can be free only together, that we can survive only together, that we can be human only together, then a glorious South Africa would come into being where all of us lived harmoniously together as members of one family, the human family, God's family. In truth a transfiguration would have taken place. ("Rainbow People" 121)

Because it is first and foremost Desmond Tutu's theological convictions that lead him to challenge Apartheid, it is necessary to take a closer look at just what those beliefs are. His very specific reading of the gospel of Jesus, coupled with his own Anglican tradition and his African spirituality, formed Tutu's theological convictions. The theme linking all of the former Archbishop's religious beliefs is a desire to connect people to one another, to bring people together despite the irrelevant differences of race, gender, and, even later, despite one's sexual orientation. When examining the life of Tutu one mustn't lose sight of these religious convictions, because he became a world peace advocate and socio-political reformer, Tutu was a man of faith who sought to truly live out the gospel of Christ. Once again, for Tutu the gospel of Christ necessitates doing something about injustice and challenging those so-called Christians who used their beliefs to subjugate blacks and endorse racial oppression.

Imago Dei

The concept of God's love for humanity is central in Tutu's metaphor for God and it is the root of all of his religious beliefs. God, the Creator, made man in His image (*Imago Dei*) and He proclaimed that this creation "was good". The Biblical account of Creation in Genesis 1, specifically Genesis 1:26-27, provides the conception of *Imago Dei*. According to Tutu, we are all children of God created equally through God's love, which is unrelenting and not dependent upon our actions or successes in the world. One should not be valued based on external factors such as race, ethnicity, status or wealth because ultimately in God's eyes we are all the same, each integral parts of the common humanity God loves. God loves the sinner and the saint equally. Tutu states emphatically, "There is nothing you can do to make God love you less – absolutely nothing, for God already loves you and will love you forever" ("*God Dream*" 32). The love of God is always present, in all circumstances, no matter how much humans' freedom to sin has masked it. We must love each other in the same way God loves us, and unite in a common humanity in order to bring about God's transfiguration. From Tutu's perspective, this is the only way to deal with a world so overwhelmed with evil that too much of its good is masked.

Tutu relies heavily on the scripture of the Genesis creation stories to make the claim that God created all individuals in His image in order that they may be interdependent and coexist. He criticizes Apartheid for failing to honor this conception by placing undue emphasis on the importance of race, which Tutu finds to be a biological irrelevancy with which God was never concerned in creation. The

themes present in the biblical creation stories make clear that God wills “peace, prosperity, fellowship, justice, wholeness, compassion, love, and joy” (“Rainbow People” 61). These characteristics had been completely ignored under the Nationalist rule of white South Africa. Tutu’s hope for the future depends on the realization of Image Dei and the recognition that we are all part of “koinonia” or the African concept for community. Tutu makes this clear in a sermon as he powerfully engages the audience proclaiming his dream “where all of us, black and white, count because we are human persons, human persons created in your own image” (“Rainbow People” 17).

One of the major themes from the Hebrew Scripture and which Tutu emphasizes, and in a way similar to that of other theologians’ insistence upon liberation, is that of the Exodus event. Tutu states, that God is a “God of the Exodus, with power and might; with an outstretched arm He had led this group of slaves victoriously out of their slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the promised land” (“Rainbow People” 18). God first showed through Moses that He would deliver his people. This theme was then carried to Joshua and finally to the one Christians call Christ. For Tutu, Jesus’ ministry is the way that individuals can experience the concreteness of a transcendent God. God for Tutu is “spirit” and “sometimes dwells in light inaccessible” (“Rainbow People” 27) but Jesus makes this God known. Jesus, through his breaking of social conventions, feeding of the poor, forgiveness of sins, healing of the sick and uncleanly, ultimately identified with those on the margins. This is the theme that should be derived from Jesus’ ministry and it is what must be incorporated into our own daily lives. The fundamentals of Christianity must be drawn from Jesus’ life, death and resurrection; Apartheid is fundamentally evil and un-Christian because these themes of the Gospel are completely ignored in a world based on dominance, superiority, and negligence of the oppressed. Our criterion as Christians must be Jesus Christ (“Rainbow People” 54-55).

Transfiguration

Central to Desmond Tutu’s religious beliefs is the concept of transfiguration. Transfiguration is defined as, “God’s transformation in the world” (“God Dream” 3). Transfiguration can be anything from the changing of nature from season to season, or even an occasion in which people, who were previously separated, come to unite. Such is the case with South Africa post-Apartheid. For Tutu, the prime example of transfiguration is the resurrection of Jesus on the cross. What was supposed to be an instrument of death has now become the basis of eternal life for all Christians. Jesus subverted the powers that were to be and because of

his transfiguration and God's transformation was able to escape death. It is this process of transfiguration that people of faith must look out for in the world, for God's transformation is always occurring; it is simply masked from time to time by a human propensity towards evil and a lack of genuine faith.

God's love is not passive, and although He loves all of creation equally He is one who is willing to take sides, according to Tutu. Jesus' ministry makes this fact known and illuminates the theme of God's preference for the poor. Although God loves all of creation, He wants each member of creation to work towards the betterment of creation as a whole. This is where the concept of human love comes into the picture. It is not only important to know that God loves us, for that can serve as a destructive opiate. God loves us in order that we actively take part in His transfiguration, and the only way we can do this is by loving one another. Love, according to Tutu, "is not an action, it is something we do for others" ("God Dream" 78). God loves us, and correspondingly needs and demands us as members of the faith community to love one another as well.

Ubuntu

Tutu's entire moral and theological framework rests on the supposition that individuals are all inextricably connected in a common web of being. This is where Tutu's conception of "ubuntu" comes into play. Tutu describes this belief, one that is somewhat hard to define in English, as "hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate" ("Rainbow People" 31). The fundamental tenet of this conviction is that people are always connected to one another and the greatest good must be social harmony. In accordance, people should see each other not as individuals but as partners who must work together to achieve any ends. Life under *ubuntu* means there is no room for completely self-sufficient individuals; we are all mutually dependent, for only together can we overcome our faults. Concretely what this means is that each and every individual sees himself or herself as a brother or sister to everyone else. God's whole creation is one large family, and whether we like it or not we owe it to our family members to help care for one another and jointly alleviate each other's pain. The superficial external distinctions (i.e. race, class, gender, or political orientation) start to break down when people elevate the importance of love. Only then will we begin to respect the positions of all of our brothers and sisters, no matter how much they may differ from our own.

Accordingly, we must spend our time trying to love one another to facilitate the creation of a loving community made of blacks, whites, men, women, rich and poor. This is a difficult task to accomplish in modern society because we have been so engrained with the importance of achieving success, especially on indi-

vidualistic terms. Once again, Tutu's insistence on *ubuntu* and interconnectedness and his conception of a God who loves demonstrates that our ultimate concern must be to love God and all of His creation in return. Echoing the language and ideas of Paul Tillich, Tutu states that we are finite beings made for the infinite whose ultimate loyalty must not be to success, money, fame or really anything other than God. Without God the Creator as the root of our being, we are bound to "turn ashes in our mouths" ("God Dream" 34).

Battle states, "*Ubuntu* theology asserts that persons are ends in themselves only through the discovery of who they are in others" (Battle 43). The highly divisive institution of Apartheid has missed this tenet of African theology. For Tutu, community is a primary requirement for Christians and therefore individuals must tend to the needs of their neighbors, as Jesus exemplifies in his own ministry and as God has made evident through his transfiguration. As Christians, according to the profoundly spiritual Tutu, we must take part in God's transfiguration recognizing our common humanity as people equally created in God's image.

Community and Forgiveness

"God's love is for us and our love for others is the single greatest motivating force in the world. And this love and the good it creates will always triumph over hatred and evil. But if you are to be true partners with God in the transfiguration of His world and help bring triumph of love over hatred, of good over evil, you must begin by understanding as much as God loves you, God equally loves your enemies" ("God Dream" 40-41).

The only way to bring about transfiguration and God's dream of peace, compassion, love and sharing, is for one to start "seeing with the eyes of God" ("God Dream" 93). First we must recognize that we are all equals created according to the Image Dei. Then we must see that God loves us all, not for our successes, but rather for our potential to do good. It would be very easy to love those people whose values and beliefs coincide with our own, but God demands more of us. Because we are all equally prone to sin, we are all equally capable of bringing about justice in the world. We must love all people, valuing each other for their potential role in the delicate network of being. This means that we can no longer afford to see people as enemies. We must welcome into our families the drug dealers, terrorists, as well as the sinners if we are to be dedicated Christians wholeheartedly following the life of Christ.

In the case of South Africa, the only means to achieving an end to racial injustice was forgiveness through reconciliation. Reconciliation was a way to move

past the many injustices and sins inflicted upon blacks and to a lesser degree whites under the system of Apartheid. Ideally, confession, forgiveness and reparation form a continuum but we must remember and be ready and willing to forgive without one's acknowledgement of sin, as illustrated by Jesus' ministry. Before this can happen we must truly try to see people the way that God does, and for Tutu this is as brothers and sisters who love and respect one another as the divinely created beings which together make up God's world and in time will prove to be instruments of His dream and transfiguration. The first step, and a difficult one at that, is seeing the world as God does and realizing that God's transfiguration is already occurring little by little, through small examples of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. God has faith in His creation and is currently working to put an end to suffering, we simply must find a way to link onto these small acts of transfiguration and the only way to do that is to start loving one another.

Being able to hold onto a firm belief in the power of reconciliation and forgiveness is what sets Tutu apart from other anti-Apartheid leaders. However, Desmond Tutu is certainly one of the most notable leaders of the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, and it is due to the dedication of this man and others that in 1994 one of the most basic of human rights, the right to vote, was granted to citizens of South Africa regardless of race. After hundreds of years of history defined by laws of separation, racism and segregation, South Africa was finally able to participate in its first democratic election, bringing former prison inmate Nelson Mandela into the Presidency. This is the movement in which the profoundly religious Tutu found himself wholly embedded. Examining Tutu's work as Chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission can give us a glimpse of this extraordinary man's dedication to liberation in the name of his faith. In a way, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought to life many of Tutu's own spiritual beliefs and as such sought to deal with the aftermath of Apartheid, transforming a blood soaked land into a land of justice and peace.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created after President Botha, the Nationalist Leader, was forced by his cabinet to resign from the Presidency, the first of what would be many steps on the road to freedom in South Africa. This Commission was set up after Nelson Mandela won the electoral vote in South Africa and became the first non-white President to preside over the country. The TRC was established by the larger *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act* and was charged with assessing how people who engaged in violent crimes would be dealt with in post-Apartheid South Africa. This Commission, composed of members of various political and theological orientations (including one of Af-

rikaaner descent), was to strive to hold individuals accountable for their unjust actions during the Apartheid era.

There was much debate over just how perpetrators were to be punished in the years following the ban of Apartheid. There were some who were supportive of an approach similar to that of the Nuremberg Trials which would consist of extensive investigation and strict reparations while others, mainly those whites who were quick to forget their involvement in Apartheid, advocated complete amnesty and absolution. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, under the leadership of Desmond Tutu, took something of a middle ground between these two opposite spectrums and decided to “grant amnesty to individuals in exchange for a full disclosure relating to the crime for which amnesty was being sought” (“No Future” 30). Specifically, the requirements for amnesty were as follows: the act for which amnesty was required must have occurred between 1960 & 1994, the act must have been politically motivated, the applicant must disclose all relevant facts, and all must be measured according to a rubric of proportionality, that is, as to whether the means were proportional to the objective (“No Future” 49). Based on these qualifications the TRC was able to make a recommendation which was to be approved by the President and lastly by Parliament as a final check.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is Tutu's most notable political activity in South Africa and it was through this commission that many of the injustices of Apartheid were handled. Over a decade after its creation, the success of the TRC is more than acknowledged but the process of creating a unified commission and coming up with an effective strategy for dealing with the dehumanization left by Apartheid at times seemed insurmountable to the former Archbishop. It was not until taking a “spiritual retreat” upon the recommendation of Chairman Tutu and President of South African Nelson Mandela that members of the Commission were able to unite in a common vision (“No Future” 81-82). From the very beginning the work of the TRC was going to be founded heavily upon both Christian and African themes. It is from this religious background, mainly the faith grounding of its leader, that reconciliation became the means to an end for the commission. An emphasis was shifted to achieving restorative justice as opposed to retributive justice (“No Future” 260). This justice would come about through the threefold process of confession, forgiveness and reparation (“No Future” 173). Granting amnesty did not mean forgetting the horrible crimes committed under Apartheid; it meant holding one accountable for participation in injustice and forgiveness from those upon whom injustice was inflicted. It meant telling the stories, owning up to one's role in the stories, and setting forth a way to move past those stories towards a more peaceful future.

Appropriately, the basic premise and slogan of the TRC was “The Truth Hurts, But Silence Kills” (“No Future” 107). The process of de-silencing South Africa was by no means an easy process, a fact the Commission was often reminded of. Many times the stories told by individuals subpoenaed to the Commission were brutal and on more than one occasion brought members of the TRC to tears. It is important to note that the TRC, although often criticized as being secretly controlled by Mandela’s ANC, was granting amnesty both to proponents of Apartheid, such as police officers and elected officials, as well as those deemed “terrorists” who revolted against the state and Apartheid. This meant that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was forced to tackle both sides of the Apartheid debate by showing that violence under the system was not acceptable and that retaliation to the system through the use of even more violence was also unacceptable. Implicit in the TRC’s goals and overarching framework was an ethic of reconciliation, with the ultimate goal of moving beyond the divisive days of Apartheid to a future in South Africa where, in Tutu’s words, “all the Rainbow people of God” could find a home.

Tutu was able to realize on a personal level, by working with the TRC, just how prone individuals truly are to sinful behavior. He states repeatedly in his own account about his work with the Commission how everyone has “the capacity for the most awful evil—every one of us” (“No Future” 85). As a religious leader centered in the fight against Apartheid, Tutu came into contact with many people who, due to either their dehumanization or their blindness to the evils of the system, were able to commit awful crimes - including rape, murder, physical beating, bombing of public areas, and even the use of chemical warfare. It seems difficult to understand, in the context of all of this sin and evil, how Tutu or any of his colleagues could actually retain any sort of faith or hope that reconciliation was possible. Tutu’s strong theological convictions were what enabled him to realize not only humans’ universal propensity towards evil, but also their propensity towards forgiveness. Through the many horror stories, members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were able to advocate for reconciliation because of a belief rooted in *ubuntu* and in God’s love for all of creation - a belief that Christianity could be a tool used to affirm our togetherness and the importance of respecting the lives of members of all races.

Tutu states, “We have supplied God with enough evidence if God had needed it to want to dispatch us all, to wipe the slate clean as when He tried to make a fresh start with the Flood” (“God Dream” 144). But this is not what has happened in South Africa so it is up to the free will of humans to find their proper place in

creation, which for Tutu has to be in connection with all individuals irregardless of personal differences. This is why reconciliation between all people is what must be realized, and who better to lead the cause than a man whose entire life was pervaded by a theology founded upon the principles of equality and community? Tutu is a valuable model because of his insistence on using reconciliation to put racial injustice to an end and halt the violent policies endorsed by the Nationalist government.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, operating under a biblical ethic of reconciliation, sought to provide as many reparations as possible to the victims of Apartheid but ultimately monetary compensation would not provide the kind of healing that needed to take place in South Africa. What South Africa needed first and foremost was a way to come to terms with its awful past by owning up to injustice, attempting to compensate for that injustice, and most importantly, finding a way to move past that injustice to ensure a brighter future. The only way Tutu and his colleagues could imagine achieving that goal was through the ethic and process of reconciliation. Due to the African concept of *ubuntu*, people must always be interconnected and interdependent working on strengthening the bond between humanity as apposed to our divisions. Coupled with the biblical ethic of reconciliation present in the Pauline letters, bringing the people of South Africa back together was imperative.

Given the tragic experience of South Africa and what seemed like insurmountable challenges, it is amazing that individuals were able to retain a strong enough hope in a better future to actually enable that future to one day occur. South Africa was a county which since the early 1600's was led with an ethic of divide and rule, where whites and non-whites were relegated to completely different social, economic and occupational spheres. Since 1994, however, this is no longer a defining characteristic of South Africa and this is due in large part to those individuals who advocated reconciliation. Desmond Tutu clearly shows how the Biblical notion of reconciliation and the African concept of *ubuntu* are at the center of his belief system, but he also stresses the important role played by Nelson Mandela as the most "potent agent for reconciliation" ("No Future" 10). Not only was this man able to lead a country torn into two by bloodshed but he was also able to come to grips with his own unjust past. This ex-prisoner of 27 years, upon the day of his induction into the Presidency, did what many individuals never expected. He personally invited all of the police officers and correctional facility workers to his inauguration as an initial powerful step towards reconciliation. He was one who, according to Tutu, embodied *ubuntu* by the willingness to open himself up

to all of God's creation in order to restore the network of interdependence which had been broken down by Apartheid and its supporters for over 50 years.

These changes were only furthered by the work of the TRC under Desmond Tutu's magnanimous leadership. The TRC was able to hear over 2,000 claims for reparations and amnesty during the length of its commission. It was, of course, unable to attend to the nearly 1.5 million South Africans who died under the system of Apartheid yet it made many important strides towards reconciliation and "re-creating" a South Africa composed of a unified people, or of "all God's children" as Tutu so often likes to refer to it. Tutu's work and belief in reconciliation has not been limited to South Africa, for this Archbishop has visited other areas of political unrest including Ireland, Palestine, Rwanda, and Israel. In all these cases Tutu has preached and embodied an ethic of reconciliation as the only way to deal with the injustice and division of power in all of these countries. According to Tutu, reconciliation is an approach that has succeeded in liberating South Africa and other nations may look to South Africa as an example in order to deal with their own struggles. It is clearly his biblical ethic of reconciliation coupled with a profound African spirituality that has motivated Desmond Tutu to embody his beliefs and extend them to the TRC in order to reassemble a broken South Africa. He states, "To work for reconciliation is to want to realize God's dream for humanity-when we will know that we are indeed members of one family, bound together in a delicate network on interdependence" ("No Future" 274).

As a final note it must be emphasized that what was so revolutionary about Tutu's work with the TRC was his ability to combine his Anglican beliefs, African spirituality and concern for human kind and turn it into a plan for action. The former Archbishop was a man whose life was dedicated towards creating a theology of praxis that was actually able to speak to worldly injustice. In Tutu's case, his theology of praxis was very instrumental in bringing Apartheid to an end and his model of reconciliation still stands as a powerful example to nations under political strife throughout the world.

Changes in Sufism in the American Context

Patrick Hamilton

Since its inception as a religious movement in what most scholars agree to be around the 8th century CE, Sufism has existed in all its forms as a controversial and highly complex sect of Islam. The vast pluralisms which come together to form the sect itself have been sources of skepticism and criticism on an international scale for centuries; syncretic worship elements from several world religious traditions are starkly inconsistent with some forms of mainstream Islam. Similarly, both ancient and modern Sufi devotional practices, including the aesthetic traditions associated with them, have continually been regarded as bastardizations of Islamic tradition. Though the diversified nature of Sufism has probably attracted many free-thinking followers throughout the centuries, it is this same mixture that has garnered scorn and even persecution from the Islamic world. For this reason, it is understandable that Sufism has been allowed to undergo drastic changes in the American context; a predominantly non-Muslim environment, largely free from the constraints of mainstream Muslim norms and state-sanctioned religious monitoring, has rendered lasting changes on Sufism in America. Ethnic diversity within the Muslim population of America has also contributed to Sufi change not only through contact, but by virtue of the fact that its diverse nature has prevented any single Muslim nation from exerting full influence on Muslim America. This distance, coupled with an increased interest in new religious movements in the US since the 1960s, has led to an increase in American Sufi practitioners, and the result has been the reworking of ancient Sufi traditions to fit the American trend of recognizing the individual's connection to worship and religious ideas through the incorporation of scientific concepts. Finally it is crucial to examine the uniquely American shifts in the organization of Sufi communities and places of worship, as the roles of women and members of the Sufi religious elite continue to change in the American context. These community changes share connections to the use of new information technology, which has simultaneously reaffirmed Sufi identities and beliefs and enabled a mere 25,000-strong Sufi population to advertise its presence to millions of Americans.¹ This essay examines the external societal viewpoints and historical circumstances that have allowed American Sufism to enhance its pluralistic approach to the individual's connection

to God and to others, to transform its spiritual foci to incorporate secular concepts, and to adopt new systems of organization in order to continue the Sufi tradition in the modern American arena.

Sufism

In order to understand Sufism in the US, it is important to first have an understanding of the nature of Sufism, along with a grasp of the historical circumstances that shaped Sufism prior to its introduction to the American situation. As with other religious traditions—or even the term “religion”—attempting to define Sufism is a tremendously problematic undertaking. The term “Sufism” is problematic in and of itself; originating from the Arabic word *sufi*, or woolen cloth worn by mystic ascetics, the term entered the West as a blanket label for “islamicate” mystics as observed during 18th-19th century European imperialism.² This Orientalist perspective formed in response to the contrasts that Westerners observed between the much-hated Ottoman Turkish Muslims of the time and the seemingly free-thinking practitioners of Sufism. Because of their apparent love of wine, dance, and poetry (among other assumed distinctions from mainstream Islam in Western eyes), the Sufis were seen in a much more affectionate light by colonialists in the Middle East and South Asia; many Europeans falsely designated Sufism as the offspring of Christianity and Greek philosophy. Though Sufism does indeed synthesize certain elements of these traditions, in combination with elements from other religious movements, it by no means shares them as its parent traditions. This Orientalist attention began the Western misconception that Sufism is separate from Islam, though certain prominent orders (elucidated below) deny connection to any parent religion.

Around the 10th century CE, Muslim scholars and composers of Sufi literature officially began using the term ‘Sufi’ in order to consolidate the general beliefs of the movement for the purpose of expanding interest and knowledge in the subject. One such 10th century scholar, known as Qushayri, collected a list of Sufi sayings from earlier masters in an attempt to offer a set of definitions for the sect. He writes:

Sufism is entry into exemplary behavior and departure from unworthy behavior.

Sufism means that God (Allah) makes you die to yourself and makes you live in him.

The Sufi is single in essence; nothing changes him, nor does he change anything.

The sign of the sincere Sufi is that he feels poor when he has wealth, is humble when he has power, and is hidden when he has fame.

Sufism means that you own nothing and are owned by nothing.
 Sufism means seizing spiritual realities and giving up on what creatures possess.
 Sufism means kneeling at the door of the beloved, even if he turns you away.
 Sufism is a state in which the conditions of humanity disappear.
 Sufism is a blazing lightning bolt.³

One can see here that the nature of Sufism is at least partially explainable through this scholar's enumeration of spiritual characteristics. Historically, Muslim scholars have agreed on the importance of the Seven Stages of Human Development on the Sufi Path as a guideline for crucial Sufi precepts in human life. The seven stages consist of abstinence, renunciation of all materials that impede one's relationship to God, poverty, patience, trust in God (Allah), and contentment, and they highlight the indispensable nature of monitoring one's conduct towards purity.⁴ In this way, they exist not only as framework for the maximization of the person, but also for the enhancement of Sufi communities.

By observing these concepts, one can attain the ultimate goal: maximizing the potential of one's relationship with Allah. The notion that this is what Sufis strive to achieve above all else has garnered a great deal of negative opinions from the mainstream Muslim world for centuries, as it places adherence to Islamic text in a less crucial light. This tension appears to have coincided with the inception of Sufism in Central Asia and the Middle East, but it reached its peak in the 10th and 11th centuries CE in Persia. The religious persecution of Sufis that characterized the time actually restricted many Sufi practitioners to a "safer" Islamic lifestyle, concealing their mystical practices under the guise of mainstream Islam.⁵

This persecution was denounced three centuries later by Persian authorities, but political and interpersonal tensions continue to exist between mainstream Muslims and Sufis today. As recently as the 1970s, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran—was a private scholar of theoretic Islamic mysticism, but scorned public practice of it. This was common in early Persia; as well, when the separation of the religio-political elite from the masses was necessary to quell the possible rise of religious rivals. It is for this reason that the term "dervish," from the Persian *darvish*, synonymous with "poor," "evil," "heretical," and a range of other negatives, has come to serve as a derogatory term for Sufis in Iran; it separates them from mainstream followers of Islam as a threatening and undesirable demographic.

Negative public- and state-promulgated opinions are not limited to slander, however. Pakistan, for instance, has laws specifically designed to control any Sufi

behavior that could be deemed “offensive” to Muslims. Punishments for such infractions have been unbelievably harsh, even during the last few decades.⁶ From a historical perspective, Sufism—despite its relationship to Islam—has been at odds with Shi’a Islam since its beginnings as the dominant religion in Iran during the Safavid reign of the 1500s.⁷ Wahhabbi Islam, which is the predominant sect in Saudi Arabia, shares many of its main precepts with the Deobandi schools (*madrasas*) of the Pakistani-Iranian border. Both are generally considered vast deviations from the original Qu’ran, and their ideas concerning interpretation of Islamic text extend far beyond those of mainstream Shi’a and Sunni Islam. The Wahhabbi and Deobandi interpretations allow absolutely no room for any Quranic construction that does not strictly adhere to their own precepts, which is why they are so vehemently opposed to Sufism.⁸

It seems that the obvious behavioral inconsistencies with mainstream Islam, and specifically with the Shi’a, Wahhabbi, and Deobandi forms, have been main sources of contention between the sects. One major factor contributing to this in history was the relationship between saint and disciple portrayed in pre-Renaissance Persian Sufi art and literature. This art, which is acclaimed for its careful use of perspective far before Dutch painters in the West began to implement it, commonly depicted the saint-disciple relationship in sexual form. This explicit homosexual element, though many claim it was merely a metaphor for the intimate relationship between instructor and pupil, went beyond the limitations of appropriate Islamic art to not only portray human figures, but to do so in a way that was markedly inconsistent with Muslim moral codes.⁹ This, in addition to the textual loose-constructionist viewpoints common to Sufism, contributed to historic aversion to the faith. One could argue that this same disregard for the precepts that many consider to be central to Islam exists today, and that it continues to influence external negative opinions.

Though it has scarcely come in forms as violent as in other nations, societal criticism against Sufis is still present in the Judeo-Christian US. Many American Shi’a and Sunni Muslims who disagree with the categorization of Sufism as part of Islam ascribe such “lumping in” of the Sufi sect to the American media’s tendency to holistically target Islamic life as the “American Enemy.” They believe that the perceived similarities between Sufi and mainstream Muslim identities are at once a cultural misunderstanding and an ignorance-driven insult.¹⁰

Pluralism in Sufism

It appears that the presence of Sufism in the ethnographic and religious di-

versity of America has had a strong effect on self-categorization within the Sufi population. It is important to note that a strong majority of members of newer Sufi movements in the US are Euro-Americans.¹¹ Among them and fellow Sufi but foreign-born Muslims, there is a range of self-proclaimed affiliation with mainstream Islam, with Caucasians and African Americans predominantly representing the less *Shari'a*-oriented movements. Communities comprising first- and second-generation Sufi immigrants from Central and South Asia and the Middle East tend to identify more closely with mainstream Islam.¹² In many instances, connection to a mother faith whose nomenclature extends beyond Sufism depends on the prevailing ideology of the particular order or place of worship. The Sufi Universalist organization known as the Sufi Order International (formerly the Sufi Order of the West), for example, strongly denies any connection to Islam, while members of many of its contemporary organizations disagree with that distinction.¹³

Though Sufism has always been a historically syncretic sect, it is apparent that the “American” demographic changes in membership have effected a change in the sense of identification with Islam. Hermansen cites a range of reasons for these changes, which she refers to as the “gradualization and hybridization” of Islamic concepts. According to her, Caucasian and African American involvement in new Sufi movements in America has been characterized by “gradualization and hybridization”—that is to say, by the primary introduction of syncretic New Age religious concepts, such as eastern meditation, breathing exercises, and different ways of understanding the self, followed by the gradual incorporation of mainstream Islamic ideas into worship. This trend in non-Muslim conversion to Sufism in America derives from the metaphysical curiosity of many agnostics over the past few decades; the relationship between mainstream Islam and Sufism was gradually visible to the alternative-religion-seeking converts over time, and it has thus found its way into the lives of Caucasian and African American Sufi converts.¹⁴ This can be observed in members of the Sufi Order International. Pir Vailayat Khan, the leader of the Order, strongly encourages members to devote themselves to understanding concepts pertaining to holistic healing, as well as those of “New Age and Eastern spirituality.”¹⁵ The emphasis of these elements in the Sufi Order International’s version of Sufism is one piece of evidence to support the notion that a self-separation from “Mother Islam” has steered some Sufis in the direction of adopting practice-oriented characteristics from other religious traditions.

Generally, those who adhere more closely to the precepts of mainstream Islam seek guidance from *Shari'a*, but their connection to Allah still takes precedence over adherence to religious texts. This is a notion that is shared throughout the Sufi

faith; emphasis on the importance of personal involvement above the understanding of religious text has always been essential to Sufism, and it continues to be a source of skepticism from the external world. Despite this inconsistency with mainstream Islam, the nature of Sufi spiritual beliefs has inspired many American Sufis to seek counsel and interaction with other New Religious Movements in healing practices; in this way, the inherent pluralistic qualities of Sufism encourage interaction with other faiths in America, and in doing so reshape that pluralism. A perfect example of this can be observed among Sufi Universalist practitioners of the American Sufi Islamiyat Ruhaniyat Society, the ideas of which are heavily centered on issues pertaining to psychotherapeutic practices. Members of the Society are encouraged to engage in yogic breathing techniques and the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra during worship, all the while incorporating Christian, Jewish, and Islamic prayers at given intervals. This is all conducted with the intention of “attuning” to ones inner being as a means of cleansing the system of negative emotions and elements.¹⁶

It is worth noting that members of the American Sufi Islamiyat Ruhaniyat Society also believe in seven energy points on the body as being places of resonance with God during worship. This may have contributed to American Sufi compatibility with the Hare Krishnas, as well as with a range of New Religious Movements, as body-centricity appears to be a shared interest in the devotional and meditational aspects of both arenas. Minimally, it exists as a strong consistency between the ideas of American Sufism and those of other religious movements.

Similarly, members of the American Jerrahi Movement have enjoyed a strikingly pluralistic approach to spiritual identity. Its former leader, Sheikh Nur al-Jerrahi (1941-1995), was an expert in comparative mysticism. He was once categorized as “an orthodox priest on Monday, a Buddhist lama on Tuesday, a Khalifa on Thursday—Christian among Christians, Muslim among Muslims.”¹⁷ American Jerrahis continue to live by these standards, and their pluralistic methodology is a direct result of their experience as a uniquely American Sufi movement.

Sufism and Western Secular Texts

One of the main changes that the American religious landscape has rendered on Sufi traditions deals with the interpretation of dreams as spiritual guidelines, especially in the predominantly Caucasian and African American Sufi communities. As mentioned earlier, this demography demonstrates the most obvious deviation from mainstream Islam in the American Sufi spectrum.

The importance of dreams has always been a main precept of traditional Sufism, and it is largely consistent with other forms of mysticism throughout the

world. In Central and South Asia and the Middle East, Sufi practitioners often recount their dreams to the sheikh, or local Sufi religious leader, and he in turn offers an interpretation in relation to Sufi or mainstream Islamic concepts. In the modern American scene, the dreams of practitioners sometimes have no consistent themes with traditional religious dream consultation ideas. As a result, for the aforementioned Caucasian and African American Sufi communities, a very unique secular substitution has replaced the importance of dream texts in American Sufism: Western psychotherapeutic models.¹⁸ The deemphasizing of religious traditions in favor of Western scientific literature used in the execution of very spiritual customs is something that has occurred strictly in the West, far from the inter- and intra-faith pressures of Sufi origins.

These Western psychotherapeutic models, which were originally set forth by psychologists such as Carl Jung, have taken root in the Sufi Order International, as well as in many American Sufi movements, as the foundations of self-awareness and dream-interpretation in relation to the individual's connection to God. As with ancient Sufi beliefs, these models suggest that dreams provide access to a deeper understanding of the inner self. The new importance of Jungian psychology to American Sufism has brought the role of the Sheikhs closer to that of the psychiatrist or psychologist; it is because of this new motion that representatives from the Sufi Psychological Association have begun to teach and consult at many clinical psychology programs at US universities.¹⁹

Similarly, recent American Sufi activity has highlighted inverse correlations between Western ego-psychology and traditional Sufi life and worship guidelines, and this information has been offered as lifestyle advice in modern American Sufi literature. The Seven Stages of Human Development on the Sufi Path, for example, offer a chronology of lifetime worship strata that seem to follow a backwards reading of Erickson's "Eight Ages of Man" ego-psychological model. The seven stages, which include abstinence, renunciation of all materials that impede one's relationship to God, poverty, patience, trust in God, and contentment, progress *against* the flow of man's undesirable slip into the development of the superego. Here one can see the Sufi modification of the self towards what Erickson considered to be the unadulterated, ego-less psychological state.²⁰ Sufi literature suggests that, following the opposite direction of Erickson's model, one can maximize the potential of the connection to one's inner self. This comes as a direct result of Sufi contact with the recent American obsession with the concept of "self help," and it has found its way into the relationship between American Sufis and their intrapersonal religious identities. In this way, the adaptation of secular texts to be put to use towards

religious practices and concepts has enabled Sufism to maintain and enhance its devotional goals in the American context.

From another perspective, a transformation of the physical aspects of devotion in American Sufism has occurred. The famed Mevlevi “whirling dervishes” who can be seen in Egypt, Turkey, and Central Asia today—those whose circular dance practices transport them to a trance-like state, arguably garnering even more criticism from mainstream Muslims²¹—have been replaced among American Sufis with “spiritual walking,” listening to sacred music, and performing other light dancing rituals.²² These appear to be conducted with the same devotional intensity, but with the same coherent state, as the Hare Krishna *kirtan* dancing—that is, grounded to a calmer, more organized method of worship, rather than in such a high-energy manifestation. Interestingly enough, this toning-down of ritual practice in a less conservative environment goes against the trends in behavioral liberalization following the introduction of Sufism to the West, but still points to alterations in Sufism in the US.

Structure and Community

As mentioned earlier, Sufism has been the brunt of external criticism and skepticism since its inception as an Islamic sect. Over the past few decades, large-scale societal ignorance about the nature of Sufism has caused many people to continue questioning its existence as a legitimate branch of Islam, and criticism of its ideas has arisen in response to its assumed relationships to other New Religions Movements in America. Gisela Webb attributes the lack of scholarship on the situation of the American Sufi to a sense of skepticism and perceived illegitimacy caused by Sufism’s untimely rise in popularity during the 1960s, when an explosion of interest in “religions of the East” inspired much capricious devotion in American anti-war youth. This happenstance also served to stoke skepticism on the part of the many American mainstream Muslims, as it made Sufism appear to be a mere “counter-cultural” phenomenon with no real connection to spirituality.²³ This, naturally, has been an external opinion that has rendered lasting effects on Sufi communities. In New York, there has been a regional adaptation and reworking of religious street processions (*julus*) held regularly for the purpose of increasing awareness in the Judeo-Christian and mainstream Muslims populations. Contrary to *julus* in Central Asia and the Middle East, some *julus* in New York almost resemble protests; Sufi precepts are printed in the English language on banners specifically to advertise community solidarity and reaffirm Muslim identity.²⁴ This is done largely in an attempt to legitimize Sufism in the arena of American religious life.

Interestingly enough, some scholars point to the origins of the perceived need to demonstrate an Islamic Sufi community identity and legitimacy in the Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. Many scholars consider this to be a crucial turning point in the conveyance and subsequent popularization of scholarly religious information.²⁵ As the popularity of Sufism continues to increase in the US, methods of communicating Sufi ideas are changing to conform to the use of such scholarly conferences and information technology. This change is a shift in organizational strategies from traditional Sufism.

Throughout history, Sufism has exerted a strong influence on economic and political affairs, from the family level all the way to matters concerning central government, and this energy has been put to use towards advertisement and information technology in the US. Sheikhs and other religious elite hold annual seminars on Sufi psychology, self help, medicine, and connections to Islam, and they are sometimes widely televised. The internet and television have also become strong tools for spreading Sufi concepts and connecting Sufi communities internationally. Hisham Kabbani, leader of the Naqshbandi Kabbanis, asked C-SPAN and a variety of cable TV networks to cover his first Islamic Unity Conference to discuss matters pertaining to Sufism in the US, and he even held an audience with President Clinton. This meeting with the President was photographed for the cover of *Muslim Magazine*—a move that many consider to be somewhat of a turning point in the public opinion of Sufism.²⁶

From a structural standpoint, the arrangement of a system of governance in Sufi organizations and places of worship is something that has arisen in response to American societal circumstances. One such organization, the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship of Philadelphia (a branch of the Qadri Order), set up committees to deal with matters pertaining to the Sufi stances on modern issues in America. They function almost as a court for the 1,000-member-strong fellowship, and they vote on the appointment of imams and sheikhs. Historically, and abroad, this has been the responsibility of the Sheikh alone; he usually chooses a successor based on the individual's ability to recite a complete genealogy of the religious elite of the particular order. Redistributing this power to a governing body comprising members of the organization appears to be a strictly American innovation, and it deemphasizes the importance of heritage and Qadri genealogy to the religious decision-making process of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.²⁷

Webb highlights the ideological transformations of this particular Sufi community in relation to the structural changes mentioned above. She lists the esoteric, interpersonal contextualization of the Arabic prayer, "La Ilaha Illa Allah"—

“There Is no God but God,” a new definition for the American renunciation of sacrilegious materials, and a new sense of self in relation to God as the main shifts she observed in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. These changes, she explains, have helped the members of the organization to reconcile traditional Sufi concepts with the changing modernity of the American religious landscape.²⁸

Beyond these organizational alterations, gender roles appear to have made significant shifts since the inception of certain Sufi movements in the United States. The Askijerrahis, an offshoot of the American Jerrahi branch mentioned earlier, began in 1985 under the direction of a female teacher, Sheikha Fariha Fatima al-Jerrahi. She is the first female Jerrahi leader in over 300 years. Her status as a sheikha grants her special permission to enter sacred sites normally reserved only for men, and her challenge to these traditions has inspired a female community identity within her organization that has been deemed subversive by other Sufi branches.²⁹

It is crucial to understand the concept of American-induced change on Sufism in the context of its contact with American spiritual diversity, but it is equally important to avoid the fallacy that America is an example of unwaveringly tolerant pluralism. Still, it can be said that the religious tensions inherent in the Middle East and Central and South Asia have probably acted as structural and ideational impediments to the Sufi situation since its inception as a sect. The main difference between the Sufi experience in those regions and that of the US is that state-sanctioned physical intervention in the form of violence has not been as much of an issue in America. Moreover, the state campaigns to eradicate Sufism from the Muslim world were conducted during the first few centuries of Islam in Persia, and were later denounced in the 12th and 13th centuries.³⁰ Because this large-scale violence is historically distant, and current international stresses seem to affect small, exclusive Sufi communities or mere individuals, there has not been a very strong American Sufi refugee movement. As mentioned earlier, many practitioners of American Sufism are Euro-Americans from Judeo-Christian backgrounds. Consequently, American Sufism has not responded as strongly to the needs of the devout religio-political refugee.³¹ The relatively small Muslim population of the US, combined with a lingering lack of understanding of Islam, also contributes to a lack of assembly in response to racial or ethnic tensions. Of all the mosques in the US, only a few are strictly for followers of the Sufi sect.³² The resulting perceived identity on the part of exterior parties seems to remain one of “New-Wave” or “flakey” characteristics, and the internally-perceived Sufi American identity continues to depend on the interpretations of the individual Sufi organizations. Some,

like Werbner's proud New York community, continue to insist on their connection to Islam; others, like the Sufi Order International, deny any affiliation with a mother religion.³³

Again, being careful not to sing the praises of American religious tolerance, one can still see how this sort of intra-faith ideological pluralism has been a recent byproduct of the American situation. Muslim views, both within and outside of the US, have combined with global historical circumstances to help shape this complex identity as well. At the very least, one can observe the concrete manifestations of American-wrought pluralistic changes to the Sufi religion in the praxis realm. A metamorphosis from the importance of religious concepts to the incorporation of Western psychological literature is direct evidence of changes that have occurred in a new location, and subsequent changes in the physical involvement of the Sufi practitioner can be seen in alterations in devotional dances and meditation. Though it is impossible to assign a blanket identity to the multifaceted nature of American Sufi groups, these transformations have outlined the framework for the creation of new *individual* Sufi identities. New interpretations of the individual's relationship to God (Allah) in American Sufism have arisen from the fresh start of a new location, along with the increased importance of Western secular literature to spiritual practices and a reshaping of American Sufi religious structural organization, and these changes have been met with new American challenges to Sufi ideology. In this way, shifts and divisions in Sufi identity in the American context have been accompanied by shifts in external pressures, and this tension continues to be a contributing force in the reshaping of Sufism as a religion in the US. These alterations serve to highlight the difficulties in defining a religious movement; changes in the diaspora of America have deepened the complexity of Sufism as a sect of Islam, and it is apparent that the only way to examine it and understand it properly is through the careful analysis of the experiences of Sufi communities and individuals throughout their history in American religious landscape.

NOTES

(Endnotes)

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13. Hermansen, "Healing," 415.
14. Hermansen, "Movements," 43.
15. *Ibid.*, 48.
16. Hermansen, "Healing," 415-416.
17. Rocher and Charqaoui, quoted in Hermansen, "Movements," 56.
18. Hermansen, "Healing," 415-418.
19. *Ibid.*, 416.
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25. Hermansen, "Movements," 46.
26. *Ibid.*, 46.
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28. *Ibid.*, 99.
29. Hermansen, "Movements," 56.
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31. Douglas, Thomas J., "The Cross and the Lotus: Changing Religious Practices Among Cambodian Immigrants in Seattle," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian & Pacific America*, eds. Jane Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2003), 170.
32. Webb, 98-100.
33. Werbner, 181.

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Literature, Christianity, and Empire

Laura Perrings

Empires have existed in the world for most of recorded history. One nation rises and conquers its neighbors only to fall to another. Throughout this trend, literature has been written by people within and outside the dominant empire. Literature can either perpetuate empirical ideology or challenge it depending on whether the authors live within the episteme of the empire or in tension with it. Whichever their position, the authors' written works reflect aspects of their worldview and culture even if they do not intend them to. The morals and critiques that they write to convey are therefore influenced by the context in which they live. Empires such as the British Empire of the seventeenth century sought to expand their borders and to accrue more land, but they share another goal with modern models of empires. Today's empires are not so concerned with the addition of more land as they are with spreading their influence to other countries just as older models of empires did. Empires can be good in some respects, but they can become problematic when they use a religion like Christianity to justify their actions, making them nearly unimpeachable. Under such strong empirical orders the structures of society are strong enough to make all the citizens internalize them, making it difficult (if not impossible for some) to imagine alternative possibilities. In order to demonstrate the capabilities of literature with respects to empire, I intend to closely examine one piece of literature which embodies many of the overall themes.

The piece I have chosen to examine is a novella written in 1688 by Aphra Behn, an English woman who was struggling to earn a living by her pen in a time dominated by men. The novella is entitled *Oroonoko* and is a story written as an account of a true event that happened in the South American colony of Surinam, as witnessed by the authoress herself who serves as the narrator. The text was intended to be a critique of society and slavery, but was written from a position embedded in the context of the empire and thus perpetuates certain aspects of the society. The novella is written by a marginalized woman about a marginalized slave. Despite the similarities in their positions, there are several very important differences as well. As Kwok Pui-lan suggests in her book *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, it is not enough to examine the text from a feminist or

postcolonial position alone, so I shall be combining these hermeneutical lenses in my argument about *Oroonoko* and its relevance for the readers of the original time as well as present readers in the United States. Beginning with the inner-most layer of the literature, I will examine the novella itself and the oppression imposed by the British Empire, followed by a move outward to discuss the context in which it was written and the faults of the nature of the empire there. I will argue that Christianity was used by the British Empire to legitimate acts and ideas it ought not to have supported and that the oppressed female author is able to still uphold Christianity while critiquing the empire's use of it. Finally, I will discuss the effect of the novel on modern-day readers. The first section, in which I discuss the story, will necessarily be a more literary discussion, while the second two sections will draw support from the works of Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, Richard Horsley, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Kwok Pui-lan who discuss the faults and merits of empire by examining the role of Christianity and the United States in today's world.

In order to examine the story in the light of empire, I will begin with the inner-most layer: the story itself. There are two forms of oppression in the British Empire which are addressed in *Oroonoko*: that of slaves, and that of females. *Oroonoko* is the story of the "Royal Slave" Oroonoko, a prince in his native country in Africa who is sold into slavery. He is friendly with a slave-trading captain who comes to his region often and even trades enemy prisoners as slaves to him. Oroonoko and the captain dine together on the ship when the captain betrays him and captures him and his men, immediately setting sail for Surinam in South America. Once he arrives, he is sold to Mr. Trefry, and is reunited with his lost love, Imoinda, who has also been made a slave. Oroonoko is of such impressive charm, deportment, intelligence, and appearance that he is greatly respected by the other slaves, Trefry, and the narrator. He is treated very well for a slave, being allowed to live with his wife (which he was not able to do in Africa due to politics and traditions), and not being required to work as much as the others. Despite his frustration at his enslavement, he has not yet learned the error of the ways of slavery and is willing to trade more slaves to Trefry in exchange for his own freedom.

Oroonoko is very much a prisoner of the European colonial system and he cannot convince his owner to release him, despite his attempts to strike bargains: "he was every Day treating with *Trefry* for his and [*Imoinda's*] Liberty; and offer'd either Gold, or a vast quantity of Slaves...They fed him from Day to Day with Promises, and delay'd him, till the Lord Governor shou'd come; so that he began to suspect them of falsehood" (Behn 40-1). When there is no solution forthcoming,

Oroonoko decides to take action and leads the slaves in an escape to freedom. He gives an impressive speech to his fellow slaves in order to inspire them and convince them that there is something wrong with their situation. Like Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda claims in her book *Healing a Broken World*, the dominant ideology is morally disabling because its subjects cannot imagine an alternative; the slaves had accepted the hopelessness of their situation. Oroonoko desires that he and the slaves become a community which strives together for their freedom from the domination of the whites, thus instituting moral agency once again. Oroonoko instills the other slaves with a sense of independence and rebellion against the dominant whites who have created such an unsavory truth for them to suffer under:

And why...my dear Friends and Fellow-sufferers, shou'd we be Slaves to an unknown People? Have they Vanquish'd us Nobly in Fight?...This wou'd not anger a Noble Heart, this wou'd not animate a Souldier's Soul; no, but we are Bought and Sold like Apes...shall we render Obedience to such a degenerate Race, who have no one Humane Vertue left, to distinguish 'em from the vilest Creatures? (Behn 52-3)

The British Empire requires slaves to maintain its prosperity in trade, and so it uses slavery to man the plantations. The Christian Europeans are the dominant group and they do all they can to make the slaves internalize the fact that they are subordinate and not fully human.

Within the British Empire, there are certain understandings of good and evil, morality and immorality, and superior and inferior. The white European Christians (in particular the British people in this case) view themselves as superior to all others because of their global prominence, and “once a group identifies itself as good and another group as bad, the ‘good’ group thinks it justifiable to place additional restrictions and controls on the ‘bad’ group. To restrain the bad group helps the forces of good win over the forces of evil” (Elizabeth Grosz qtd. in Hall 465). The text abounds with mentions of the “other” and “heathens” who are the blacks and the native Indians in Surinam. Oroonoko is praised because he is, in many ways, very European and can appeal to those whites who are trapped in the empirical ideology. He has been taught by a French philosopher, can speak English, French, and Spanish, and is European-looking except for his jet-black skin: “He was pretty tall, but of a Shape the most exact that can be fancy'd...His nose was rising and *Roman*, instead of *African* and flat” (Behn 13). As Behn describes Oroonoko, he is “not only a natural European and aristocrat, but a natural neoclassicist and royalist as well” (Brown 234). The British believed that white people were naturally more moral than the heathen blacks and they sought to spread their ways, believing

that if it worked for them, it would work for everyone else as well. In his book *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission*, Stephen H. Webb establishes his opinion that America is a country chosen by God to bring about His Kingdom; in the meantime democracy, free trade, and capitalism should be spread to the world because they are systems that will work for the good of everyone (12). Behn's hero's possession of European qualities is either a flaw in her writing produced by her situation within the empire and the ideology, or it is a means of ensuring that her character appeals to her readers. Perhaps, if Behn (at least in part) invented Oroonoko from her imagination rather than recording a real person and events, she knew that her audience would be more likely to applaud a slave who is admirable by their European standards and thus might be more inclined to rethink the justice of the institution of slavery. Within an empire there is only one good way to be, and in this case the right way is to be white. This understanding of the binary in which whites are superior to blacks is what was held by the majority of the Europeans who would have read the book at the time of its publication.

Yet, in *Oroonoko*, Behn attempts to subvert this understanding by showing how corrupt the Europeans are in comparison to the shining examples of simplistic slaves and natives. Oroonoko makes two speeches arguing against the purity and virtue of the whites who claim to be followers of God, yet treat other people in such an abominable fashion. One of these speeches comes after his failed rebellion. Oroonoko rails against the whites who have put a stop to him, telling them that: "there was no Faith in the White Men, or the Gods they Ador'd; who instructed 'em in Principles so false, that honest Men cou'd not live amongst 'em; though no People profess'd so much, none perform'd so little" (Behn 56). Then he sarcastically adds that he is "asham'd of what he had done, in endeavoring to make those Free, who were by Nature *Slaves*, poor wretched Rogues, fit to be us'd as *Christians Tools*... and they wanted only but to be whipt into knowledge of the *Christian Gods* to be the vilest of all creeping things; to learn to Worship such Deities as had not Power to make 'em Just, Brave, or Honest" (Behn 56). Thus Oroonoko and the author who records these words are expressing their distaste for the use of Christianity to legitimate the actions performed by the white men who have power in the story.

The native Indians also speak their opinions about the faults of the whites. The reader is first introduced to the natives when Behn praises them for their innocence and comparing them to the pre-fallen state of Adam and Eve, for there "is not to be seen an indecent Action, or Glance" and they seemed to be "an absolute *Idea* of the first state of Innocence, before Man knew how to sin" (Behn

9-10). The Indians see that the governor of Surinam is a hypocrite, asking, "What Name they had for a Man who promis'd a thing he did not do? The Governor told them, Such a man was a *lyar*, which was a word of infamy to a Gentleman. Then one of 'em reply'd, *Governor, you are a Lyar, and guilty of that Infamy*" (Behn 10). Along with the spread of their trade and religion, they are also teaching "Vice" and "Cunning," which are unknown to the natives "but when taught by *White Men*" (Behn 10). Behn's novella disapproves of the effects of the empire's spreading influence because it corrupts the natural innocence of the people: "'Tis [Nature] alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the World than all the Inventions of Man: Religion wou'd here but destroy that Tranquility, they posses by Ignorance; and Laws wou'd here but teach 'em how to know Offence, of which now they have no Notion" (10). The voiceless, oppressed people who are belittled by the plantation owners and political officials are portrayed in the novella as admirable, noble people.

The natives and the blacks are described in such admiring terms by Behn that it seems that she does not fall into the category of whites who believe that the black body is over-sexualized and evil as described by Kelly Brown Douglas in her book *What's Faith Got to Do With it?* Yet Behn does express almost a wistful despair for the color of their skin which is the only thing that keeps them from being perfectly admirable, "for they have all that is called Beauty, except for the Colour" (Behn 9). Nor is this favorable presentation of blacks consistent with the typical Platonized Christianity described by Douglas, who claims that whites justified the efforts of missionaries who sought to tame the heathen others and teach them to value the soul over the body because they thought that blacks were too carnal. The mistrust of the body then legitimated lynching black bodies as a Christian act. Despite her distaste for black skin which is most likely a product of her cultural context, Behn is affirming the value of the black body and the black person while showing the flaws in the white people and their society. Her comments subvert the belief in the supremacy of the Christian faith, for the hero of the story, who is the most admirable person presented, is not Christian and despises the way in which the Christians behave.

In addition to addressing the oppression of the blacks, *Oroonoko* also includes a commentary on the oppression of women. Within the white society, the narrator, a woman, has very little power despite the fact that she has the appropriate skin color to benefit from the empire. The narrator is the highest ranking person in the area, being the daughter of the intended Lieutenant General of the colony (who died at sea before he could take his post), yet she has very little real power.

The men around her do what they please regarding Oroonoko and the slaves despite her protests. The Lieutenant Governor tricks Oroonoko into surrendering himself, whips him cruelly and then kills him in a gruesome fashion. The narrator is unable to stop this. She alternates between identifying with the slaves and with the Europeans, but in the end, she “separates herself from the Europeans responsible for Oroonoko’s downfall...If the reader wonders why someone of her high social position did nothing to protect Oroonoko from the vicious treatment he gets, the answer lies in her sex” (Spencer 217). Her femininity and oppression are useful in her role as the narrator because she floats between the dominant and the oppressed in the story. There are “similarities between the slave’s and the woman’s positions” which “allow her her sympathetic insight into the hero’s feelings at the same time as she creates a full sense of the difference of his race and culture...she can present a picture of both sides” (Spencer 218). The narrator is oppressed like Oroonoko, but still enjoys some of the privileges of the dominant group.

Behn uses her character of Oroonoko to accomplish things similar to what Richard A. Horsley claims Jesus did in his own culture in his book *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*. According to Horsley, Jesus was in tension with the Roman Empire and spoke against the temple which was the center of religion, the economy, and politics. In speaking against the temple, Jesus was challenging everything it stood for, and thus met the fate of an enemy of state: crucifixion. Horsley points out that the nature of the Roman Empire was to expand using military force because the military provides stability. The Romans sought to make everyone believe and think the same thing which was debilitating to the egalitarian community that the covenant promised (Horsley 14). The temple embodied the combination of the state, the economy, and the religion of which Jesus disapproved. In response to Jesus’ opposition, the Romans used terror to silence him and his thoughts—they executed him in a horrible fashion to warn others from attempting to change the system (Horsley 28).

The language used in Oroonoko’s execution scene evokes images of Jesus’ crucifixion. When Oroonoko is caught during his escape attempt, he welcomes death as a means by which to finally escape the episteme, rather than being frustrated at his inevitable demise. Likewise, Jesus does not act against his death, but instead he forgives his prosecutors and dies without complaint. He enters into death and defeats it through his resurrection three days later, thereby making it something that need not be feared and in doing so, strips the state of its most powerful weapon. In a similar fashion, Oroonoko does not try to fight against his death, but calmly accepts it, “and he replie[s], smiling, *A Blessing on thee*” (Behn

64). He asks for a pipe to smoke while they kill him, never making a sound as “they cut his Ears, and his Nose, and burn’d them; he still Smoak’d on, as if nothing had touch’d him; then they hack’d off one of his Arms, and still he bore up...but at the cutting off the other Arm, his Head sunk, and his Pipe drop’d; and he gave up the Ghost, without a Groan, or a Reproach” (Behn 64). Oroonoko reverses the roles of the blacks and whites in this scene; he acts like the stoic, refined white man as he smokes his pipe while a savage Englishman dismembers him in an approach that falls under the category of the behavior of heathens. By acting so nobly, Oroonoko, a slave, takes away the horrific meaning of death because he embraces it as the one way to gain his freedom. The episteme comes out of this situation in worse shape because it has lost its weapon and the recording of the event may lead to a resurrection-like event that will produce more rebellions amongst the slaves. Behn states that her purpose in writing the story is to ensure that the actions of so great a man will not go unknown, and perhaps there will be recognition of the errors of the ways of slavery and Orientalism (the differentiation between “us” and the unusual and oftentimes monstrous “other”) due to her writing. The royal slave succeeds in his endeavor to change the episteme through his martyr-like death in a way that he may not have been able to accomplish in life.

The social context in which the novella was written also plays a major part in determining what is being taught by the story. The book was written by a woman in the 17th century when women were not supposed to be supporting themselves financially, let alone writing. She was “determined to be accepted on equal terms with men,” however, and worked very hard to acquire a fair amount of fame and success as a poet, playwright, and novelist (Spencer 212). There is historical evidence that she did visit Surinam in her lifetime and many of the details included in her writing are more accurate than the standard reference material about South America to which most authors referred: “Behn does not seem to rely on any particular sources, and she includes practical information that does not seem readily available in Europe, but if she made no use of texts, she would have been very nearly alone” (Lipking xiv). She is praised by Virginia Woolf for opening the way to later women writers: “She made, by working very hard, enough to live on. The importance of that fact outweighs anything that she actually wrote...for here begins the freedom of the mind, or rather the possibility that in the course of time the mind will be free to write what it likes...it was she who earned [later women writers] the right to speak their mind” (qtd. in *Oroonoko* 197). She, as the narrator and author, made the story available to the public and inspired them to reconsider the situation of slavery. Yet the history she relates should be viewed with suspicion,

for “history, in a more current view, must be understood as an official narrative by privileged voices” (Lipking xi). Behn’s story “portrays other people who had their own histories, though forever distorted, written by the literate Europeans” (Lipking xii). The Europeans were the ones with the language and capabilities of spreading a story through print, and they were the dominant group, thus their perspective on things is what is recorded.

Behn’s novella undermines the assumption of white supremacy and the correct interpretation of Christianity by the Empire. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer wrote in *Saving Christianity from Empire* that the people have no voice in the Empire, but Behn seeks to give voice to the voiceless slaves and women alike in a world dominated by men who view blacks as inferior: “I was my self an Eye-Witness to a great part, or what you will find here set down; and what I cou’d not be Witness of, I receiv’d from the Mouth of the chief Actor of this History, the *Hero* himself, who gave us the whole Transactions of his Youth” (Behn 8). The intentions of the British Empire and many other empires to spread their ideals become dangerous when attached to an idea of God: “[noble intentions and ideologies] are generally more dangerous when believed and internalized, and most dangerous when linked to God and a religious sense of mission” (Nelson-Pallmeyer 22). Thus Christianity should be removed from Empire and be allowed to stand in tension with it as Behn attempts to do by critiquing the white’s Christianity in *Oroonoko* but having her narrator retain her faith in God throughout the events. The narrator does not approve of the way the slave owners and the Lieutenant Governor use Christianity to legitimate their brutal murder of Oroonoko. The Empire distorts the understanding of human interrelations and causes people to act violently toward one another as Oroonoko did against his captors and as the whites did against Oroonoko for rebelling against them. Such violence is not in keeping with Jesus’ methods and the teachings of the Bible according to Nelson-Pallmeyer.

The British Empire disabled moral agency in the citizens. Within the novella, the narrator and Oroonoko’s owner, Trefry, disagree with the treatment he is receiving, but they cannot imagine a solution to the problem because they are imbedded in the ideology of the empire. The British Empire is thus morally disabling as Cynthia Moe-Lobeda describes. Although Moe-Lobeda is discussing the United States as the empire in question in her book, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*, the same principles apply to this situation of a woman writing in the British Empire of the seventeenth century. Globalization, she says, corrupts democracy which should ideally mean the people have power and a voice: “globalization corrodes the moral agency required to resist it and to move

toward more just and sustainable alternatives" (Moe-Lobeda 30). In the British Empire, the slaves and the women are silenced most often. The Empire perpetuates the demands of trade and the economy. Behn describes with surprising detail the commodities of Surinam that are desirable to fashionable Europeans (Behn 8-9). The episteme established by the Empire means that the people cannot think of any alternatives; their imaginations cannot conceive of a different and better way for society to function. When the people no longer have any say in the political structures, they no longer have moral agency which is defined as "the power to embody active love for creation including self, other, and other-than-human creation. Moral agency suggests the power to orient life around the long-term well-being of communities and the Earth, prioritizing the concerns of the most vulnerable" (Moe-Lobeda 38). Being political by nature, moral agency requires action on the part of the people, but empires like the Britain Behn lived and wrote in, prevented the people from acting (38). The empire in *Oroonoko* exploits human relationships, human-divine relationships, and the relationship with the environment since the colonies are using the natural resources of the land for the benefit of greedy Europeans who want the newest fashionable curiosity and the money with which to buy it. People have become commodities. Christians, Moe-Lobeda argues, should be striving to maintain proper relations between man, God, and nature, ensuring the well-being and community of all. Behn's writing attempts to point out the flaws in the human cultural structures and inspire action just as Oroonoko's speech in the text sought to rally the slaves to his pursuit of freedom.

The final step to be taken is to an entirely external view of the text. Modern day readers come to *Oroonoko* from a different cultural context, and yet can still learn a great deal from this piece of literature. We must take care, however, to separate the text from the context in our minds by keeping track of what is critiquing the social structures and what is included unconsciously as a result of the context it was written in. Kwok Pui-lan advocates the "collaborative effort of many scholars with expertise in the theological, cultural, social, and institutional dimensions of Christianity in different historical epochs" in order to better interpret the Bible and the historical events therein, and I believe that a work such as *Oroonoko* is also a good example of literature that has been influenced by readers in different periods (Kwok 7). She observes that the natives of the New World "symbolized alterity, the Other at the periphery of the 'civilized' European world" which I believe includes the natives featured in Behn's novella as well as the African slaves (Kwok 14). In order to avoid perpetuating certain aspects of the text that are most simply the product of the context of the British Empire, we need to understand the historical context of the novella and the situation of the author.

Behn's work flips the binary of good and evil that the Euro-centric Empire of the 17th century produced and shows how the blacks can be noble while the whites can be bad. The use of Christianity to authorize the acts of inhumanity in *Oroonoko* is much like the Roman use of religion to legitimate its structures and oppression of people (such as the Galileans). Jesus acted against those structures as Oroonoko and Behn are. The Empire drowns out the voices of the people, but Behn seeks to make them heard by using her modest fame to relate a story (which she claims to be true) to the larger population of England. Her imagination helps to bring moral agency back to the people, and that is what modern readers should take away from the text. The empire is not always right. Christianity should not be used to legitimate structures of politics and economy because it will become corrupt instead of critiquing the ideology. In the fashion of Kwok Pui-lan, readers from different backgrounds should be inspired to dialogue with each other as the white female narrator conversed with the royal black male slave who came from a completely different world. Only by combining multiple lenses of interpretation together can we bring to the surface aspects of society and religion that have been pushed to the background to make way for the favored points of the dominant group. If this dialoguing does not occur, then the consequence can often be that God is captured and used to legitimate improper actions. Kwok observes how President Bush's administration has been "provoking unabashedly biblical images and Christian rhetoric to justify his global 'war against terrorism'" which she claims to be a misuse of theology (Kwok 6-7). One group capturing God results in confusion of text and context and the justified abuse of people as Douglas discusses in her book. White Christians understood black bodies to be less human, and therefore were perfectly justified in abusing them horribly just as Oroonoko, Imoinda, and the other slaves are (Douglas 114). Instead, Christianity should remain outside of the imperial structures so that it can remain critical of them and ensure that the people have moral agency and a voice in politics. Christianity should ensure that there is an "ethic of relationality," as Moe-Lobeda calls it, which looks out for the well-being of everyone.

In conclusion, literature can either be a tool of the empire, or it can be a hammer to knock the supports out from under it. Although *Oroonoko* was written in 1688 from the context of the British Empire, the situations it presents are parallel to those facing the world in the twenty-first century with the super-power empire, the United States. All empires seek to spread their influence, but we should be aware that what works for one group of people may not work for everyone, and the empire should not exploit people or silence them in order to keep peace. Christianity

comes under Aphra Behn's scrutiny as portrayed by the slave ship captain and the Lieutenant Governor of Surinam who both claim to be Christian but do not live up to the standards of kindness, honesty, and love that even a pagan slave expects from a human being. The wonderful thing about literature is its ability to have multiple layers of meaning. The story itself can say one thing, while the context of the author and the publication adds other possibilities, and of course the present reader's context influences the reading as well. Literature is rich with possibility and, in the case of *Oroonoko*, it can critique a society as large as the British Empire by simply telling the story of one man and his life. Surely such an admirable character as Oroonoko deserves the protection of upstanding British citizens rather than an untimely and brutal death. The lesson of Behn's story is thus that empire should be watched closely lest it produce oppression and injustice.

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What Does Scripture Say About Homosexuality?: Ethical Questions for Christian Communities

Emily Toler

Christians attempting to live ethical lives in contemporary America have recently confronted many new questions. Is it ethical to use human embryos for stem cell research? Is it ethical to prohibit sex offenders from entering a church? Is it ethical to be wealthy when others are poor? The list of emerging issues is long and diverse, but few questions have sparked so much interest as the debate about homosexuality. The question of whether homosexuality is compatible with a Christian ethic—and the subsequent debate about whether and how to include homosexuals in Christian communities—has emerged as one of the most polarizing issues facing Christians in America, dividing families, congregations, and even entire denominations. Because it is such an important question, Christian ethicists have struggled to help individuals and churches decide what might be an ethical Christian response to homosexuality and homosexuals.

To support their claims, many ethicists turn to Scripture. But different passages from the Bible have been used to support these judgments about homosexuality, and even when the same passage is cited, many different interpretations arise. These problems should compel Christians, who must use these arguments to make ethical decisions in their own lives, to question the validity of these diverse interpretations. By asking questions about historical context, applying (and sometimes translating) Biblical injunctions to modern society, and identifying the possible biases and agendas of the Biblical authors, Christians can derive an ethical judgment about homosexuality from Scripture.

Before investigating these questions, however, an important distinction must be made. It is crucial to recognize that modern understandings of homosexuality differ greatly from those of the Biblical authors. When we speak about *homosexuality* or *homosexuals* today, we understand such terms to refer to an orientation—a physiological and/or psychological condition that exists independently from personal choice. Because this concept is a relatively new development, however, no Biblical author would have been familiar with it. It is imperative to remember this

distinction when reading Scripture for at least two reasons: first, when texts condemn “homosexuality,” they are likely referring to same-sex activities performed by heterosexual individuals; and second, that the texts’ authors simply did not understand that same-sex activities might be motivated by anything other than personal choice. Remembering this distinction between homosexual *orientation* and homosexual *activity* is critical when investigating the question of homosexuality and the Bible.

One of the passages frequently cited in the debate about homosexuality and scripture is the story of two angels who visit Lot in the city of Sodom.¹ In response to Abraham’s plea to spare the city if righteous men still exist there, God sends two messengers to Lot’s home. Lot welcomes them, but the other men of Sodom besiege his residence and demand to be allowed to have relations with the male visitors. Lot refuses, offering his virgin daughters instead, but the Sodomites do not accept the trade and attempt to break into the house. The angels, however, pull Lot back inside, and they blind the other men.

Ostensibly, this story seems to be a straightforward condemnation of homosexuality: the Sodomites demand to “know” the male visitors, and as a result, they are punished. Modern interpretations of this passage, however, suggest that it must be considered in its textual and historical context, and that its true meaning must be derived from more than a simple reading of the events it describes. Choon-Leong Seow contends that, despite the homoerotic overtones that exist in the passage, homosexuality is not the primary focus of the text. The passage, he writes, “is not about homosexuality in general. It is certainly not about homosexual love. Rather, it is about rape, specifically same-sex rape. It is about gang rape. It is about violence. It is about the violation of a code of hospitality. It is about wickedness in general.”²

To make this claim, Seow emphasizes the importance of reading the text in context. He acknowledges that Lot’s actions—offering his daughters instead of his guests to the mob—may seem horrific, but that we are repulsed primarily because we live in a completely different sociocultural milieu. In the ancient Near East, hospitality was of the utmost importance, and the Israelites adhered to this principle.³ Recognizing that hospitality was paramount certainly makes Lot’s actions, which ultimately aimed to ensure the well-being of his guests, seem reasonable. Seow is careful to note, however, that simply because we can understand that decision in its context does not mean that we must follow its example;⁴ after all, the modern world is very different from the Biblical world, and the same ethical norms are not necessarily applicable.

John J. McNeill also believes that the sin condemned in the story of Sodom is not homosexuality but a lack of hospitality. The evidence he cites in support of his interpretation, however, relies largely on the information provided elsewhere in Scripture. First, he argues that it is misguided to interpret this passage as specifically concerned with homosexuality because “there is no evidence elsewhere in the passage or in the Old Testament to show that homosexual behavior was particularly prevalent in these cities.”⁵ Moreover, the other passages in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament that have been traditionally cited as condemning homosexual behavior never mention Sodom.⁶ If the Sodomites’ worst sin had truly been homosexuality, then these subsequent writings would surely have made reference to the story.

Both Seow and McNeill note that, when the story of Sodom is mentioned in other biblical passages, it is used as an example of “utter destruction occasioned by sins of such magnitude as to merit exemplary punishment.”⁷ The authors of the Hebrew Bible reference this passage when they condemn other sins: injustice (Isa. 1:10 and 3:9); adultery and deceit (Jer. 23:14); and pride, excess, and indifference to poverty (Ezek. 16:49).⁸ Clearly, Sodom was a city destroyed for many forms of wickedness—but not primarily for homosexuality. This claim is supported by evidence in the New Testament. Jesus himself speaks of Sodom when he discusses the uncongenial reception that his disciples will receive in Luke 10:10-13: “But whenever you come to a town and they do not welcome you [...] on that day Sodom will fare better than that town!”⁹ Both McNeill and Seow present convincing arguments that the sin for which the Sodomites are punished is not their demand to “know” the visitors—that is, their homosexuality—but their wholly inhospitable behavior. These interpretations suggest that the story of Sodom does not condemn homosexuality, and should therefore not be used to claim that it is unethical. But this contention is complicated when the story is considered in conjunction with other biblical texts.

The Hebrew Bible contains another passage that has been central to the debate about homosexuality and Christian ethics. The Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus contains two verses that seem to address this issue: Leviticus 18:22¹⁰ and Leviticus 20:13¹¹. The apparent condemnations of homosexuality—or at least of homosexual behavior—are more explicit in these passages than in the story of Sodom, and the punishment for committing the sin is harsh indeed. It comes as no surprise, then, that some scholars believe that these passages *do* condemn homosexuality as we understand it today.

Mark Allan Powell relies on the importance of contextualization to make his argument. In response to the claim that the Levitical texts refer to acts between

male temple prostitutes who were members of idolatrous cults, Powell points out that the passages do not restrict their denunciation of homosexuality to such individuals.¹² Applying a similar close reading of the texts, Powell further concludes that these scriptural prohibitions were not intended to be linked to a particular ideological agenda. He writes that “sexual intercourse between men is not condemned because it fails to produce offspring, or because it defies some ancient purity code, or because it undermines a patriarchal evaluation of men as superior to women, or for any other discernable reason. It is simply prohibited, period, as activity that is an ‘abomination’ to God.”¹³

Although Powell seems confident that these passages are clear in their unqualified condemnation of homosexuality, he is also careful to emphasize the importance of context in using Scripture to make ethical judgments. The Holiness Code has been problematic for modern Christians: because it is a part of the Bible, it cannot be ignored, but most churches have not affirmed all of its injunctions. Many of the specific prohibitions in the Code, such as planting multiple types of crops in one field, are largely irrelevant for modern American Christians. Others, however, such as the commands against incest and adultery, are almost universally applied.¹⁴ The problem, then, is determining which commands are still normative for a Christian ethic. Powell offers a solution, pointing out that the primary criterion for making such a decision has traditionally been whether the injunctions of the Holiness Code are reiterated elsewhere in the Bible: if subsequent authors reaffirm these commands, they should be incorporated into a modern Christian ethical framework. Some of Paul’s writings (1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:18-32) do precisely that, which leads Powell to conclude that “Paul might be viewed as carrying the prohibitions from Leviticus over into the New Testament, indicating that they *do* apply to Christians.”¹⁵

But not all modern scholars share Powell’s interpretation. Jeffrey S. Siker, for example, suggests that it is wrong to interpret the texts from Leviticus as explicit condemnations of homosexuality; instead, he suggests that Christians must determine “what *constitutes* the sin of same-sex relations [... and] what it is that makes homosexual practices sinful, rather than merely assuming the sinfulness of all homosexual expressions.”¹⁶ Applying this interpretive lens to the verses in Leviticus, he suggests that the true nature of the sin is engaging in idolatrous or pagan practices, or otherwise acting contrary to human nature, as it was understood by the text’s authors.¹⁷ McNeill supports this position, observing that “the Code specifically warns the Israelites against accepting idolatrous practices,” and concludes that the passages in Leviticus serve primarily to “[establish] the connec-

tion between idolatry and homosexual activity.”¹⁸ It seems that homosexuality is simply the medium by which the real sins of idolatry, paganism, and unnatural action are expressed; it is not the actual sin in question.

Other authors who share Siker’s belief that the injunctions against homosexuality in the Holiness Code are not normative for Christian ethics ground their arguments in the importance of considering historical context. Gwen B. Saylor considers these texts in terms of “theological anthropology”—the theological frameworks that informed the worldviews of the Biblical authors. She observes that the Holiness Code was written in an age when “the critical importance of keeping categories separate, of avoiding any kind of hybridization” was consistently emphasized.¹⁹ Many of the other laws set forth in Leviticus, such as those regarding proper dress for men and women, support this position. Therefore, she contends that the laws of Leviticus exist primarily to guard against the “mixing of gender-role categories.” Indeed, it is because male-male intercourse involves the penetration of the male—a role traditionally ascribed to the female—that it is condemned. It is not homosexuality, but the confusion of gender roles, that is the “abomination.”²⁰ Victor Furnish articulates a similar position, observing that the verses concerning homosexuality are situated within the laws regarding ritual purity—“what is clean and unclean in a quite objective sense seen as distinct from spiritual or moral purity.”²¹ This leads him to draw the same conclusion as Saylor: that “it is not the morality of male same-sex relationships [...] that underlies the taboo; same-sex intercourse is viewed as a mixing of roles.”²²

It is not only textual and theological context that scholars use to support this position, however. Many also emphasize the historical context of the Holiness Code. Walter Wink, for example, points out that the ancient Israelites did not understand the biological processes of reproduction: they believed that the female body was simply an incubator, and that male semen contained all of the necessary material to create life. Therefore, any “spilling of semen for any nonprocreative purpose [...] was considered tantamount to murder.”²³ Wink’s subsequent suggestion that the Israelites were particularly concerned with procreation because they were so vastly outnumbered in society is corroborated by McNeill, who observes that “the profertility bent of the Old Testament authors was due to underpopulation, with the result that any willful destruction of human seed was regarded as a serious crime.”²⁴ It seems, then, that homosexuality may have been condemned because it threatened the future of the Israelite population. This concern, however, is clearly no longer relevant; as Wink observes, the morality of such a position is “rendered questionable in a word facing uncontrolled overpopulation.”²⁵ Because

modern society no longer emphasizes the division of gender roles as strongly as the ancient Israelites did, and because underpopulation is no longer a problem that Christians must address, these authors believe that the passages from Leviticus do not condemn homosexuality, in the modern sense, as unethical.

These discussions about the meaning of Scripture are clearly complicated, and many voices have articulated well-supported arguments on both sides of the debate. Although the passages from Genesis and Leviticus are certainly important texts for Christians to consider as they make decisions about how homosexuality fits into a specifically Christian ethic, they are not the passages on which much of the most intense debates have been focused. That distinction belongs to a passage in Paul's letter to the Romans: Romans 1:18-32.²⁶ There are many possible reasons that these verses have been the primary battleground in the war over homosexuality: Paul's powerful influence on the development of early Christian churches, the authority his writings have traditionally been afforded, the sheer number of texts with which he is credited, or any combination of those (and multitudinous other) factors. Much like opinions are divided about the meaning of the Holiness Code's injunctions against homosexuality, scholars who debate the Pauline discussion of the issue can be separated into two groups: those who believe that Paul *does* condemn homosexuality as we understand it today, and those who believe that he does *not*.

Many of the scholars who contend that this passage from Romans should be interpreted as a condemnation of homosexuality begin their arguments with a discussion of the creation stories in the first and second chapters of Genesis. Ulrich Mauser uses this strategy to analyze the text, demonstrating that the "conceptuality of [Paul's] argument [is based on] the creation narratives at the beginning of Genesis."²⁷ Mauser further argues that the primary principle Paul derives from these accounts and subsequently uses to inform his discussion of homosexuality (and all the questions about sexuality that he addresses) is "the creation of the one human form of life in the polarity of male and female."²⁸ Because the Genesis narratives can now be seen in a new eschatological light—a recognition that the coming of the kingdom "heightens the demand expected in sexual behavior [...] and stretches Old Testament legislation into the arena of apocalyptic disaster"²⁹—Paul's writings reflect a distinct awareness of the importance of right sexual behavior in the context of the male-female polarity. Indeed, Mauser contends, this concern is paramount in the Pauline text; any practice that "[distorts] or [abolishes] this one crucial reality of being human is seen in the New Testament as outrage against the Creator."³⁰ For Paul, then, homosexuality is more than just a sin—it is

a complete deformation of humanity at its most fundamental level because it is a denial, in both practical and theoretical terms, that God's creation of the male-female polarity is good.³¹

David E. Malick shares this view, placing a similar emphasis on the importance of maintaining the created order. He contends that Paul's condemnation of homosexuality is rooted not in the customs of Hellenistic Judaism, but in the same creation accounts that Mauser cites. Indeed, Paul conceives of homosexuality as evidence of "the fall of the race from God's design and from the natural, moral pattern of God for sexual expression."³² Moreover, Paul's focus on homosexuality as a violation of God's transcultural created order is evidence that Paul was not simply imposing Jewish customs on a Hellenistic world, and that the ethical judgment he sets forth, because it transcends social and historical context, remains applicable to modern society.

Malick also addresses the claim that Paul's writings in Romans 1 condemn only "perverted" homosexuality. He suggests that the movement away from heterosexuality to homosexuality (vv. 26-27) occurs within a context of movement away from natural sexual expression and from normal social behavior (vv. 24-32), demonstrating Paul's belief that homosexuality is a movement away from God's design and is, therefore, immoral.³³ In his view, homosexuality does not have to be linked to specific acts to be unethical. Stanley Grenz also rejects imposing this sort of specificity on the text, asserting that Paul's condemnation is not limited to "perverted" acts such as pederasty. He cites the mention of female-female relations in verse 26 as evidence that Paul's argument applies universally to homosexuality, and not just to specific, male-male cultic practices.³⁴ This widespread applicability, in Grenz's opinion, indicates Paul's belief that homosexuality should be condemned as a fundamental perversion of God's created design, not simply as an isolated unethical action.³⁵

There is, however, another side to the debate about the meaning of this passage from Romans. Scholars who disagree with the arguments summarized above have adopted a variety of strategies to demonstrate that, despite what seems to be an obvious condemnation, Paul does not actually denounce homosexuality as it is understood in the modern sense. Victor Furnish makes this case on two levels: first, he suggests that Paul would have been incapable of making a distinction between "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" because the concept of sexual orientation simply didn't exist; and second, he suggests that, because these terms would necessarily have been absent from Paul's vocabulary, theology, and ethical framework, to use them when translating texts is "anachronistic and

misleading."³⁶ For Furnish, as for many ethicists, the danger is clear: imposing modern understandings of sexual orientation on a text whose author was familiar only with sexual actions necessarily leads to misinterpretation.

Walter Wink echoes these concerns, emphasizing the difference between sexual orientation, which a person cannot control, and sexual actions, which a person can.³⁷ This is an important distinction because it suggests that Paul's writings specifically address heterosexual individuals who willfully engage in same-sex erotic behaviors—the only sort of "homosexuality" with which he would have been familiar. Wink contends that the behaviors Paul condemns are not "relationships between consenting adults who are committed to each other as faithfully and with as much integrity as any heterosexual couple;" instead, they are based solely on lust.³⁸ Numerous other ethicists share this position: for example, Brian K. Blount suggests that, because unnatural same-sex behavior was viewed as a choice, it was frequently associated with "insatiable lust."³⁹ Jeffrey Siker elaborates on this argument, noting that Paul's only experience with homosexual behaviors would likely have been indirect, and even then, it would only have been to witness "exploitative forms of homoerotic expression—particularly pederasty and prostitution."⁴⁰ Both of these practices are condemned elsewhere in the Bible as lustful and sinful, so it comes as no surprise that Paul would echo those denunciations.

Another key component of this side of the debate is, interestingly enough, the question of sexual expression and its relationship to God's created, natural order—the same question that scholars who support the opposite interpretation have discussed. The intended meaning of the word "unnatural" in the passage is somewhat ambiguous; McNeill, for example, observes that Paul probably did not distinguish between "natural law and social custom."⁴¹ This observation has two important implications. First, it suggests that the behaviors Paul condemns are homoerotic acts by heterosexual individuals who voluntarily choose to act contrary to their nature. Second, it suggests that Paul's social context (devoid of any concept of sexual orientation) is inextricably present in the text, and that the passage, therefore, cannot be read as a condemnation of homosexuality in modern terms.⁴²

Wink also acknowledges the importance of understanding how Paul's text relates to his ideas about God's created order. The behaviors he condemns are "unnatural" because they are heterosexual individuals' voluntary choices to act against their natural attraction to the opposite sex. Wink believes that it is this *principle* that is important. Paul is condemning sexual behavior that runs counter

to an individual's nature—not homosexuality. In fact, a homosexual individual's participation in sexual activities with a member of the opposite sex would be a corollary rejection of his or her natural orientation.⁴³

For some scholars, even the idea of the “natural order” is not a transcultural one; instead, its meaning is rooted in its context. Gwen Saylor suggests that Paul's primary concern is to maintain the boundaries between males and females. Much like the verses from Leviticus, the passage from Romans ultimately focuses on “proper gender role distinction.”⁴⁴ In sexual practice, this distinction was between the active male who penetrates the passive female. Clearly, then, two heterosexual men who engage in homoerotic behavior act contrary to their nature: “one partner has violated the male role that is by nature his, and by taking advantage of this, the other person has also violated his male role.”⁴⁵ This understanding, of course, is firmly rooted in the same theological anthropology that Saylor employs in her discussion of Leviticus—a limited, hierarchical, patriarchal society that is necessarily limited to its context. Therefore, Paul's condemnation of homosexuality cannot be seen as normative for making ethical judgments about modern sexual practices.

Instead of emphasizing the importance of specific contexts, however, some scholars have chosen to interpret Romans 1:26-27 as representative of larger themes in the Bible. Robin Scroggs, for example, claims that Paul's reference to homosexuality is part of “a major *theological* goal; ethical concerns or admonitions lie far from his purpose.”⁴⁶ Instead of passing ethical judgments about specific practices, Paul's text aims to emphasize the importance of God's grace. Although Paul may condemn homosexual behavior, he uses it only to illustrate his larger agenda: demonstrating that humanity has fallen into a “false reality” from which God's grace is the only means of salvation.⁴⁷

Turning to a discussion of these larger themes is a useful way of broadening our consideration of homosexuality and Scripture. A perplexing dilemma emerges when we attempt to derive an ethical judgment about homosexuality from the Bible: there simply aren't many passages that mention it. This relative absence of scriptural sources raises important questions. Because there are so few references to homosexuality in the Bible, and because some of those references are implicit or have unclear meanings, can Christians even use Scripture to form ethical judgments about homosexuality? Despite these difficulties, Christians not only *can*; they *must*. Instead of relying on interpretations of isolated passages, however, it may be more useful for Christians to understand how those passages relate to the Bible's larger themes.

Jeffrey Siker shares this viewpoint, writing that he “was surprised to learn that scripture says almost nothing about homosexuality.”⁴⁸ Moreover, in the few pas-

sages where it does, it does not address homosexuality or homosexual relationships in the modern sense. Siker therefore concludes that the best way to understand homosexuality and scripture is to look for thematic guidance. He focuses on the parable of the wheat and the chaff,⁴⁹ suggesting that its model of inclusivity and affirmation of human dignity should inform a normative Christian ethic. Although the Bible does not specifically tell Christians how to relate to homosexual individuals, it *does* tell them that all human beings have worth and calls for “the inclusion of those who, even to our surprise, have received the Spirit of God and join us in our Christian confession.”⁵⁰

This Biblical affirmation of human worth is perhaps best expressed by Jesus’ rule of love: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵¹ For many scholars, this command is the lens through which all of Scripture should be interpreted and the model all Christians should strive to emulate; indeed, it is the foundation on which a Christian ethic should be constructed. Robin Scroggs describes the importance of this principle of love, contending that it is “the central affirmation of biblical faith which forms the context in which all Scripture must be interpreted” and should therefore be the primary criterion used to make ethical judgments about homosexuality.⁵² Victor Furnish, too, argues against focusing the debate on specific texts; instead, he advocates using the “gospel of grace” that makes Scripture unique as a framework for shaping the Christian community’s response to homosexuals and homosexuality.⁵³

Patrick D. Miller is perhaps the strongest advocate for the primacy of the love command. Although he does not discourage the use of the Bible in making ethical judgments, he cautions that “interpretation of scripture in the church should not happen without attention to the rule of faith and the rule of love.”⁵⁴ In his opinion, the specific commands expressed in the Bible must be read in terms of these two rules; therefore, if an interpretation of a text leads Christians to exclude or fail to love others, that interpretation must be reevaluated.⁵⁵ Walter Wink shares this belief, arguing that, because the Bible never expresses a clear sexual ethic that can be universally applied, the best way to make an ethical judgment about sexual behavior is to do so in light of Jesus’ love command.⁵⁶ If these scholars are correct, it seems reasonable to conclude that a relationship between two Christians that exemplifies the ideal of “loving your neighbor as yourself” is an ethical one, gender and sexual orientation notwithstanding. Indeed, McNeill adopts this position, asserting that “a general consideration of human sexuality in the Bible leads to only one certain conclusion: those sexual relations can be justified morally which are a true expression of human love.”⁵⁷ This understanding of biblical

themes suggests that loving, homosexual relationships are ethical as long as they represent an individual's best attempt to lead a life that is an expression of Jesus' love command.

While the debates about the meaning of Scripture and its relative importance in context of the Bible's overarching themes are important, they are not the only elements to consider when making an ethical judgment about homosexuality. Indeed, a Christian ethic is more than just a theoretical or ideological framework; it is also a practical means of relating to the world. Therefore, any consideration of Christian ethics must involve a discussion of how judgments, whether they are derived from the Bible, from tradition, from experience, or from some other combination of sources, are translated into action. Few scholars seem willing to advocate completely excluding homosexuals from Christian communities, which may be because they recognize that the Bible's primary teaching seems to be, however simply, to *love*. Instead, two models for a Christian response to homosexuality have emerged: a model of qualified inclusion and a model of unqualified inclusion.

Some of the scholars who address these questions have concluded that an appropriate Christian response to homosexuals is to offer them a sort of qualified inclusion—to include them as members of a Christian community, but only if they meet certain criteria. Lewis B. Smedes, despite conceding that homosexual orientation may not be a choice, does not embrace homosexual individuals as they are. Instead, he relies on a traditional interpretation of the creation narratives (that is, a belief that God created humanity in a male-female polarity designed for procreative purposes)⁵⁸ to inform his conviction that homosexuality is an example of “nature sometimes gone awry.”⁵⁹ But, because God created homosexuals just as he created heterosexuals, Smedes concludes that “God wants gay people to make the best life they can within the limits of what errant nature gives them.”⁶⁰

Other responses to homosexuality and homosexuals, however, are less forgiving. Although Stanley Grenz does acknowledge that homosexuality may be an orientation, he is unwilling to discount the role of individual choice. He asserts that “Christian ethics maintains that personal responsibility is not limited to matters in which we exercise full choice.”⁶¹ All people are, by nature, “enslaved to sin,” and the Bible does not excuse any individual from responsibility for that sin, even if he or she did not consciously choose to behave sinfully. Therefore, homosexuality should not be condoned or excused, even if it is a biologically reality. Furthermore, Grenz contends that “ethics is not merely a condoning of what comes naturally”; instead, living an ethical Christian life often involves mak-

ing decisions that are contrary to the “natural inclinations” that are evidence of humanity’s fallenness.⁶² This, too, suggests that Christians should not embrace homosexuals without expecting them to try to rise above their “fallen” nature.

Both Smedes and Grenz offer suggestions about the criteria that might help determine whether to include homosexuals in a Christian community. Although he never explicitly states that homosexuals should attempt to become heterosexual, Grenz devotes considerable time to discussing the arguments that such a transformation is possible, suggesting that a transition from homosexuality to heterosexuality will correct the “truncated sexual development [...] that] falls short of God’s ideal in creation.”⁶³ Although he is careful to indicate that no Christian is necessarily *required* to make such a transition, Grenz does insist that homosexuals and heterosexuals alike must be expected to “[lead] exemplary [lives, which] means that they have forsaken all sinful sexual practices associated with their orientation.”⁶⁴ Because Grenz believes that all homosexual acts fall short of God’s created order and are therefore necessarily sinful, however, this seems to imply that celibacy is necessary before homosexuals can be included in Christian community. Smedes shares this opinion, writing that it is only when “celibacy is not possible” that other expressions of homosexual behavior might even be *considered* as acceptable in a Christian ethical framework.⁶⁵

Other Christian voices call for full inclusion of homosexuals, however. Jeffrey Siker suggests looking back to history and Scripture, using the inclusion of the Gentiles into early Christian communities as a model for including homosexuals in modern communities. He argues that, just as Peter and Paul were motivated by love to welcome Gentiles who did not adhere to Jewish law to the church, modern Christians are called by God and compelled by love to “move beyond marginal toleration of homosexual Christians and welcome their full inclusion.”⁶⁶ Moreover, Gentiles were not sinners by definition, because the Holy Spirit was more important than adhering to the law; similarly, the Spirit is more important than sexual behavior in guiding the lives of modern homosexual Christians.⁶⁷ Therefore, just as Gentiles were welcomed into the church two thousand years ago, so should homosexuals be welcomed into the church today.

Choon-Leong Seow also advocates the use of other Biblical texts as a way to understand how to construct an inclusive Christian ethic. He suggests reading the wisdom literature⁶⁸ to reveal that, although God is undoubtedly the Creator, his “creation does include irregularities and unevenness— anomalies that no human being can explain or change.”⁶⁹ The implication here is clear: a homosexual orientation is one of the “anomalies” of God’s creation. This does not necessarily

mean that it is a sin, and it is certainly not a justifiable basis for excluding any individual from the Christian community. Most importantly, Seow suggests that the wisdom literature, because it expresses themes that do not appear elsewhere in the Bible, is particularly valuable: it allows Christians to “[give] credence to science and experience” without having to worry about being “unscriptural.”⁷⁰ Instead, integrating personal experience, modern knowledge, and Biblical text becomes a viable ethical method that opens the door for the inclusion of homosexuals. Even if Christians do incorporate the principles of wisdom literature into their ethical frameworks, however, they must always remember that how they interpret Scripture must correlate with how they live. Patrick D. Miller reiterates the importance of Jesus’ love command, concluding that any interpretation that justifies “[inflicting] pain or [putting] down other Christians—or human beings of any stripe—is under question.”⁷¹ Excluding another Christian from the community is certainly one way of inflicting pain, and if Miller is correct, then the interpretations of the Bible that advocate such treatment must be *mis*interpretations. Therefore, they should be revisited, and Christians should work to come to an understanding of Scripture that is in keeping with the all-important rule of love.

Perhaps the most important implication of a practical application of an ethical judgment is that these questions are not merely questions about textual interpretation or ethical method. They are not merely questions about how to move between the biblical and modern worlds. They are not merely questions about translation, about historical context, or about authorship. They are questions about *people*—real, flesh-and-blood, living-and-breathing human beings. The ethical conclusions that Christians draw, therefore, have significant consequences, and must not be taken lightly.

The diverse perspectives discussed in this paper demonstrate that it is never easy to derive an absolutely conclusive ethic from Scripture—especially when the lives of real people are concerned. Although the Bible is an important reference, it should not be the only source that Christians use to make an ethical judgment about homosexuality. Instead, Christians should combine a variety of approaches. First, they should study the scriptural passages that discuss homosexuality, paying particular attention to historical context and the Bible’s larger themes. Second, they should remember that Jesus’ love command is the primary criterion for establishing a normative Christian ethic. Finally, they should consider their personal experiences with homosexuals, reflecting carefully on the lessons they have learned. By integrating these different strategies, Christians will be better equipped to make an informed, compassionate judgment about homosexuality that is true to Christian tradition, to Christian scripture, and to the example of Christ himself.

TEXTUAL REFERENCES (NRSV)

Genesis 19:1-11

¹ The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." ³ But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

⁴ But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵ and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." ⁶ Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." ⁹ But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

Leviticus 18:22

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

Romans 1:18-32

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²They know God's decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them.

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NOTES

(Endnotes)

1. Gen. 19:1-11 NRSV (New Revised Standard Version).
2. Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 22.
3. *Ibid.*, 21.
4. *Ibid.*, 22.
5. John J. McNeill, "Scripture and Homosexuality," in *The Church and the Homosexual: Fourth Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 43.
6. *Ibid.*, 46.
7. *Ibid.*, 46.
8. Seow, 22.
9. McNeill, 45.
10. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Lev. 18:22, NRSV.)
11. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Lev. 20:13, NRSV.)
12. Mark Allan Powell, "The Bible and Homosexuality," in *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality*, ed. James M. Childs (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 23.
13. *Ibid.*, 24.
14. *Ibid.*, 24. This claim is conversant with the arguments that other scholars who oppose his view have articulated; those claims will be subsequently considered.
15. Powell, 25.
16. Jeffrey S. Siker, "Gentile Wheat and Homosexual Christians: New Testament Directions for the Heterosexual Church," in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 137.
17. *Ibid.*, 137.
18. McNeill, 57.
19. Gwen B. Saylor, "Beyond the Biblical Impasse: Homosexuality Through the

- Lens of Theological Anthropology," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44 (2005): 82.
20. *Ibid*, 83.
 21. Victor Paul Furnish, "What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?," in *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*, ed. Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer (Nashville: Abington Press, 1994), 60.
 22. *Ibid*, 61.
 23. Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible," in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 34.
 24. McNeill, 58.
 25. Wink, 35.
 26. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. ²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. ²⁶For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. ²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²They know God's decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them. (Rom. 1:18-32, NRSV.)
 27. Ulrich W. Mauser, "Creation and Human Sexuality in the New Testament," in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 11.
 28. *Ibid*, 12.
 29. *Ibid*, 13.
 30. *Ibid*, 12.
 31. *Ibid*, 13.
 32. David E. Malick, "The Condemnation of Homosexuality in Romans 1:26-27," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993): 332-333.
 33. *Ibid*, 337.
 34. Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 230.
 35. Grenz, 230.

36. Furnish, 58.
37. Wink, 36.
38. *Ibid*, 36.
39. Brian K. Blount, "Reading and Understanding the New Testament on Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. Choon-Leong Seow (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 34.
40. Siker, 143.
41. McNeill, 54.
42. *Ibid*, 56.
43. Wink, 36.
44. Saylor, 85.
45. Blount, 34.
46. Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 109.
47. Scroggs, 114.
48. Siker, 140.
49. He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" ²⁸He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" ²⁹But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." ' (Matt. 13:24-30, NRSV.)
50. Siker, 150.
51. Matt. 22:39, NRSV.
52. Scroggs, 10.
53. Furnish, 64.
54. Patrick D. Miller, "What the Scriptures Principally Teach," in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. Choon-Leong Seow (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 58.
55. *Ibid*, 59.
56. Wink, 45.
57. McNeill, 65.
58. Lewis Smedes, "Exploring the Morality of Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, ed. Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 78.
59. *Ibid*, 81.
60. *Ibid*, 81.
61. Grenz, 231.
62. *Ibid*, 230.
63. *Ibid*, 235.
64. *Ibid*, 246.
65. Smedes, 82.
66. Siker, 146.
67. *Ibid*, 150.
68. Specifically, Seow discusses passages from the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

69. Seow, 30.
70. Ibid, 31.
71. Miller, 60.

