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FROM THE DESK OF THE EDITOR IN CHIEF

Most venerable readers of *Glossolalia*,

When *Glossolalia* was reborn at Yale in the summer of 2016, its re-foundation was underscored by a strong belief in the power of academic voice, and the collective community that fosters that voice. Our first new issue sought to maintain that belief, and we are happy to continue proclaiming purpose in the power of communal utterance and academic solidarity. In the face of a fraught and difficult 2017, that purpose remains ever-relevant as we collectively carry forward with our common work and scholarship.

It is in the swiftest of moments that authority, simply and often irrevocably, becomes authoritarian. In such grave instances, dissent becomes the highest form of speech, and disobedience becomes the most profound type of action. Among religious adherents and members of worldwide faith communities, resistance is often born not in the following of revered traditions, but through the actions of those who seek to disrupt and overturn the structures of power for the common good.

As 2016 turned to 2017, the theme of “Dissent and Disobedience” seemed not merely an appropriate topic, but a necessary theme with which to engage; happily, the global scholarly community responded to our call. Submissions arrived from academic communities in

Nigeria and India, as well as a number of American universities spanning the continent. Questions of dissent and disobedience vis-à-vis religion arose from inquiries grounded in a multitude of academic disciplines, as well as interdisciplinary exposition, and the following papers represent the most excellent scholarship of graduate students honing their academic craft.

Again, it is with humble honor that we present the work of these four emerging scholars, whose current writing resides at the intersection of religion, dissenting speech, and disobedient action.

Wishing you all the very best,

Alexander D'Alisera
Yale University

PROPHETIC, PATHETIC, OR BOTH

Examining the Works of Nat Turner and Ezekiel with Their Contemporary Implications

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Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison defines American Africanism as “an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, African-like (or Africanist) presence or persona [is] constructed in the United States.”¹ Morrison argues, “the representation and appropriation of [the American Africanist] narrative...is used for discourse on ethics, social and universal codes of behavior [and] definitions of civilization and reason.”² The American fascination with independence, unfettered access to freedom, full social recognition, and Manifest Destiny does not spawn wholly from the affairs of the Old World. This New World fixation with freedom and

¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 6. Morrison examines the way white writers portray the presence and existence of Black bodies in literature. Ultimately Morrison finds that Blacks are often used as props, as means to white ends and then discarded. They are empty characters undeserving of being developed. They are blank slates with the express purpose of being beneficial to the main characters who are white. For more reading on the portrayal of non-whites in literature and film see Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

² Morrison 1992, 53.

independence is in part produced by the onslaught of fettered Black bodies shipped to the North American continent. In no area of society is this more salient than in American Christianity. Historically, the nation has used Christianity as a tool of the empire, divinely justifying the pilfering of lands and resources from others, while righteously permitting the wholesale commodification and subjugation of human beings based upon skin color.³ By examining the lives of Christian slaves and their interactions with religious texts, contemporary lessons may be applied to current crises that call for Christians to resist. One Christian slave who offers rich insight on this subject is Nat Turner. Turner is infamously known for leading a vicious rebellion in which enslaved Blacks murdered dozens of white slaveholders and other supporters of the peculiar institution. Highly defined theological beliefs undergirded Turner's brutal movement. Turner's theology yields a hermeneutic of liberation engaging in the radical reversal of the dominating language belonging to his white, Christian owners. Rebellion, for Turner, results in the radical *de-* and *re-*construction of his identity. This paper analyzes Nat Turner's revolt, his hermeneutic and its theology, the subsequent consequences, and lastly, its contemporary implications.

Resistance and Revolt

On August 23, 1831 Virginia "Governor John Floyd dispatche[s] six militia companies to Southampton, along with arms and ammunition."⁴ Events in Southampton, VA leave the governor and the state in complete chaos. A petrifying slave revolt has occurred. The destruction of this revolt is exacerbated by white fears that slaves across the state will be motivated to follow in the footsteps of the

³ See George D. Armstrong, *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1857). And Fred A. Ross, *Slavery Ordained of God* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Company, 1857).

⁴ Randolph Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2008), 198.

rebellion's leader. In the eyes of Nat Turner and his followers, the uprising is attributed to a power not of this world. Turner initiates the revolt under divine prompting by way of a vision. He responds to this vision by murdering his owner's entire family and several other surrounding families. Turner's Rebellion is a revolt aimed at deconstructing white supremacy by utilizing a scriptural hermeneutic of liberation. In response to these attacks restrictive laws and seeds of distrust between white and Black Christians are sown, resulting in strained racial relations and the creation of discriminatory laws.

Nat Turner is born around the end of the eighteenth century in the state of Virginia. He is a product of American slavery, yet he possesses a counter-cultural perception of himself. Referring to his origins, Turner reflects, "I was born...property."⁵ Being reared in a devout, Christian environment, Turner speaks of his family and their ability to see potential in him even as a boy. Due to his staunchly religious upbringing, Turner does "not use tobacco or liquor, he seem[s] to live a perfectly disciplined life..."⁶ As a child, the future resistance leader is told that he "surely would be a prophet" one day by his "father and mother" as well as his very religious grandmother around the age of three or four.⁷ This affirmation undoubtedly contributes to Turner's possession of an exceptional, non-slave self. Further adding to this identity is the slave's special gift for reading and writing, a rarity for most slaves in Virginia. Due to the social and legal constraints of American slavery, Blacks like Turner are lawfully banned from learning to read, but many of them resist by privately teaching themselves or being taught by slave mistresses to read the

⁵ Nat Turner, "Religion and Slave Insurrection," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University, 1999), 89.

⁶ Vincent Harding, "Symptoms of Liberty and Blackhead Signposts: David Walker and Nat Turner," in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (New York: Oxford University, 2003), 81.

⁷ Turner 1999, 90.

Bible. In a private letter written to another governor, Governor John Floyd even reasons that slave mistresses are, in part, a cause of the recent insurrection. Floyd writes, “finally our females...of the most respectable [a]re persuaded that it [i]s piety to teach negroes [sic] to read and write, to the end that they might read the *Scriptures*.”⁸ Turner’s religious upbringing and skills contribute to his identity, as well as the event in Turner’s adolescence in which his father runs away never to return.⁹ Perhaps it is his father’s absence that moves Turner, who actually manages to escape one of his masters prior to revolting,¹⁰ to voluntarily return and fight instead of fleeing and leaving his wife and family behind. Although Turner admittedly recognizes his social place in this world, there is evidence that he adheres to another identity, one involving divine membership in another world—the kingdom of Heaven. For Turner, this identity bears greater authority. One day as he is laboring in the field of one his masters Turner receives a divine message. In his own words, “As I was praying one day at my plough, the spirit spoke to me, saying ‘Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you.’”¹¹ After years of meditating on this vision Turner comes to believe that the “Spirit that [speaks] to the prophets in the former

⁸ John Floyd, “Letter from Virginia Governor John Floyd to South Carolina Governor James Hamilton Jr., November 19, 1831” in *The Confessions of Nat Turner: With Related Documents*, 2nd ed., ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (Boston: Bedford-St. Martin’s, 2017), 108. Emphasis not added. In this letter Gov. Floyd blames “the Yankee population,” “preachers,” and lastly “our females” for the rebellion. The latter “become tutoresses [sic] in Sunday schools and, pious distributors of tracts” that encourage Blacks to challenge current power structures. Floyd also lambasts Black preachers deeming them to be inciters of violence and mischief. He makes no effort to hide his distrust of Black religious leaders in resolutely claiming, “I am fully convinced that every black preacher in the whole country east of the Blue Ridge was in [on] the secret...”

⁹ Harding 2003, 82.

¹⁰ Harding 2003, 81.

¹¹ Harding 2003, 91.

days”¹² is the same Spirit prompting him to foment a murderous rebellion.

A Slave’s Hermeneutic

“Turner’s sense of [a] special purpose [is] reinforced by his reading of scripture and his own experience of direct revelation.”¹³ While Nat Turner is in some ways exceptional, it is worth noting that Christianity for many of the slaves in Turner’s day is utilized as a tool that stresses their imminent freedom. Historian Eugene D. Genovese concedes that the Christianity of Black slaves “serve[s] as a bulwark against the dehumanization inherent in slavery.”¹⁴ Moreover, “[l]ed by their own black preachers and exhorters, the slaves d[o] not simply imbibe white Christianity.”¹⁵ The Christianity of Nat Turner encourages him to enact violent resistance because God encourages, nay, God *demand*s it. Sensing the magnetic pull of a divine call, Turner manages not to allow his social position as a slave to determine his status in the kingdom of Heaven. Scholar Richard Brodhead asserts that, “Turner’s prophetic career” leans toward a “way of conceptualizing selfhood that [leads to] a much larger social life.”¹⁶ In one of his earliest visions, Turner has a spiritual experience while working as a slave. As he is ploughing his master’s fields the Spirit gives Turner instructions to seek the Kingdom of God first with all other things being subsequently added to him.¹⁷ After

¹² Harding 2003, 91.

¹³ Scully 2008, 192.

¹⁴ Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 7.

¹⁵ Genovese 1979, 6.

¹⁶ Richard Brodhead, “Millennium, Prophecy and the Energies of Social Transformation: The Case of Nat Turner,” in *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*, eds. Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 217-18.

¹⁷ Turner 1999, 91-92.

receiving these words, Nat Turner anticipates a powerful demonstration of this great promise from God, ultimately interpreted with an aim towards freedom and new-found social identity. The only obstacle standing in the way of this manifestation are white slaveholders. Turner, enamored by the prophetic millennialism experienced in his first vision, would soon have another one of destructive proportions. In 1825, Turner receives a vision that will radically change his life forever. This apocalyptic vision leaves an indelible mark on his heart and mind. Turner writes:

And about this time I had a vision and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, “Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it.”¹⁸

At the core of the rebellion lies this truth: Turner daringly recognizes and envisions himself as something other than a slave. He undermines the identity that society assigns him by responding with a counter-identity in which he is a divinely-affirmed warrior fighting for a heavenly cause. Inserting himself as the protagonist in the vision gives Turner a freedom from bondage despite being *in* bondage. It gives him the gall to murder his master and other white slave-owners. Maintaining his identification with prophets of the Bible also gives Nat Turner’s life value and meaning. The vision mentioned above is splendidly intertextual. Like Joel, Turner is privileged to view cosmic warriors,¹⁹ similar to Jeremiah he sees the sun darkened²⁰ and even as Ezekiel mentions hearing thunder and

¹⁸ Turner 1999, 92.

¹⁹ Joel 2:5-10.

²⁰ Jer. 4:23.

seeing the visible flow of blood in the streets so does Turner.²¹ For further incitement, the Spirit again speaks to Turner in May 1828 proclaiming, “The Serpent is loosened, and Christ ha[s] laid down the yoke he ha[s] borne for the sins of men...the first should be last and the last should be first.”²² Consequently, Turner identifies himself “as the potential hero of this millennial struggle, he who is to fight against the Serpent, is to see himself as the performer at once of Christian spiritual and racial inversion.”²³

To appreciate fully Turner’s interpretation of scripture, it is helpful to probe his theology. Nat Turner’s attempt to invert radically his ascribed social status of bondage to one of freedom, liberty and recognition precedes, by over a century, the same ideals of theologian James Cone. According to Cone, undeterred freedom through the redemptive work of Christ is one of the fundamental messages of Christianity. Furthermore, one “is free when he [or she] sees clearly the fulfillment of his [or her] being and is thus capable of making the envisioned self a reality.”²⁴ Along this same vein:

[t]hrough God’s love, the [slave] is given the power to *become*, the power to make others recognize him...For he knows that until he accepts himself as a being of

²¹ Ezek. 1:24; 28:23.

²² Turner 1999, 93.

²³ Brodhead 2002, 226.

²⁴ James Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 39. Historically, Christianity is perceived as being a supporter of the white, racist status quo. Cone acknowledges the initial hesitance slave owners had about allowing their slaves to convert to Christianity, as it is customary for Christians not to enslave other Christians. The religion soon assuages these concerns by noting that Christianity does not change the outward social condition, it merely frees the slave from sin. For Cone, much of the work that needs to be done in American Christianity is to divorce Christianity from white supremacy. Over time, America’s brand of Christianity has theologically rationalized the inhumane treatment of Black men and women as objects rather than subjects. Part of the true Christian’s assignment is to reveal to whites that Blacks are not objects, but human subjects equally loved by God.

God in all of its physical blackness, he can love neither
God nor neighbor.²⁵

New-found identity in Christ is envisaged as motivating the oppressed and enslaved to act even if that means utilizing violence. Cone equates Turner's acts of violence to an "attempt to say 'Yes' to his being as defined by God in a world that would make his being into nonbeing."²⁶ The Christianity of slave-owners seeks "to interpret the meaning of Christianity in the light of a futuristic eschatology, [centered on] pietistic moralities in this life as a means of gaining eternal life upon death,"²⁷ but slaves like Turner call for the Kingdom of God to manifest itself now on earth. By passively accepting the brutalities of their masters and being obedient to them, slaves were told that they were laying up their treasures in Heaven. To understand Nat Turner's relationship with Christian texts, it is equally beneficial to examine the type of people Turner read about.

Nat Turner is once asked about the origins of the alleged "Spirit" that provides him with his divine messages. The slave rejoins that it is "the [same] Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days."²⁸ It is not absurd to imagine Turner identifying with Prophet Ezekiel. Like Turner, Ezekiel receives the prophetic call while being given a subjugated social status. Ezekiel acts in a context in which the Israelites' Babylonian neighbors forcefully overtake and rip a significant portion of them from their homeland. In affirming his chronological ordering with prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah,²⁹ Ezekiel

²⁵ Cone 1997, 52-53. Emphasis not added.

²⁶ Cone 1997, 55.

²⁷ Cone 1997, 101.

²⁸ Turner 1999, 91.

²⁹ Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1983), 3. Ezekiel 1:2 simultaneously supplies the historical setting in which Ezekiel lives and works and legitimates the chronological ordering of Ezekiel after Isaiah and Jeremiah. Isaiah is said to have begun his prophetic ministry (8th century BCE) during King Uzziah's reign and

begins prophesying in the midst of being placed in a foreign community where he is an ‘other.’ Both prophets find themselves working for God in places that do not fully recognize their humanity. Ezekiel is an exile—property won through conquest. Nat Turner is a slave—property not worthy of being considered human. Just as Turner’s prophetic “gift allow[s] him to turn nature into a new divine text and to read God’s intentions there,”³⁰ Ezekiel is instructed to prophesy annihilation against the very mountains of Israel.³¹ Scholars like Moshe Greenberg believe Ezekiel is so willing to speak out against the mountains due to the loneliness and despair “felt by the exiles [in] the river-valley environment” of Babylon compared to the mountainous highlands they (are naturally) acquainted with in Israel.³² Yearning to return home, but knowing its futility, the prophet denounces his homeland. Ezekiel and Nat Turner work for God out of their pain. As a means of reconciling with his own displacement, the prophet is operating under the assumption that “[e]verything on the surface of the land is to be swept away, starting with the offending cult-installations, and ending with the towns and their populations.”³³ Additionally both prophets are given the divine ability to see. According to Ezekiel 33, God ordains the prophet to be a watchman for his people. This job title of watchman appears to be one of a “conscript rather than a volunteer.”³⁴ Ezekiel is told that

Jeremiah starts his ministry under the reign of King Josiah (7th century BCE). Ezekiel’s ministry commences in the 6th century BCE.

³⁰ Harding 2003, 129.

³¹ Ezek. 6:2-3.

³² Greenberg 1983, 130. Greenberg suggests that part of the reason the prophet speaks out against the mountains of Israel is to both cope and reckon with his own displacement while discovering the theological purposes of Yahweh in allowing the Israelites to be overtaken.

³³ Greenberg 1983, 131.

³⁴ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 239.

if he fails to do his job he will be considered responsible for any fatalities that occur as a result of Ezekiel failing to report what he witnesses.³⁵ The Hebrew in which the language of the verse that makes this claim is written translates to be “an apodictic legal declaration, patterned after sentences kings pronounced over subjects who ha[ve] fallen out of their favor.”³⁶ Essentially, both prophets find themselves inescapably tied to their prophetic assignments as watchers. After watching Black and white spirits engage in deadly aerial combat Turner hears a voice tell him, “Such is your luck, such you are called to *see*, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it.”³⁷ The two prophets have no way out. They must engage in their prophetic works even if they involve violence—even if they involve death. The utilization of violence to accomplish or echo the divine is perhaps the most cogent similarity between the two prophets. Theologians such as Karl Lampley argue that the Hebrew Bible is rife with examples of God working through and in violence. Lampley asserts that “prophetic violence is God’s violence through the prophets against the enemies of Israel for sins and transgressions.”³⁸ Prophetic violence is precisely the form of violence Ezekiel engages in when prophesying destruction on Israel’s mountains for failing to worship only Yahweh. By way of his rebellion, Turner “implement[s] prophetic violence against his white Christian slave-masters.”³⁹ Ultimately, Lampley finds that the Old Testament reveals violence and wrath as part of God’s eternal character, “which explains why [a]t times God utilize[s] both supernatural and human violence to achieve God’s ends and to save

³⁵ Ezek. 33:8.

³⁶ Block 1998, 238.

³⁷ Turner 1999, 92. Emphasis added.

³⁸ Karl Lampley, *A Theological Account of Nat Turner: Christianity, Violence and Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10.

³⁹ Lampley 2013, 10.

Israel.”⁴⁰ While both Cone and Lampley’s theologies embrace violence, other theologians reject it. Anatheia Portier-Young contends that there is a “direct correlation between our willingness to attend to the shocking violence in our Scriptures and our willingness to attend to violence [in] the world.”⁴¹ Prophetic figures of the Bible like Ezekiel, who “sexualize” God’s punishment of Israel in chapters 16 and 23, produce a form of discursive violence in which sexual violence against Israel is justified by making it an ‘other.’ Moreover, by portraying Samaria and Jerusalem as abject, promiscuous women, the prophet “normalizes [the sexual] atrocity”⁴² that befalls the two groups on the basis of their moral failings and implicitly presumes that similar actions are justified against women today. Theologians who think like Portier-Young attribute these passages of the Bible to the fallen state of humanity and “the experience of violence and brokenness [that] generate[s] violent and broken speech about God.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Lampley 2013, 88.

⁴¹ Anatheia Portier-Young, “Drinking the Cup of Horror and Gnawing on Its Shards: Biblical Theology Through Biblical Violence, Not Around It” in *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, eds. Heinrich Assel et al (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 390.

⁴² Portier-Young 2012, 399. Ezekiel 16 features Yahweh first recognizing Jerusalem as a newborn baby that has been largely rejected and ignored (v.5). Yahweh recalls that Yahweh gave them life (v.6) and allowed them to once flourish and grow into womanhood (v.7). Yahweh remembers the divine covenant made with the woman (v.8) and how the deity manages to richly provide for her and give her an abundance of wealth (vv.8-14). Eventually, Israel forgets the one whom she enters a covenant with and cheats on Yahweh by engaging in child sacrifice to idols (v.20) and worshipping these idols instead of Yahweh (v.25). According to Ezekiel, Yahweh will now punish Israel by exposing Israel’s naked body to the very neighbors which she has supposedly cheated on Yahweh with. Ezekiel 23 is a similar story that justifies the sexual violence of Samaria and Jerusalem as a result of their idolatrous behavior (v.35).

⁴³ Portier-Young 2012, 405-406.

Organized over a roasted pig and a bottle of Henry Brandy,⁴⁴ the rebellion begins. Turner, along with several willing friends, gather early Sunday morning. While all the other participants drink, Turner remains vigilant and sober, abstaining completely as he has always done. Later that night, the resistance leader and his followers silently creep into the room of slave master Joseph Travis, who is reportedly a “kind master.”⁴⁵ Notwithstanding his kindness, with axes in hand and minds resolute, by the time the men leave Master Travis’s home, all five family members of the household (including an infant) meet their demise. The rebels go on to destroy at least five other households. The days to come will be marked with widespread hysteria, fear, and distrust. While Turner acts in obedience to God, earthly ramifications also compel him to act. The possibility of freedom on earth proves to be something worth fighting for. The God that Turner serves is not content with Turner being enslaved. In actuality, God is already engaging in cosmic battle against white spirits in the heavens. If one were to tell Turner that his God did not actively pursue his emancipation, Turner would likely respond that this is not the God he serves but a foreign one. Much of the Black Christian tradition follows the same hermeneutic that inspires Nat Turner. Cone surmises that “it [is] the black man’s deep concern for freedom and equality which le[ads] him to accept Christianity.”⁴⁶ This acceptance in the name of freedom is antithetical to the hope white missionaries and masters originally had in introducing Christianity to their slaves. They wanted the faith specifically to keep Blacks in their place and satisfied with an eschatologically-skewed faith, looking for a change in their fortunes only in death. Slaves like Nat Turner would courageously act against this group’s wishes and

⁴⁴ Turner 1999, 94.

⁴⁵ Turner 1999, 93.

⁴⁶ Cone 1997, 94.

tout a faith that called for God's Kingdom to transpire on earth as it already has in Heaven.

While Turner comes to interpret his murdering of several white families as carrying out God's will, there lies at the heart of the attack a greater desire. This desire is rooted in Turner's eager hope for a new social position for himself and others bearing the status of property. Turner arguably believes that the key to bringing about the promised social transformation he associates with his apocalyptic prophecies is by attacking the chief source of oppression for slaves in nineteenth-century America—the white family structure. The role of the family in American slaveholding societies has an extensive impact on the perpetuation of slavery. Historian Randolph Scully recognizes that the “family [i]s the crucial ideological [bearer of] ideas about gender roles and relations with the economic and political unit of the white male-headed household.”⁴⁷ These family structures are one of the greatest sources of public recognition for white males (especially slaveholders). Additionally, the family “also serve[s] as a template for conceptions of mastery and submission.”⁴⁸ Detecting the serpent in his vision to be not just the slave master but his entire family is indeed an astute observation on the oppressive, systemic impact of the white family power structure on slave lives. Turner's logic suggests that by destroying the root of slavery (the family), one can destroy slavery altogether. Genovese affirms Turner's analysis: “The slave regime in the United States enter[s] its great period of...expansion after the [international] slave trade ha[s] closed.”⁴⁹ As a result, “it bec[omes] necessary to improve the material conditions of slave life in order to guarantee an adequate rate of reproduction.”⁵⁰ The necessity to prolong slave life creates an opportunity for

⁴⁷ Scully 2008, 200.

⁴⁸ Scully 2008, 200-201.

⁴⁹ Genovese 1979, 4.

⁵⁰ Genovese 1979, 4-5.

paternalism to take root. By dismantling the paternalism on which the institution of slavery rests, Turner aims to destroy the entire system. Ultimately, the problem of Nat Turner is his ability to have an alternative vision of himself and to engage with divine vision as a means of potentially altering his current social position. Turner experiences and lives this scripture firsthand as he is apprehended and ultimately hanged on November 11, 1831. In addition to mass violence, the Turner Rebellion follows with three major consequences: increased scrutiny of the Black church and its leaders, strained race relations between Black and white Christians, and the creation of repressive legislation.

Consequences

By undermining the power structure of the white, slave-holding family, the power base of slaveholders, Turner leaves slave society throughout the American South in an uproar. One of the most immediate consequences of the revolt results in a slighted image of the Black church and Black Christianity at large. Less than a month after Turner's hanging, the state legislature hosts its annual gubernatorial address. In his address, Governor Floyd makes clear his opinion on slaves and Christianity. He asserts, "[t]he most active among ourselves, in stirring up the spirit of revolt...have been the [N]egro preachers."⁵¹ These leaders of the Black church are considered to be the "channels through which the inflammatory" incitement of rebellion occurs.⁵² After the rebellion, many white Virginians grow to distrust their slaves to worship alone. Christianity in their hands is recognized as an invitation to trouble and deviance, not one to everlasting life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness. In the wake of Turner's barbaric executions, white Christians are inspired

⁵¹ Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008), 146.

⁵² Irons 2008, 146.

to do something practically unheard of today—integrate. The days in which Blacks worship among themselves are over. They now require direct supervision and must be monitored even while worshipping God.

Local race relations between Blacks and whites following the Turner Rebellion are strained at best, severed at worst. Historian Charles F. Irons adds: “Long after the insurgents ha[ve] dispersed, armed whites continu[e] to arrive on the scene.”⁵³ Additionally, Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson recognizes that “in shuddering at the horrors of the insurrection, we have forgotten the far greater horrors of its suppression.”⁵⁴ Dubbing the white response a “Reign of Terror,” Higginson recollects that Blacks “[are] tortured to death, burned, maimed [and] subjected to nameless atrocities.”⁵⁵ The constant flow of violence increasingly deteriorates race relations, as “scores of the white solders engag[e] in bloody reprisals against the county’s slaves and free blacks”⁵⁶ with ravenous zeal. These wide-scale attacks indiscriminately target Blacks free and bound, suspected and unsuspected. After the slave revolt, Black Christians are especially consigned to lives of fear and resignation. Higginson uses the personal account of a woman who lives during the violent aftermath, Charity Bowery. Bowery provides invaluable insight: “At the time of the old Prophet Nat, the colored folks was afraid to pray loud; for the whites threatened to punish ‘em dreadfully, if the least noise was heard.”⁵⁷ Compounding this oppression, white vigilantes,

⁵³ Irons 2008, 134.

⁵⁴ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Black Rebellion: Five Slave Revolts* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1998), 183-84. Thomas W. Higginson was a commander of the first regiment of free Blacks to fight in the Civil War. Col. Higginson originally produced a book entitled, *Travellers [sic] and Outlaws* (Boston, 1889). *Black Rebellion* is composed of the last five chapters of this book. Col. Higginson was well known for being a staunch abolitionist.

⁵⁵ Higginson 1998, 185-186.

⁵⁶ Higginson 1998, 134.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Higginson 1998, 187.

“if they heard any of the colored folks praying, or singing a hymn, they would fall upon ‘em and abuse ‘em [and] sometimes kill ‘em, afore master or missis could get to ‘em. The brightest and best was killed in Nat’s time.”⁵⁸ The significant number of innocent slaves illegally killed is revealed in the incessant number of petitions “subsequently presented to the [Virginia] Legislature asking compensation for slaves thus assassinated without trial.”⁵⁹ One of the greatest historical sources used to assess the dismal status of relations between Black and white Christians exists in nearby Black Creek Baptist Church. Church records disclose that in the week following the Turner insurrection the church “agreed that the sacrament be Postponed [*sic*] in consequence of the unpleasant feeling the white Brethren have towards the black Brethren.”⁶⁰ Sadly, not even the broken body of Jesus Christ is capable of uniting the two races together.

Another consequence of Turner’s Rebellion are the immediate, widespread legal responses. South Carolina passes state legislation preventing Blacks from gathering together for worship between “sunset and sunrise.”⁶¹ By March of 1832, lawmakers of the state of Virginia repossess “formal spiritual authority from the hands of African American clergymen and prescribe for all Virginians a refined brand of proslavery Christianity.”⁶² By unifying all Christians under one type of church, whites are able to limit Black autonomy and heighten their supervision of Black Christians. Not many days hence, the General Assembly passes an “Act to amend the act concerning slaves, free Negroes and mulattoes.”⁶³ This law makes it

⁵⁸ Higginson 1998, 187.

⁵⁹ Higginson 1998, 186.

⁶⁰ Scully 2008, 222.

⁶¹ Turner 1999, 89.

⁶² Irons 2008, 138.

⁶³ Irons 2008, 142.

illegal for freed or interracial Blacks to meet at schools, churches or homes or any other place “teaching them reading or writing.”⁶⁴

Contemporary Implications

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin [and] in their own house.’”⁶⁵ Being prophetic often comes with a price. For Nat Turner, his ability to heed the prophetic call and dispute his oppressive slave-owners’ projections of himself made him a problem. By retaining an alternative vision of himself, he spurned his slave status. By finding himself in prophets like Ezekiel, Turner received divine visions that required action. Turner was an ill-destined watchman. As a slave, he utilized a reading of scripture that radically undermined his status as property and forced him to act violently. He boldly assailed the source of his enslavement by attempting to destroy the white family structure that was held together by paternalism. Turner managed to discover, name, and attack the principalities and powers that enslaved him. However, his attempt to materialize the promise given to him by the Holy Spirit is not perceived as a pious act of faith by all. For others, Turner is simply a barbarous murderer deserving a criminal’s death. The initial response to Turner was marked by violence, demonizing the Black church and Black people, and even creating laws that prevented Blacks from reading and writing while simultaneously inhibiting their ability to worship God among themselves.

In an era of hashtags, protests, and Twitter wars, Turner’s dissension offers more than a few lessons to Christian dissenters today. Turner’s example teaches that one of the best ways to leave behind an effective legacy of resistance is to have a problematic vision that makes the protester the problem and also to be willing to

⁶⁴ Irons 2008, 142.

⁶⁵ Mark 6:4.

suffer the consequences that come with this vision. The example given by Nat Turner encourages Christians to courageously *be the problem*. Advancing ideas of radical community, equality, and identity that defy the polarizing, self-centered ways of this world have the potential to ascribe “problem-status” to Christians today. Turner’s willingness to undermine the status-quo acceptance of slavery is clearly problematic to some, not because of the cause itself, but due to the violent way in which Turner dissents. This forces some to consider the work of Nat Turner not to be a *prophetic* effort but instead one that is *pathetic*. Theologian Charles Campbell argues: “a good God creates a good creation not through violent means but through the Word. Neither evil nor violence is inherent in God or the creation.”⁶⁶ Others, like Lampley, point to moments in the Bible such as the deliverance of Israel out of the hand of Pharaoh and the intentional decision of God to harden his heart so that God may engage in the mass genocide of Egyptian firstborn sons. Portier-Young also recognizes that the God in Ezekiel 23 is depicted by the prophet as condoning gang rape as a means of punishment and brandishing it as a tool craftily used to teach covenant-breakers a lesson. These examples alone suggest that the relationship between Christianity and violence is a *tenuous* one. Dissenters and onlookers should not rashly judge acts of violence as ungodly. Lampley acknowledges that although they are often disregarded, Jesus’s “defiance, confrontations [and] righteous indignation are also a part of the gospel record.”⁶⁷ Many Christians focus on Christ being the “Prince of Peace,” but forget that he also promised to bring a sword to the world.⁶⁸ What is certain is that the righteous cause is in the eye of the beholder. By learning from the history of America’s slaves,

⁶⁶ Charles Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 73.

⁶⁷ Lampley 2013, 99.

⁶⁸ Matt. 10:34.

Christians today are forced to grapple with the subjects of God, protest, and violence. In reckoning with violence and the possibility of God's role in it, modern Christians are concurrently paying tribute to Christians of the past like Nat Turner, who have wrestled with the same question.

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THE NONVIOLENT SELF

Selfhood and an Emerging Global Community

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Introduction

From the battlefields of the nineteenth century, overwhelmed by the smoke and cacophony of musket and cannon fire, to the twentieth century and the sobering reality of nuclear weapons capabilities, to the twenty-first century military operations carried out at a distance by drone operators who see images on a computer screen, the rise and development of the modern nation-state has paralleled a brutal and disconcerting increase in the efficiency of state-sanctioned violence. As the role of nation-states in a globalizing world increased in prominence in recent centuries, so too did the ability of these entities to execute violence in the name of their interests, from small-scale assaults to wars that engulfed much of the world and killed multitudes in moments.

Additionally, as technological advances have facilitated this increase in the efficiency of violence, they have also allowed citizens of different nation-states to connect more easily, and identify more readily, with one another across national boundaries. While the violence of nation-states has become more efficient, the populations

asked to conduct and support this violence have become more connected to one another. Global tourism has made the foreign familiar. Global migration has allowed cultural components to be relocated, reimagined, and incorporated into local cultures. The internet has facilitated face-to-face communication where there was, even recently, mostly mystery. Consequently, those citizens asked to finance and carry-out the nation-states' acts of violence are being asked to do so against nations that are now much more familiar, against persons who are now much less foreign.

Along with the technological advances that serve to make warfare both less palatable and less tolerable, our modernizing and globalizing world has instantiated an eroding confidence concerning one's self-identity. Citizens who once relied on membership to a nation-state for a significant portion of their self-identity now have a multitude of options from which to construct a sense of selfhood. As the violence at the ready of global powers becomes increasingly horrific in its cold efficiency, and as disparate cultures from distant corners of the world become increasingly encountered and familiar, citizens of a globalizing modern world may seek to construct an identity that is rooted less in the nation-state and its violent associations and more in an emerging global community that engenders the hope of an end to inter-state warfare.

As these globalizing and modernizing processes and their consequences became clear, three luminaries arose who opposed the violence of nation-states based on a definition of selfhood that transcended national identities. The lives and philosophies of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thich Nhat Hanh provide a template for the construction of a self-identity rooted in opposing the violence of nation-states and asserting one's interconnectedness with the global populace.

Modernity and the Eroding Self

Modernity and globalization are two processes that have been coevolving and shaping one another. Seemingly at the mercy of these forces are individuals who have found less confidence in traditional markers of self-identity. Whereas identities were previously constructed along proscribed and predictable paths, the modern world has seen options for self-construction proliferate; the pathways upon which self-identities are constructed are now many, and one is faced with choices for such construction unknown to previous generations. The near-absence of guidance as to how to go about such an enormous task has given rise to what Anthony Giddens has termed “ontological insecurity.”

¹ As the encountered world broadens and options for this self-construction multiply, anxiety and uncertainty increase. This is not only because human beings have spent the overwhelming majority of our evolutionary history in much smaller tribal settings than the global world we are now asked to navigate, but because doubt is a hallmark of modern knowledge. The scientific revolution, which Giddens notes has become the defining episteme of this modern age, “institutionalises the principle of radical doubt and insists that all knowledge takes the form of hypotheses: claims which may very well be true, but which are in principle always open to revision and may have at some point to be abandoned.”² That this “radical doubt” extends also to the project of self-construction is key to Giddens’s understanding of ontological insecurity: “The integral relation between modernity and radical doubt is an issue which, once exposed to view, is not only disturbing to philosophers but is *existentially troubling* for ordinary individuals.”³ As human beings are

¹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 35ff.

² Giddens 1991, 2-3.

³ Giddens 1991, 21.

forced to construct their identities from a globe's worth of options, their efforts are continually undermined by the doubt which necessarily accompanies each and every assertion. The security with which one previously constructed a self-identity within a relatively narrow course of options has been replaced by an insecurity as options multiply and certainty becomes more difficult to find; the loci of self-identity held by previous generations, then, has become less secure and thus, less satisfying.

New and unsettling modes of warfare fought among increasingly less foreign entities serves to exacerbate this sense of insecurity. As nation-states have developed more efficient means of conducting violence, the need to monopolize and control these means increases.⁴ In the best of circumstances, this control is defensive and used to protect citizens from those who would do them harm. Nation-states and powerful factions within nation-states, however, have interests of their own and the control of violence can be a means to realize them. To whatever extent the interests of the nation-state do not align with the interests of some or all citizens, the effort to monopolize violence becomes problematic; whatever tension exists between the interests of some or all citizens in a state and the interests of the state itself is heightened by the state monopolization of violence. This violence may take the form of inter-state warfare, but it may also take subtler forms, such as colonialism—both in its historic manifestation and in its more insidious contemporary expressions. Additionally, this violence may take place within a state, as when state power is used to marginalize systematically some portion of the population at large. These expressions of violence, may prove alienating enough that all or some citizens within a nation-state will seek alternative expressions of their collective identity. With their ontological insecurity exacerbated by state-sanctioned violence

⁴ Giddens 1991, 15.

that is becoming more difficult to justify, some portion of the population will be compelled to construct a self-identity outside of the nation-state. Thus, to whatever extent these populations wish to define their locus of identity elsewhere, they do so in contrast to the state's monopolization of violence.

Nonviolence may serve as the basis for the construction of self-identity in our current setting, as it has historically. Luis Gómez, in tracing the development of the principle of nonviolence in early Buddhism, notes that nonviolence did not arise from philosophical principles, but as a means to construct the identities of those within this early community. Writing on this historic function of nonviolence, Gómez notes: "Although nonviolent behavior may be associated with self-effacement and compassionate thoughts, it embraces certain features of the self and excludes others, thereby serving as a powerful tool of self-definition."⁵ Thus, in the face of violence-monopolizing nation-states, those who wish to construct an alternative self-identity may do so by means of nonviolence; the inclination to do so becomes especially pointed when it is the inappropriate use of this monopolized violence that provides the impetus to identify elsewhere. Citizens of nation-states conducting what is taken to be unethical violence, then, may be compelled to construct identities in opposition to the actions of the state, and so construct identities based on a shared ethic of nonviolence.

If the doubt that is inherent in all forms of modern knowledge casts a pall on constructions of self-identity, rendering them also unreliable, could there be a self-conception constructed in which this doubt is counteracted, and a self-conception that is, at least, more reliably constructed? Indeed, for Giddens, this ontological insecurity can be counteracted by the building of trust between individuals:

⁵ Luis O. Gómez, "Nonviolence and the Self in Early Buddhism," in *Inner Peace, World Peace Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 31-32; cf. 35-38.

“Trust in others... is at the origin of the experience of a stable external world and a coherent sense of self-identity. It is ‘faith’ in the reliability and integrity of others which is at stake here.”⁶ For Giddens, acting in a trustworthy manner is what allows others to overcome this inherent doubt and build the kind of trust that allows a more coherent and reliable sense of self to develop. For those, then, for whom the monopolized violence of the state or states serves as a motivation to seek an alternative collective identity, nonviolence can serve as the means to act in such a trustworthy manner and as a marker of an alternative self-identity. In this way, nonviolence can be seen to both delineate one’s own self-identity from a violence-monopolizing state and also to build trust with others who seek to do the same, thereby providing an alternative basis for the development of a self-identity rooted in a global nonviolent community.

The situations encountered by Gandhi, King, and Nhat Hanh serve as examples of the formation of this alternative collective identity, formed in response to the inappropriate use of violence by the modern nation-states that had effectively monopolized such forces. For each, the state’s or states’ monopolization of violence served to carry out interests contrary to large segments of the population. The conceptions of personhood operative in each of these leaders’ philosophies, rooted in their respective religious traditions, led them to articulate an ethic of nonviolence that served as a means by which they and others delineated their identities from the states they were opposing. Faced with the overwhelming multitude of choices from which to construct an identity, these leaders allowed their conceptions of personhood—conceptions which lead to an ethic of nonviolence—to articulate a collective

⁶ Giddens 1991, 51.

identity that served (and can continue to serve) to define a reliable and stable sense of self in a continually globalizing modernity.

Gandhi and the Universal Ātman

Mohandas K. Gandhi was born into an already globalizing world, into an India colonized by the British Crown. While the image of the white-robed ascetic is the one most easily called to mind today, young Gandhi wore the dress of one born into nineteenth-century Western privilege. His home life, too, was one that reflected a world of many influences. Even for a notoriously diverse place like India, Gandhi's childhood was marked by multiple identities. His father was a devotee of Vishnu, his mother a Pranami: "a Hindu tradition usually associated with Krishna Vaishnava devotion, but which reads the Muslim Qur'an and preaches tolerance and the equality of all religions."⁷ A world with a variety of options for self-identifying was not one Gandhi would discover, but one he began navigating from day one.

Gandhi stepped further into this globalizing world, though, than many around him expected. When a family friend suggested he travel to London to be educated as a barrister, his family felt that was a step too far. They relented only when Gandhi vowed to retain certain aspects of his Indian identity—by abstaining from meat, wine, and women. These vows were witnessed, not by a Vaishnava or a Pranami—the religious traditions of his parents—but by a Jain.⁸

Fittingly for one growing into a globalized identity, it was on a distant continent that Gandhi first became familiar with aspects of the religious philosophies that permeated so much of India. It was in London where he was first introduced to *The Bhagavad-Gita*, the text he would later call his "spiritual guide."⁹ If the construction of a

⁷ Douglass Allen, *Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 18.

⁸ Allen 2011, 30.

⁹ Allen 2011, 22.

self-identity in modernity is defined by being asked to choose from a wide variety of options, Gandhi showed an early willingness to do so. In familiarizing himself with the Hinduism of his homeland, Gandhi embraced some aspects, while discarding others, developing interpretations that would later define his philosophy: “He rejected the orthodox Hindu interpretation that sees it [*The Gita*] as a divine summons to kill as a caste obligation. To him *The Gita* was an allegory in which the battlefield was the soul and Arjuna a symbol of man’s higher impulses struggling against evil.”¹⁰ Gandhi would continue to develop his religious understanding by affirming some aspects of traditional Hinduism while rejecting others. He found himself leaving aside scriptural claims with which he was uncomfortable, rejecting religiously based hierarchies and refusing the “traditional Hindu renunciation of an illusory world,” while embracing “a rather stoic asceticism, of self-control of ego-desires and attachments as part of self-purification.”¹¹ As he grew into his role as a teacher, he advised others to do as he has done: to evaluate their own religious traditions that they too might embrace some aspects and reject “anything in their religious texts and institutions that violates their own moral experiences and human reason.”¹² Faced with the multitude of options for self-construction that modernity presents, Gandhi began to pick and choose which would come to define him.

Likewise, it was in London when Gandhi’s vegetarianism became his own. Upon arrival, he struggled to explain to bewildered colleagues his strange eating habits, practiced as they were less from personal conviction and more from adherence to the vow he had taken. But here he discovered the London Vegetarian Society, as well as the moral and ethical reasons that would sustain this practice for

¹⁰ Calvin Kytle, *Gandhi, Solider of Nonviolence: His Effect on India and the World Today* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1969), 83.

¹¹ Allen 2011, 46.

¹² Allen 2011, 46.

the remainder of his life.¹³ Identity, for Gandhi, was not something proscribed but something constructed, built from the set of global tools he was encountering.

It was the violence of institutionalized racism that turned the young barrister into the social activist. During his time in London, of course, Gandhi had witnessed the occasional ill-treatment of minorities, especially those of African or Asian heritage, but in South Africa, where he had taken on a legal case, he encountered something more systematic. Here, “he found color prejudice institutionalized and embodied in the law.”¹⁴ Indians were subjected to curfews and restrictions on property ownership. The state saw fit to institutionalize hierarchies, a practice offensive both to his modern identity as a London-educated barrister and to his emerging identity as a globalized citizen. When he returned to India, he saw the relationship between India and the British government differently. The Gandhi who had once dressed “in expensive suits and fights to travel first class” now dressed “like a poor indentured labourer and travel[ed] by the lowest third class.”¹⁵ The violence of the colonial enterprise now became apparent for Gandhi, manifested in such famous incidents as the Amritsar Massacre, where nearly four hundred unarmed Indians were killed and more than fifteen hundred wounded by armed British soldiers.¹⁶

Gandhi’s encounter with the globalizing world forced him to evaluate which aspects would come to define his own sense of personal identity. His encounter with the institutionalized violence of nation-states forced him to evaluate which collectivities would comprise his social identity. While Gandhi would come to articulate a concept of Indian self-rule—*swaraj*—his emerging philosophy was

¹³ Kytte 1969, 35-37.

¹⁴ Kytte 1969, 47.

¹⁵ Allen 2011, 52.

¹⁶ Allen 2011, 58.

not based in nationalism. On the contrary, what sets the Gandhian movement apart from other independence movements was that it was “one of the first mass political movements for national independence to be based on the rejection of identity and nationalism.”¹⁷ As John Hick notes, “[F]or Gandhi, *swaraj*, freedom, meant not simply, or even primarily, political independence, but a transformation of both individuals and society from selfishness to true community.”¹⁸ This subduction of nationalism to an alternative collective identity grows out of Gandhi’s conception of personhood.

The personhood that Gandhi came to articulate, and which motivated his political engagement, was one that emerged from his understanding of Indic philosophy, particularly as it is expressed in the Upanishadic and Vedic textual traditions. From these traditions, Gandhi affirmed “an all-encompassing, permanent, spiritual Self,”¹⁹ an impersonal absolute reality. This absolute reality was localized to each sentient being as a fundamentally divine nature: an *ātman*. This *ātman* not only tied each being intrinsically to the absolute but also—foundationally—to one another. For Gandhi, then, each sentient being was fundamentally united, sharing in a common, divine nature.²⁰ This fundamental nature of reality is what Gandhi called Truth and he succinctly expressed the central importance of this reality with the statement “Truth is God.”²¹ The ultimate truth of the world is the collective identity shared by all sentient beings.

¹⁷ Mithi Mukherjee, “Transcending Identity: Gandhi, Nonviolence, and the Pursuit of a “Different” Freedom in Modern India,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 115, No. 2 (April 2010), 455.

¹⁸ John Hick, “Gandhi: The Fusion of Religion and Politics,” in *Religion, Politics, and Peace*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 150-151.

¹⁹ Allen 2011, 110.

²⁰ Hick 1999, 152-153.

²¹ Hick 1999, 149.

It is from this understanding that Gandhi developed his practice of nonviolence—*ahimsā*—inseparable from the political realities surrounding him. As Hick observes:

Abimsa is the point at which Gandhi's philosophy becomes political and has a continuing significance for the whole world. [...] *Abimsa* means in practice that in the midst of injustice the right way to deal with oppressors... is not violent revolt but an appeal to the best within them by rational argument and by disobedience to unjust laws even when this involves suffering violence and imprisonment."²²

He goes on to write that violence, in this conception of personhood, is violence not only against one's own self, but also against the divine. Nonviolence, then, is the inevitable response to Gandhi's understanding of reality. Much more than a political strategy, nonviolence becomes for Gandhi a way to realize and manifest the ultimate nature of each being—indeed, of all the world.

Gandhi's conception of reality can serve both as an alternative locus of one's collective identity, grounded in a Gandhian sense of self, as well as the means to build trust among others who are likewise alienated by the monopolized violence of nation-state actors. As Douglass Allen, a philosophy professor and one of Gandhi's biographers, observes, "Nonviolence is a powerful bonding and unifying force that brings us together in caring, loving cooperative relations, that allows us to realize and act consistently with the interconnectedness and unity of all of life."²³ For Gandhi, and for those who would seek to emulate him, an ontology of fundamental relatedness compels an ethic of nonviolence, but also serves as a way to manifest, to live out, and to realize such an ontology. For those

²² Hick 1999, 154; the lack of diacritical markings is original.

²³ Allen 2011, 117.

for whom the monopolized violence of the nation-state has become alienating, Gandhian philosophy provides both an ontological grounding and the means for its expression, in which an alternative identity is conceived. Additionally, the expression of this ontology—nonviolence—acts as a signal to others alienated by the violence of modern nation-states, that an alternative is available.

King and the Community of the *Imago Dei*

A similar phenomenon would play itself out decades later, on the other side of the globe, in the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his response to the violence of systematic and legalized racial discrimination of Jim Crow in the American South. Like Gandhi, King was born into a world awash with the challenges of globalization. And, like Gandhi, King was born with a certain amount of privilege—albeit privilege likewise limited by oppressive structural constraints—which allowed for professional achievement, such as earning a doctoral degree from Boston University.²⁴ King did not travel as extensively as Gandhi, and did not live abroad; he did however make a pilgrimage of sorts, spending more than a month in India, meeting and learning from Gandhi’s foremost contemporaries.²⁵

American slavery and the legalized discrimination that followed are not always considered to be a result of globalization, but the same technologies that began the globalizing process were also responsible for the rise of the slave trade. As Jeannine Hill-Fletcher notes, globalization may have been accelerated by the emergence of recent modes of travel and communication but it was “technologies of sea

²⁴ See Lewis V. Baldwin’s, Keith D. Miller’s, and Richard Lischer’s contributions to the chapter “Authorship: Plagiarism, Ghost-Writing and Voice-Merging,” in *Martin Luther King, Jr and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. John A. Kirk (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) for why this claim ought not be qualified.

²⁵ See Martin Luther King Jr., “My Trip to the Land of Gandhi,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 23-30.

travel that provided opportunities to traverse the globe, and the technologies of industry that propelled a European need for permanent expansion into various parts of the world for material resources.”²⁶ The triangular trade that brought slaves from Africa to America, cotton from America to Britain, and manufactured goods to both America and Africa was not a predecessor to the globalization with which we now live, but an early manifestation of it. Jim Crow, of course, grew from the same impulses.

In his autobiographical writings, King relates several experiences of racial discrimination, some systematic and others personal. Perhaps most famous is the story of King’s childhood friendship with two boys—brothers, who were white—whose parents ran a neighborhood store. They were “inseparable playmates,” until their parents began to make excuses to keep their sons apart from the young Martin. When he asked his mother why he could no longer play the games other children play, she did her best to explain the realities of the American South.²⁷ King also recounts witnessing as a young man the legally instantiated discrimination he would spend his life working to end. Once, when his father took him shoe-shopping, the pair sat in the front of the store, only to be told that they would need to move to the back. Refusing, King, Sr., took his son and left the store, muttering as he left, “I don’t care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it.”²⁸ Of course, this system was state-enforced, a fact King, too, came to learn at a young age, when his father was pulled over for failing to come to a complete stop at a stop sign. When the officer called the elder King, “boy,” King, Sr., responded “I’m no boy.... I’m a man, and until you call me one, I

²⁶ Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “Religious Pluralism in an Era of Globalization: The Making of Modern Religious Identity,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 396.

²⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Stride Toward Freedom,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 420.

²⁸ King, Jr. 1986, 420-421.

will not listen to you.” The officer, unaccustomed to this kind of resistance, nervously wrote the ticket “and left the scene as quickly as possible.”²⁹

These early experiences exposed King not only to the legalized discrimination of the Jim Crow South, but also to the refusal to abide by or to accept such treatment. George Yancy, in relating the above stories, explains that King’s mother and father instilled in him in these instances a sense of “somebodiness.”³⁰ This counter-vision, this alternative scheme of valuation, was derived directly from the theologies of King’s parents, theologies learned and enacted in Ebenezer Baptist Church, where the elder King—and later, the junior King—served as pastor:

Ebenezer Baptist Church, as many black churches did, functioned as a space within which black people could enact anti-white racists semiotics, a place where black people could explore a range of bodily expansion and articulation through collective worship, and a place where they could narrate their own stories about being *somebody*, especially somebody in the sight of God.³¹

This space provided the young King with an alternative sense of value to the one his larger community impressed upon him. It was this alternative that allowed him to resist the message from his nation-state that he ought to be valued less than his white neighbors.

For King, these two visions of personal worth were mutually exclusive, and he trusted what he heard from his parents more than what he heard from shoe salesmen and police officers. It was this

²⁹ King, Jr. 1986, 421.

³⁰ George Yancy, “Dr. King’s Philosophy of Religion: Theology of Somebodiness,” in *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Critical Essays on the Philosopher King*, ed. Robert E. Birt (Lanham: Lexington, 2012), 45.

³¹ Yancy 2012, 47.

disconnect, the discordance of these conflicting messages that would drive King to develop an alternative anthropology that could be articulated in such a way as to universalize the word heard at Ebenezer and so to motivate a wider resistance against, and eventually the change of, the dehumanizing racial hierarchy into which he was born.³² Growing out of these experiences, with roots sunk into Ebenezer, King began the process of formulating a theology that would serve to ground a sense of selfhood apart from national identity, even black national identity. For King, Yancy writes, the value of a person was located outside such historical accidents, in something “transhistorical.”³³ King would come to articulate this source as the *Imago Dei*.

In the opening chapter of Genesis, Hebrew poetry narrates the creation by God day by day. God creates humanity on day six: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. [...] So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’”³⁴ While barrels of ink have been spilled over the centuries about what this concurrence of image might mean, Luther D. Ivory writes that, for King, it allowed him to make two claims which shaped the rest of his theological thinking: first, that all of humanity shares a fundamental essence, a metaphysical unity imparted to each by the divine absolute; and second, that this identity necessitated freedom.³⁵ Like Gandhi, King saw each person as endowed with a fundamental identity which originated beyond the bounds of any other identifying factors and which bound each person to a divine absolute and to one

³² James Cone, “Martin Luther King, Jr: Black Theology—Black Church,” in *Martin Luther King, Jr and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. John A. Kirk (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 56.

³³ Yancy 2012, 55.

³⁴ Genesis 1:26, 27

³⁵ Luther D. Ivory, *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 59.

another. And, like Gandhi, King saw the surrounding political order, with its racial hierarchies and legally instantiated inequalities, as a violation of this fundamental reality, “antithetical to a theology based upon the belief that all persons are created in the image of God, and that God endowed each human person with dignity.”³⁶ The conflicting messages of his surrounding community and of his experiences in the Church could not coexist and, with the concept of the *Imago Dei*, King had the means to name one as a violation of the other.

As Ivory notes above, though, it was not enough to recognize this disconnect; the recognition of the discordance compelled one to work toward its harmonization. For Ivory, the existence of the *Imago Dei* revealed that the intention of the Creator was that human beings would live in a community with one another that reflected this divine connectedness:

He [King] was convinced that God’s moral ordering of the universe, God’s image in human personality, and God’s active work in history, when viewed together, revealed God’s ultimate goal for humanity to be that of *community*. God had structured reality in such a way that full human development became an existential impossibility apart from living in community with others.³⁷

Divine order was revealed in this concept, and with it divine will. It wasn’t enough, however, to claim that this was the way God wanted the world to be; rather, because King and his theological compatriots also saw God as acting throughout human history in order to bring this divine order into being, the proper action of human beings was to participate in this divine mission, to work with God in realizing

³⁶ Yancy 2012, 53.

³⁷ Ivory 1997, 59

this divinely ordained human community. Robert Birt puts King in a tradition of religious activists “that infers from a doctrine of human spiritual equality before God the moral duty of social equality in a human community.”³⁸ Indeed, it was exactly a revolution King was after.

Like Gandhi, King saw the problem with which he was faced, not as a particular instance of injustice carried out by bad actors who had merely to be defeated, but the result of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of reality. An injustice the likes of Jim Crow segregation was not an aberration of the modern moral order but indicative of it. The violence manifesting itself in the early twentieth-century American South was simply the continuation of a longer story. The violence of white supremacy, he saw, had been an ever-present theme—not a means to the end of white dominance but an end itself, inextricable from the nation’s systemic structures. Kathryn T. Gines writes that King saw this as precluding violence as a tactic, “[describing] the call to violence as a way of upholding this problematic value of the West.”³⁹ Nonviolence, then, in King’s thought, becomes a way, not just to challenge the status quo of the African-American experience, but to instantiate a different understanding of humanity, one rooted in mutual care and compassion that would no sooner do violence to one’s oppressor than to one’s own sibling.

Here again, nonviolence becomes a way to realize, to create, and to manifest an alternative way of understanding humanity as a whole and of understanding one’s own place within this collective. Robert

³⁸ Robert E. Birt, “King’s Radical Vision of Community,” in *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Critical Essays on the Philosopher King*, ed. Robert E. Birt (Lanham: Lexington, 2012), 158-159.

³⁹ Kathryn T. Gines, “Martin Luther King Jr. and Frantz Fanon: Reflections on the Politics and Ethics of Violence and Nonviolence,” in *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Critical Essays on the Philosopher King*, ed. Robert E. Birt (Lanham: Lexington, 2012), 252.

Birt points toward the comprehensive nature of King's vision and the social change it implores, writing:

King's quest for community is a *radical* quest to transform not only the situation of black America, but the entire social order. Not only racial caste, but the interrelated evils of economic exploitation, poverty, materialistic values that elevate things above persons (often relegating persons to the status of things), militarism and imperialism—all these mark the world that *is*, the world King seeks to *transcend* in thought and action toward a possible *new* world where freedom and dignity in a cooperative society of justice and love can be the birthright of every man, woman and child on earth.⁴⁰

This nonviolent work is not merely a tactic to bring about a reversal of fortunes, to replace the oppressor with the oppressed, but a recognition and realization of a different conception of reality, a different sense of self. For those that see such marks of the current social order as alienating, as indicative of a selfhood that they do not wish to affirm, King's vision of an alternative community provides the means for a construction of selfhood that transcends the monopolized violence of the nation-state and offers an alternative location for one's self-identity. Likewise, the means of nonviolence serves as well to extend an invitation to others who seek an alternative sense of self and community, so that they might become co-participants in the construction of an alternative locus of identity.

Thich Nhat Hanh and Selfless Selves

Like Gandhi and King, Thich Nhat Hanh was born into a population groaning under the weight of a globalizing modernity,

⁴⁰ Birt 2012, 161.

and like Gandhi, born directly under colonial rule. Education, too, played a key role in the development of Nhat Hanh's thought; entering into the monastery as a novice monk at the age of seventeen, he found that he yearned for a more comprehensive philosophical education and so sought out additional studies in philosophy and literature that were not available as part of a monk's training. He departed for Saigon University, where he supported himself as a poet and a novelist while studying more broadly.⁴¹ During these years, the tenuous post-colonial political structure began to break down.

Following World War II, France was unable to retain control of what had been French Indochina, and the area experienced a period of increased turmoil, with China and Russia working to support communist allies (predominately in the north) and the Western powers, led by the United States, working to support capitalists (predominantly in the south). The country became divided between North Vietnam and South Vietnam and war between the two, with the backing of their respective global superpowers, soon erupted. Buddhist leaders in the country—both Theravāda and Mahāyāna—convened a conference, and formed the Unified Buddhist Church in Vietnam with the express purpose of protecting the practice of Buddhism throughout Vietnam.⁴² The UBC adopted a strictly neutral position concerning the belligerents and advocated the right of the Vietnamese people to choose their own political leaders, free of foreign influence. Their work became known as the Struggle Movement.

Nhat Hanh's own work during this time was not synonymous with the UBC, nor was it entirely separate. While the two ought not to be equated, Nhat Hanh often worked in close conjunction with

⁴¹ Sallie B. King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action," in *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 322.

⁴² S.B. King 1996, 329.

the leadership of the UBC and is often counted among them.⁴³ In 1964 and 1965, respectfully, Nhat Hanh founded the School of Youth for Social Service as well as a new branch of Vietnamese monasticism, the Order of Interbeing; these organizations would serve as the primary loci for the engagement of Nhat Hanh's views, a conception he would come to term Engaged Buddhism.⁴⁴

The activity of the UBC became increasingly political at this time, as well. A refusal to denounce those Vietnamese favoring Communism put it at odds with the United States and aligned Vietnamese forces.⁴⁵ Sallie B. King summarizes:

In other words, any government acceptable to the United States, which wanted to pursue the war, would be unacceptable to the Vietnamese people, who wanted to stop the war, and vice versa. It was the Buddhist movement that voiced this popular dissatisfaction with American policy and actions.⁴⁶

As their opposition to the war attracted an increasing number of Vietnamese citizens, as well as South Vietnamese soldiers, it became clear that the war's continuation required their eradication. Eventually, the Buddhist movement gained enough power and influence that the US-backed rulers in Saigon had to act. In the Spring of 1966, government-backed troops moved against the Buddhist leaders in central Vietnam, including South Vietnamese troops who had openly sympathized with the Struggle Movement and had earlier refused calls to deal violently with them. As the military forces moved, "[t]housands of Buddhist families placed their sacred family altars in the streets to block the tanks' passage, to no

⁴³ S.B. King 1996, 325-326.

⁴⁴ S.B. King 1996, 323.

⁴⁵ S.B. King 1996, 329-330.

⁴⁶ S.B. King 1996, 331.

avail.”⁴⁷ Following a subsequent crackdown on politically-active Buddhist leaders in Saigon, the Buddhist-inspired movement to end the war was defeated: “On the heels of these events, Thich Nhat Hanh narrowly escaped an assassination attempt and left Vietnam on May 22.”⁴⁸ The Buddhist-led peace movement would not come to prominence again.⁴⁹

Forced to flee, Nhat Hanh embarked on an international speaking tour with engagements in nineteen countries. In the United States, he met with government officials, as well as Dr. King; following their meeting, King compared the Struggle Movement to the American Civil Rights Movement and publicly denounced the war in Vietnam for the first time, marking the start of the final chapter of his life’s work.⁵⁰ The publicity Nhat Hanh attracted during these years made his return to now Communist-ruled Vietnam impossible, and so he began a life of unofficial exile in the south of France, where he sought to engage a broader audience, and articulate a vision for a wider peace movement, rooted in his understanding of Buddhist interdependence—what he had come to term “interbeing.”

A founding principle of the Buddha’s teaching is that all things, persons included, lack a permanent, unchanging essence. Whereas Gandhi and King recognized an immutable marker inherent in all persons, Nhat Hanh and his fellow Buddhists would deny the existence of such a thing. As Gandhi would characterize persons as possessing an *ātman*—a Self—Nhat Hanh would characterize them as *anātman*—a non-Self. Such a conception, writes Luis Gómez, has long been misconstrued as nihilism, leading to accusations that Buddhism could not possess a defined system of ethical thought, the likes of which developed in such traditions as Gandhi’s

⁴⁷ S.B. King 1996, 334.

⁴⁸ S.B. King 1996, 334.

⁴⁹ S.B. King 1996, 334.

⁵⁰ S.B. King 1996, 323-324.

Hinduism and King's Christianity.⁵¹ Gómez goes on to explain, though, that “what is false here [in the conception of *anatman*] is not the phenomena of interpersonal relations but the notion of permanent, graspable entities; and only the first is a necessary condition for ethical values.”⁵² That is, the Buddhist conception of *anātman* does not negate the existence of persons but only that persons exist as permanent and eternal entities. For Gómez and other Buddhists, such a conception is not necessary to develop a system of interpersonal ethics, as the history of Buddhism attests. Jan Westerhoff finds it helpful to make a distinction between the Self—“a permanent, unitary substance”—which Buddhism denies, and the person—“a dependent and impermanent entity, yet something that is nevertheless real”—which Buddhism affirms.⁵³ It is this latter conception which provides the basis for ethical conduct.

Whereas in Gandhi's and King's thought persons share a connection with an absolute reality, which then provides the basis for the deep interpersonal connections that motivated their ethics of nonviolence, Nhat Hanh's understanding lacks the former but not the latter. That is, because persons are seen to lack the permanent essence of Gandhi's *ātman* or King's *imago Dei*, persons in Buddhist thought are defined not by a connection to an absolute reality, but by their interrelatedness to one another and their surrounding environments. While the conceptions of personhood operative in Gandhi's and King's philosophies possessed a “vertical” connection that provided the basis for a “horizontal” connection, the conception of personhood operative in Nhat Hanh's thought has no

⁵¹ Luis O. Gómez, “Emptiness and Moral Perfection,” *Philosophy East and West*, 23 (1973), 361.

⁵² Gómez 1973, 372.

⁵³ Jan Westerhoff, “The Connection Between Ontology and Ethics in Madhyamaka Thought,” in *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness*, ed. The Cowherds (London: Oxford UP, 2016), 204.

vertical connection and so brings the horizontal to the fore. Kenneth Kraft explains:

A principle concept that underlies most forms of engaged Buddhism is the interdependence of all existence (and nonexistence). The paper on which these words appear is the product of countless causal factors—tree, rain, cloud, logger, trucker, those who perfected the papermaking process, the fuels used to manufacture and transport the product, the sources of those fuels, and so on, endlessly. [...] Buddhist terms such as nonduality, interrelatedness, or interbeing all point to this idea.⁵⁴

In this way, the deep interconnectedness that characterize Gandhi's and King's conceptions of selfhood become even more emphasized in Nhat Hanh's thought. As Sallie B. King writes, "Ultimately the implication of the doctrines of no-self and interdependence is that *there is no other*. Self and other...co-create each other. [...] [R]eality is a great web of interaction and mutual creation from which nothing and no one stands apart."⁵⁵ And it is in Nhat Hanh's articulation that this interrelatedness—"interbeing"—becomes the basis for ethical action.

The interconnectedness Nhat Hanh emphasized extends beyond persons, as well, to include the social systems with which people interact. That is, the entities that compose that "great web of interaction" include things like "Capitalism," "Communism," "Vietnam," "the United States," and even things like "Buddhism" and "Christianity." For this reason, Nhat Hanh articulated a deep

⁵⁴ Kenneth Kraft, "Prospects of a Socially Engaged Buddhism," in *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 13.

⁵⁵ S.B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 25.

and abiding compassion for all persons involved in the devastating Vietnam War, insisting that each was acting based on the causes and conditions that created that hellish war in the first place. This is what allowed Nhat Hanh to identify so intimately “with both victim and victimizer.”⁵⁶ In this way, Nhat Hanh makes explicit what was often implied in the thought of Gandhi and King: the actions of individuals, all individuals, are shaped by large social systems of which they may or may not be aware, and over which they may have limited influence. And, as in Gandhi’s and King’s conceptions, the interconnectedness articulated by Nhat Hanh compels an ethic of nonviolence.

Whereas in Gandhi’s philosophy violence distorted the divine nature of beings and the true nature of reality, and in King’s thought violence impeded the divine work of realizing the community for which humans were intended and which God sought to build, in Nhat Hanh’s understanding violence is simply unjustified. Because there are no independent actors but only persons dependent on the causes and conditions which have given rise to the social realities with which we all must engage, violence ceases to be an effective means to any productive end. But, as in Gandhi’s and King’s conceptions, Nhat Hanh sees violence as only perpetuating the causes that lead to more violence. As Nhat Hanh writes, “If we work for peace out of anger we will never succeed. Peace is not an end. It can never come about through non-peaceful means.”⁵⁷ Because of the interrelated nature of reality articulated by Nhat Hanh, violent acts only serve to create the causes which condition future violence, and so lead to suffering for all. In all three outlooks, means and ends are collapsed, and nonviolence becomes the basis for an alternative engagement with the world, born out of an alternative construction of self.

⁵⁶ S.B. King 1996, 341.

⁵⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), 66.

For those in the midst of the violence of war-torn Vietnam, and for those who felt powerless watching such destruction from afar, Nhat Hanh's articulation of an alternative orientation—alternative to that of superpower nation-states warring by proxy and directly, causing immeasurable suffering of those caught in the middle—provided a means by which to identify collectively outside such a system. The philosophy of Nhat Hanh provided—and continues to provide—the means for an alternative locus for the construction of a self-identity. Nonviolence served to express this alternative and to signal to others the possibility of constructing a self-identity which did not rely on the monopolized violence of nation-states.

Conclusion

In a world in which technology facilitates inter-state travel more conveniently than ever, interpersonal global communications nearly as intimate and certainly as immediate as speaking with one's neighbors, and a continually globalizing economy cinching the world's fortunes ever more tightly together, the formally central role of the nation-state is more easily questioned and doubted than ever before. A world which will continue to globalize will continue to lead global citizens, consciously or not, to begin the process of constructing a globalized self-identity. Further, as long as nation-states are motivated to maximize their interests and retain as much power and influence for their beneficiaries as they can, they will continue to act in ways that clash with the emerging identities of an increasing number of their citizens. If Anthony Giddens is correct and the post-Enlightenment episteme in which we find ourselves is one characterized by a pervasive doubt, this desire to formulate a stable alternative collective identity will only become more explicit.

The philosophies of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thich Nhat Hanh, which compel an ethic of nonviolent action, provide viable articulations of an alternative locus for the construction of a sense of self that contrasts with the monopolized

violence of modern nation-states. Each of these philosophies articulates a conception of personhood which is not contingent on identifying collectively with nation-states, but rather provides a means for identifying with a humanity defined as a globalizing whole. Because these philosophies articulate fundamental connections between persons, an inherent interrelatedness, they also compel an ethic of nonviolence. Further, because the nonviolent ethic proclaimed by Gandhi, King, and Nhat Hanh is not a passive but an active one, this ethic can serve as a proactive means to express an alternative to the monopolized violence of nation-state actors, allowing adherents to actively construct a self-identity that serves as an alternative to one located in such a system of nation-states. For those who find this violence alienating, or counter-productive, or harmful, the nonviolent ethic voiced by these luminaries can also serve as a signal to others that such an alternative exists, and so provide the opportunity to build the trust that forms the basis of stable identities. In this way can these philosophies, and the nonviolent ethic they compel, serve to counter the “radical doubt” of the modern age and provide a sense of ontological security going forward. Here, in the thought of Gandhi, King, and Nhat Hanh, the seeds for a conception of an intimately interrelated humanity, one that can construct a collective identity based on nonviolent action, and one that can counter the monopolized violence of the system of modern nation-states, are planted. If new voices arise that can water and nourish these seeds, an alternative conception of civilization may come into view.

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HISTORICAL ROOTS OF PRESENT SCHOLARSHIP

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Among Pope Francis's many exhortations in *Laudato Si*, or *On Care for Our Common Home*, is a simple call to those who would engage with the ecological crisis facing humanity from an academic perspective. He writes, "Theological and philosophical reflections on the situation of humanity and the world can sound tiresome and abstract, unless they are grounded in fresh analysis of our present situation, which is in many ways unprecedented in the history of humanity."¹ This strongly worded call to scholarship across disciplines is inspirational; it asks scholars to reach back into their own disciplines and seek new ways of understanding old problems.

A significant argument made by *Laudato Si* hinges on the idea that hubris and lack of perspective in the academy and society at large have allowed humankind to develop an undeserved sense of entitlement towards the environment. Further, the encyclical argues that this entitlement has led directly to the ecological crisis presently facing humanity. Using perhaps the oldest bully pulpit in Western Christian culture, Francis makes a compelling argument for interdisciplinary engagement with the problems of global climate

¹ *Laudato Si*, 15

change. No discipline can stand alone or provide an individual solution to these problems; rather, the practitioners of various fields of study must come together to formulate novel solutions together. This is not a simple task. The misplaced sense of humanity's privileged place in the world is not only the product of a single field of study. Neither the physical and social sciences nor the humanities can claim full responsibility for the crisis as it currently exists; historians and those who study the past, however, are culpable in a particular way.

Advances in various fields of knowledge can lack perspective if they are the product of shortsighted historical inquiry. Our sense of the past meaningfully impacts the decisions we make about our future. Without a nuanced understanding of the past and a significant reappraisal of the roots of our ecological crisis, scholars will be unable to conjure a solution that addresses both the present trouble and its underlying causes. The problems of environmental degradation on a worldwide scale emerge out of Western European culture starting in the fifteenth century. If we are to understand the sources of these problems, we must return to medieval Europe with a critical eye towards understanding how these methods for the exploitation of natural resources were borne out of that culture.

It was with this idea in mind that noted medievalist Lynn White, Jr. put pen to paper to compose "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," published in the journal *Science* in 1967.² In this piece, White synthesizes a career's worth of study and personal reflection on the subject of the historical development of Europe during the Middle Ages. The result is a succinct paper on the genesis of the utilitarian approach to the natural world in Western Europe. White asserts that Christianity, as it has developed in the West, has within its essence a tacit separation between man and the natural

² Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (10 March 1967): 1203-07.

world. This sort of anthropocentric cosmology constitutes a hallmark of Western Christendom, he argues, that has persisted into modernity and become a mainstay within Western culture itself.

Laudato Si can be read as the most recent direct response and challenge to White's thesis. Citing scripture to support his argument, Francis argues that "Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned with other creatures."³ By leveling the charge of anthropocentrism against the whole of Christianity, White's argument set the tone for the debate over the relationship between Christianity and the environment. His work precipitated intense responses arguing for and against the inherent anthropocentrism of the Western and Christian traditions. This paper seeks to explore the works of three scholars as responses to Lynn White and understand the implications of their conclusions for modern scholars of religion and the environment.

Contemporary medievalists – White's own intellectual heirs – have also issued critical reinterpretations and revisions of his thesis from within their own field. The past five years alone have proven to be a remarkably productive time for historians wishing to engage in these critical projects of reappraisal. Notable have been the works of Richard Hoffman and Karen Louise Jolly. Both of these scholars have published works that challenge White's thesis from different and contrasting positions. Hoffman's textbook-length work, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe*, integrates a career's worth of academic inquiry into medieval environmental history with a particular focus on the dynamic relationship between culture and nature.⁴ Aimed at scholars in both the sciences and the humanities, this work achieves a previously-unseen combination of interdisciplinary breadth and disciplinary depth. He endeavors to

³ *Laudato Si*, 50

⁴ Richard C. Hoffman, *An Environmental History of Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

understand how medieval Europeans themselves would have understood their relationship to the natural world. Importantly, he engages explicitly with White's accusation from the perspective of his own methods and experience. Karen Louise Jolly's chapter "Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context" is by contrast a much smaller and more novel an approach than is Hoffman's treatise.⁵ Adopting a popular religion approach, Jolly's work blurs the line between identifiably Christian and identifiably pre-Christian approaches to nature, cultivation, and the environment. Scholarship of the kind undertaken by Hoffmann and Jolly represents a new, post-White paradigm for medieval history. These works engage in projects of synthesis across disciplines and consciously work to integrate the discovery of new evidence with reinterpretation of the old.

It is appropriate at this point to note that, in the words of Matthew Riley, "White the critic of Christianity is a *straw man* that I have little interest in knocking down."⁶ Rather, this paper seeks to shed light on White's scholarly milieu, to understand the intellectual historical context into which White entered as a scholar of medieval Europe, and to explore the substantial effect his work has had on that field since.

The beginning of White's "Historical Roots" centers on the development of technology in medieval Europe. The breadth and unchecked rapidity of this technological development, in conjunction with the following argument, constitutes White's oft quoted critique:

⁵ Karen Louise Jolly, "Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context," in *Contesting Christendom: Readings in Medieval Religion and Culture*, ed. James Halverson (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2008), 57-66.

⁶ Matthew Riley, "The Democratic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" *Zygon* 49.4 (2014): 939.

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the 2nd century both Tertullian and St. Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's Religions (except perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.⁷

White asserts that Christianity, by virtue of its theology, holds humanity apart and separate from the natural world itself. This anthropocentric cosmology, traceable back to Genesis 1:28, lies at the heart of present ecological crisis and the problem of global climate change. He argues that the problem of anthropocentric thinking has further spilled over into Western culture writ large, and thus has had a direct impact on the sort of technological developments undertaken in the West during the Middle Ages and beyond.

His hallmark example of this mentality influencing the development of medieval technology centers on the plow, and the transition from low-impact subsistence farming to more industrialized methods of agriculture. White utilizes a hermeneutic of violence to describe the effect of this transition. The new heavy plows "attacked the land with such violence" that they fundamentally changed the way in which Europeans conceptualized their relationship with the natural world.⁸ Farmers no longer had to

⁷ White 1967, 1205.

⁸ White 1967, 1205.

scratch out a subsistence living on small plots, but could instead till long strips of arable land. Plows required up to eight oxen to pull efficiently, and forced peasants to organize communal sharing of resources. Thus, he argues, the human relationship with nature underwent irrevocable change. “Is it a coincidence,” he asks, “that modern technology, with its ruthlessness toward nature, has so largely been produced by descendants of these peasants of northern Europe?”⁹

Direct, impactful, and never lacking in breadth of vision, White’s scholarship and the style of his approach to historical problems reflect the best aspects of his training in both theology and history. In his 2014 article on the life of Lynn White, Matthew Riley writes about the scholar’s often unexplored spiritual life, and his formative experience studying theology with Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary:

[White’s] studies with Niebuhr instilled in him a sense that theology was not an abstract, intellectual exercise. Rather, theology became an embodied, efficacious mode of being that stretched beyond the personal into the social and political. Theology, in this sense, was a shaping force in history that merited serious study and that also demanded thoughtful action.¹⁰

This is White’s first principle and foundation. His body of scholarship, from “Historical Roots” to *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, rests upon a desire to apprehend the lived, daily experience of religion and its implications within society at large. Studying at Union allowed White to develop this methodological lens through which his study of history is focused.

⁹ White 1967, 1205.

¹⁰ Riley 2014, 941.

For White, the period spent studying with Niebuhr was complemented by his time at Harvard studying new ways of interpreting history. Generally speaking, White's analysis grows directly out of the French *Annales* School, and in particular the work of its co-founders, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. A medievalist and a modernist respectively, these two men founded the journal *Les annales d'histoire économique et sociale* while both of them were among the history faculty at Strasbourg University in 1929. Both men were deeply invested in the idea of reinventing the professional practice of history. They saw themselves as practicing a dynamic, new social history – a history that included within its purview the lives and experiences of men and women at all levels of society.¹¹ In 1935, they published a special edition of the journal entitled *Les techniques, l'histoire et la vie*. In it, Febvre outlined a three-part methodology for understanding the history of *techniques*¹² and technology. First, the historian must understand the technique as the technicians themselves understood it. The accounts used to formulate one's understanding should be accounts of the technicians themselves whenever possible. Second, the historian must chart a developmental trajectory for the technique. What was the original method? How did it develop and under what circumstance? Third and finally, the historian ought to be able to comment upon the relationship between the technique in question and the social context in which it arose.¹³ All three of these methods are on broad display within White's masterwork, *Medieval Technology and Social Change*.

¹¹ Cf. Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929-1989* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹² The original French is *techniques*, which might be better understood in English as simply, "Ways of practicing a craft."

¹³ Lucian Febvre, "Reflections on the History of Technology," in *Techniques to Technology: A French Historiography of Technology*, trans. Martha Cummings, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Pietro Redondi (Hyderabad: Stosius Inc., 1990), 91–96.

Inasmuch as one can see the germ of *Medieval Technology and Social Change* in Febvre's work, one can also see the beginnings of White's historical environmental consciousness in the work of Marc Bloch. Himself a historian with broad interests, Bloch's life and works are difficult to summarize without leaving something out.¹⁴ Instead, the words of William H. McNiehl on encountering Bloch's work in graduate school suffice:

Bloch's prose was like a draught of cool water in a dry and thirsty land. Not only did Bloch write French... he also got right down to the earth, describing how real people made a living from the land. Bloch's rural France smelt of the barnyard, not of dusty archives... the everyday flavor of peasant life oozed from his pages.¹⁵

For Bloch and his comrades at the *Annales*, the study of history necessitated engagement with people at all levels of society on their own terms. Only through that sort of broad investigation could the historian begin to see the social trends and intellectual currents of an era.¹⁶

White's approach can be characterized in much the same way. Having cut his teeth working with Bloch's thesis on the cultural significance of the transition from scratch to heavy plowing, it was no great leap for White to make the leap back and suggest that the culture of medieval Christendom might have had an effect on the

¹⁴ Bloch's own words provide the surest avenue into his *mentalité*; his unfinished opus, *The Historian's Craft*, provides an elegant defense of the practice of history penned just before his execution by Nazi troops in 1944. Cf. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (Toronto: Knopf, 1963).

¹⁵ William H. McNiehl, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 205.

¹⁶ Cf. Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

widespread use of such a tool as a means to manipulate the natural world. “What,” he asks, “did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment?”¹⁷

The answer White furnishes to this question is clear: Christianity separated medieval Europeans from nature by virtue of its theological and cosmological principles. The daily, lived experience of medieval Christians in the West was one that held the natural world at arm's length. Though Pagan animism provided a channel through which pre-Christian Europeans could understand the natural world around them and treat it with reverence, the introduction of Christianity stripped the environment of its sacredness. Only outliers, including Francis of Assisi, retained a positive view of nature within the new Christian context. For White, the Christian conversion of the Northern European peasantry causes the introduction of inherently-violent forms of land management.

The change within the disciplines of medieval history and the ecological sciences since the publication of “Historical Roots” has been astronomical. Like Bloch and Febvre before him, White now plays the role of rhetorical bogeyman in the historiographies of a new generation of scholars working in the field that he helped create. That said, the developments that have taken place within the two previously mentioned fields are worth examining. Ben Minteer and Robert Manning’s jointly published 2005 article in *Organization & Environment* provides the most succinct and interdisciplinary update to White’s thesis. They note that, since the publication of “Historical Roots,” ecological science has undergone something of a sea change. White subscribed to the idea of self-regulating ecological balance:

But this picture of an inherently stable, self-regulating ecological order has, in the decades since White wrote, been steadily challenged by a growing legion of

¹⁷ White 1967, 1205.

ecologists defending a different understanding of ecological stability and the role of natural disturbance in environmental systems. Various referred to as new or postequilibrium ecology, or the flux-of nature paradigm, this emerging view of ecological systems emphasizes the inherent dynamism, complexity, and unpredictability of the workings of the natural environment and replaces older balance- of-nature metaphors and models with new visions of ecological change, disturbance, and natural disorder.¹⁸

This view of nature, as a dynamic system of which humans are a single part, has immense implications not only for White's thesis, but also for how to approach environmental history as we look into the past in search of human interaction with ecological systems. Within medieval history too, changes in methodology and approach have precipitated new ways of seeing old problems. There has been significant renewed interest in the role of religious belief in the daily lives of people at all levels of society. However, this approach differs significantly from the type of religious inquiry White undertook within his own scholarship. Instead of starting with the theological writings of Tertullian and Irenaeus and searching for evidence of orthodoxy, the most fruitful inquiries since 1967 have focused on the study of heterodoxy and heresy.

The study of inquisition documents, rather like the study of farming techniques and land management, has always been a mainstay of Medieval European scholarship. However, the introduction of microhistorical methods, a new attention to demography, as well as renewed interest in legal history, has allowed for an entirely new picture of day-to-day life in Medieval Europe to

¹⁸ Ben Minteer and Robert Manning, "An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,'" *Organization Environment* 18 (2005): 167.

develop. The best example of this sort of work is unquestionably Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's seminal *Montaillon: The Promised Land of Error*, which uses the inquisition records kept by Jaques Fourniers, a French bishop and future pope, as he investigates the alleged heretical practices and teachings of a rural community in southern France. Working thoughtfully and carefully within the framework of *Annales* school methodology, Ladurie's work examines the lived cosmologies and daily ritual practices of both orthodox Christians and heterodox Cathars.¹⁹

Another seminal work of this type is Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, which tells the story of the 1582 inquisitorial trial of Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio. In this case, the man accused was brought up on charges of both anti-clerical sentiment and of disseminating a heretical cosmogony. He is quoted in his trial as having said, "I have said that, in my opinion, all was chaos, that is earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together; and out of that bulk a mass formed – just as cheese is made out of milk – and worms appeared in it and these were angels." He further elaborates a worldview that originates fascinatingly out of the chemical process of putrefaction.²⁰

Common across both of these works and the genre of analysis they represent is a sense of dynamism previously absent from the historical narrative. Whereas previously, historians including White were happy to take the word of inquisitors and theologians about the conflicts they faced in combating pernicious heresies wherever they threatened their flock, contemporary historians are far more interested in understanding why certain types of recusant behaviors

¹⁹ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillon: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: George Brazillier, 1992).

²⁰ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 6 and 57-58.

persisted, and what that can tell us about the folk culture of medieval European communities.²¹

Speaking into the space between the reconsideration of nature as a dynamic system and the reassessment of popular religious and social practice, Richard Hoffmann's *Environmental History of Medieval Europe* helps to clarify these two ideas in historical context. In his short introduction, Hoffmann writes that his book aims squarely at two audiences, both the medieval historian looking to gain a foothold in the scientific literature of his period, and the paleo-scientist looking into the cultural context for the same.

Hoffmann characterizes his approach as an interaction model and writes that a good environmental history will consider three points: the impact of the environment on human activities, human attitudes toward the natural world, and the impact of humans on the non-human. He notes that:

Many societies lacked cultural grounds for purposeful written descriptions of environmental issues, concepts, or conditions, so like many economic, social, and other historical themes, these must be learned by reading 'against the grain' to see what the creator had simply assumed, had refused to acknowledge, or attempted to conceal.²²

A series of Venn diagrams in his introduction illustrate the relationship between Nature and Culture, which the author argues

²¹ For an example of persistent superstition tied explicitly to the integration of pagan folklore and Christian, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). This text is of particular note to those interested in the role of animals in medieval Christianity and folk traditions, given that the eponymous greyhound was named a saint and venerated for nearly five centuries.

²² Richard Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 15.

ought not be considered as non-overlapping magisteria. Instead, he asks his readers to consider how Culture responds to, is shaped by, and attempts to shape the Natural environment in which it grows.

Hoffmann's response to White's critique is direct, and focuses primarily on aspects of medieval Christian identity. Essentially, rather un-controversially, Hoffmann argues that the notion of a unified Western, Christian identity with a singular reading of Genesis 1:28 simply did not exist. Furthermore, the sharp distinction drawn between solidly Christian and pre-Christian identities does not bear out in the historical evidence. Drawing examples from Irish folk literature about the natural world, Hoffmann cites a rich tradition of work that is comfortably pagan *and* Christian in character.²³ He goes on to argue that such examples indicate that communities tended not characterize their own lived experiences as being distinctly separate from the natural world, and that their sense of identity and cosmology were not contingent upon Christianity or pagan animism.

To that effect, Karen Louise Jolly dives more deeply into the Anglo-Saxon context by working with what she calls "Elf Charms." These efficacious prayers and rituals from the tenth and eleventh century constitute a lived experience of religion, intimately tied to the natural world. One part magic, one part prayer, the most fascinating of Jolly's examples illustrates the steps necessary to bless a field prior to cultivation in order to ensure a good growing season. References to *pater noster*, *sancta Maria*, and *ille domine* are interspersed with exhortations to the earth, wind, sky, and to *Erve*, the earth's mother. Jolly's obvious delight and perplexity at these seemingly contradictory notions of religion show through in her writing. For instance, she writes:

²³ Hoffman 2015, 93.

Germanic folklore and Christian belief bled into each other as much or more than they sought to destroy each other. Instead of focusing, as so many histories do, on the traditional dualistic view of oppositions in conversion (magic versus religion, for example)... [we ought to examine] the middle ground, the gray area of encounter between Germanic cultures and the incoming Christian traditions.²⁴

Works like Jolly's grow directly out of a post-White landscape in medieval studies. Informed by the controversy surrounding the initial publication of "Historical Roots," contemporary medievalists are eager to point out nuance and to turn the commonly accepted notion of a monolithic medieval Christian world on its head. Jolly's work is indicative of the present state of the discipline: much as it was when White wrote, it is a discipline engaged in the investigation of the emic nuances that forged European identity. White's etic approach, to look for objective causes to concrete modern problems, was a necessary step in the development of this discourse.

Hoffmann's work ends with a call to the further integration of ecology into the practice of medieval history, citing the benefits of a paleo-scientific understanding to creating a more nuanced and dynamic picture of medieval Europe. This work of integration will help us develop a better picture of the past, and could potentially have tangible benefits for our future. What if, inspired by Jolly's work, a team of soil scientists took it upon themselves to recreate the "spell" for good soil? What could we learn about what's happening in the soil on a microbial level, and how could that relate back to what the Anglo-Saxons thought was happening in their soil? The

²⁴ Karen Louise Jolly, "Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context," *Contesting Christendom*, James Halverson, ed. (Rowan & Littlefield: New York, 2008), 61.

possibilities for such collaboration are ripe. Inasmuch as Lynn White can be considered the founder of a modern Theology of Ecology, so too should he be considered a founder of the modern approach to environmental history.²⁵ His analysis, a breath of fresh air, cleared the way for the work of others with a keen curiosity about the meaning of historical beliefs and the lived experiences of those who came before us.

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TESTING THE SPIRITS

*Charles Péguy's Resistance to Demystification in Notre Jeunesse*¹

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When François Mauriac learned that Julian Green was translating Charles Péguy's long-form poem *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc* into English, Mauriac retorted, "What a pity someone doesn't translate him into French!"² Understanding the thought of this French essayist, poet, and literary critic is a difficult task for Francophones and Anglophones alike, but significant Catholic voices still view him as representative of a way forward with regard to taking seriously the secularity of the world and rebelling against it. Hans Urs von Balthasar finishes his survey of theological styles in *The Glory of the Lord* with Péguy and views him as a "unifier of all things that cannot be unified."³ In politics, he was "a man of the extreme Left and the extreme Right," and in theology, he was both "ecclesiastically minded and anticlerical."⁴ For von Balthasar, Péguy represents a way forward between many a Scylla and Charybdis in theological aesthetics. For philosopher-theologian Charles Taylor, Péguy is a "modern who has found his own path," a paragon for

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Humanities Center Graduate Conference hosted by Johns Hopkins University on March 3-4, 2017.

² Charles Péguy, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, trans. Julian Green (New York: Pantheon, 1950), 5.

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 404.

⁴ von Balthasar 1986, 404.

substantive faith in a secular age.⁵ By committing himself both to the new movement of liberty in the Third French Republic and the tradition of charity in the Catholic Church, Péguy presented a type of “faithfulness to the tradition which precisely excluded just going back . . . because [just going back] replaced a creative continuation of the past with a mechanical reproduction of it.”⁶ For both von Balthasar and Taylor, Péguy embodies an exemplary attempt to live well in the old and the new: a life worth learning from and studying by any modern American Christian confused by the difficulty of practicing faith in a Christ-haunted nation. The American Christian struggles to maintain the old faith of Christianity in a way that dutifully engages the complexities of a brave new world, from a Trump presidency to *Obergefell v. Hodges*. At present, many American Christians feel that the United States and the Church have lost their founding identity or spirit, or that the two are even opposed to one another. In such a context, it is worth examining Péguy’s thought to see what constructive suggestions he might have for such a situation.

Charles Péguy rests buried in the annals of French literature, but this essay attempts to resurrect his life and thought through an analysis of his 1910 essay titled *Notre jeunesse* or “Our Youth.” His essay acts as a textual resistance against the immanent frame of modernity, defined as the conditions of belief which allow the “normative arrangement of things” to be discovered without any reference to the transcendent, and shows how to make spirits live in spite of these conditions of belief in a secular age.⁷ Working at the literary cusp of the beginning of the twentieth century, Péguy prescribes a way to combat the disenchantment, or demystification (to use Péguy’s term), of the world. With the understanding that secular life threatens the life of the spirit, Péguy wrote *Notre jeunesse*

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap, 2007), 745.

⁶ Taylor 2007, 747.

⁷ Taylor 2007, 543.

in 1910 to preserve the dying spirits of French Catholicism and republicanism. A spirit dies, for Péguy, when an institution obscures its own transcendent beginnings in an act of demystification. Péguy presents three ways to resist this death of spirits in the secular age. First, Péguy shows the importance of a text in preserving a spirit against reductive, materialist explanations. Second, Péguy presses the importance of the youth inheriting the spiritual nature of a movement in order for it to survive. Finally, Péguy points to the possibility of a careful policy which does not kill the spirit from which it emerged. In this paper, I will first show how Péguy viewed his modern age, describing his historical situation and vocabulary, and then elaborate his three prescriptions in *Notre jeunesse* before finally offering a brief appraisal of his thoughts on the survival of spirits in the modern age.

What He Saw: Péguy's Historical Situation and Vocabulary

Péguy believed that he lived in the beginnings of a modern age, or an age with an acute sense of apathy toward tradition and the transcendent. Péguy notes his view of the moment in these words:

We are extremely badly placed. . . . We are the rearguard, in very poor touch with the main body, the generations of the past . . . We are the last. Almost the ones after the last. Immediately after us begins the world we call, which we have called, which we shall not cease calling, the modern world.⁸

He recognizes the turn of the imagination toward a type of forward-looking forgetfulness of tradition. Specifically as a literary critic, Péguy diagnoses his situation as a moment of extreme change in literature and resists the impending approach to the text as a

⁸ Charles Péguy, “*Notre jeunesse*,” in *Temporal and Eternal*, trans. Alexander Dru (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 7.

historical document in favor his “belief in the redemptive and trans-temporal value of literature.”⁹ Péguy adamantly rejects literary historicism, and the modern frame in which it coheres, in favor of the more mystical approach explored throughout the paper. “More than any other modern writer,” as Glenn Roe argues, “Péguy believed sincerely that he was part of a distinct generation, of a discrete period in history that straddled the old and the new, and that would inevitably lead to the unimpeachable advent of modernity.”¹⁰

Péguy identifies that he lives at the cusp of modernity and further describes the problem as a dual death of the state and the Church. Specifically, the French republican spirit and the French Catholic spirit are both dying, and Péguy sees the intertwined fatality wrapped up in the event of modernity. He argues, “The derepublicanization of France is essentially the same movement as the de-Christianization of France. Both together are one and the same movement, a profound demystification.”¹¹ By diagnosing his moment as one characterized by demystification, Péguy describes the death of the state and the Church as a spiritual death. Here, Péguy does not present a theocracy which is dying because of the secular state's assault on the Church,¹² but identifies how his age is governed by demystification, “one single incredulity” which “strikes at the idols and God” –both state and Church are threatened by the

⁹ Glenn Roe, *The Passion of Charles Péguy: Literature, Modernity, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.

¹⁰ Roe 2014, vii.

¹¹ Péguy 2001, 7-8. The original editorial emphasis has been removed.

¹² Péguy turns the criticism primarily to the Church, not the state. Alexander Dru argues that Péguy “reverses the usual procedure of the apologists who blame the de-Christianization of Europe on the evil of the times; he puts the whole blame on the Catholics, and in particular on the clergy, who allowed the idea of tradition to harden so that what should have been the source of new forms of life because an obstacle to change.” See Alexander Dru, *Péguy* (London: Harvill, 1956), 87.

“sterility” of unbelief.¹³ Péguy diagnoses his modern situation as a moment of spiritual death, and demystification.

Péguy's aphorism, commonly taken from *Notre jeunesse*, further explains what he means by demystification. The aphorism, *Toute commence en mystique et finit en politique* or “Everything begins in *mystique* and ends in *politique*,” identifies how a *mystique* (or spirit) dies as *politique* (or policy).¹⁴ Thus, Péguy's definition of demystification is a *politique* overcoming and destroying a *mystique*. But what are the *mystique* and *politique*? His use of *mystique* and *politique* is difficult to untangle, but he clearly delineates the *mystique* in contradistinction from the *politique*. Péguy describes a *mystique* as the initial, animating spirit which draws people into a vision for the world. The *mystique* is never planned, has a transcendent or spiritual character, and often shifts society and causes change. The *politique* comes after the *mystique* and is a more established development of the *mystique* as politicians and intellectuals take the spirit into the public sphere. For example, the French republican *mystique* was a vision of liberty which produced the French revolution, struggled against the Napoleonic Empire and monarchic restoration, and birthed the Third French Republic, while the French republican *politique* was the formalization of that spirit of liberty into a stable republican government with a constitution and parliament. During this transition from *mystique* to *politique*, the institutional policy threatens the fervent spirit because of the modern tendency to disregard origins and prioritize survival over faithfulness. Péguy writes *Notre jeunesse* to this transition from the *mystique* to the *politique* and addresses three ways to keep a spirit alive in resistance to the demystifying force of the institution.

¹³ Péguy 2001, 8.

¹⁴ Péguy 2001, 17.

What He Said: Péguy's Three Prescriptions for Dying Spirits

Péguy believes the first assault of the *politique* on the *mystique* happens in a particular way of telling history. This way of telling history occurs within a framework of historicism, defined as a way of viewing history through completely explainable material causality. The *politique*, emerging after the *mystique*, tells its story of origin through a historicist lens and removes the spiritual nature of the *mystique*. To combat this false narration, Péguy's first prescription for dying spirits is proper textualization, telling the story of a movement in a way that preserves its mystery. He points to his own essay and letters from a republican family as texts which preserve the mystery of the republican spirit.

In his own essay, *Notre jeunesse*, Péguy textualizes the republican *mystique* of the Dreyfus Affair to defend it from an intellectualizing *politique*. In brief review, Alfred Dreyfus was a Jewish Captain in the French Army falsely convicted of treason in 1894 and only fully exonerated in 1906, despite significant evidence proving his innocence emerging in 1896. This volatile affair drew sharp lines within the Republic between those arguing for Dreyfus's innocence, the primarily pro-Republic Dreyfusards, and those arguing for his guilt, the primarily pro-army and Catholic anti-Dreyfusards. Péguy, both republican and Catholic, was one of the earliest and most ardent Dreyfusards.

Four years after the close of the Dreyfus Affair, one of Péguy's colleagues named Daniel Halévy published a work telling the story of the Dreyfus Affair in a way that angered Péguy, because it removed the spiritual nature of the republican movement. Halévy was a fellow Dreyfusard and journalist, but Péguy took serious issue with his portrayal of the Affair, calling it an overly intellectual depiction of what was a *mystique*-driven event. In *Notre jeunesse*, Péguy argues that the institutional *politique* assaults the *mystique* by explaining it, or by locating the cause and effect of history, rather than

remembering the powerful mystery of a movement. Charles Taylor distinguishes between Péguy's conception of history and memory. Taylor explains, "History consists essentially in running alongside the event. Being inside the event, memory consists essentially above all not in going outside of it, but in remaining there and reliving it from within."¹⁵ History explains while memory embodies. So Péguy textualizes the *mystique* to remember and preserve its mystery. This, for Péguy, revealed the *mystique* of republicanism as scholars and writers served the spirit of justice in the face of the threat of an army and state that staunchly defended their conviction of Dreyfus. They placed their careers on the line for their belief during the Dreyfus affair, but after the situation settled, many benefited from their support of Dreyfus. For example, the then-unknown Émile Durkheim received a professorial chair at the Sorbonne while other anti-Dreyfusards lost their jobs in the academy. Péguy reacted in surprise to "this settling of political scores in the academic community" as professors like Durkheim and Gustave Lanson received benefits for their work in the Dreyfus Affair.¹⁶ Halévy and others told the history of the Dreyfus Affair from this standpoint of privilege, ignoring the career-threatening acts which journalists committed for the freedom of one man. Thus, for Péguy, one of the primary ways to keep a *mystique* alive is to tell its mystery in textual form. Péguy himself takes up this task by his polemic refutation of Halévy in *Notre jeunesse*.

Péguy not only points to his own essay as a text to preserve the republican *mystique*, but also the letters of a founding family of the Republic. Péguy opens the essay by describing a friend named Paul Milliet who approaches him with his family's letters, which included correspondences with Victor Hugo and others who helped found the Third French Republic in 1870. While his friend thinks that the

¹⁵ Taylor 2007, 746.

¹⁶ Roe 2014, 13.

value of the letters comes from the famous signatures, Péguy argues that the value comes from the letters ability to reveal “the very tissue” of the Republic.¹⁷ Péguy emphasizes that the letters do not come from some famous figure, but instead from the Milliet family. Therefore, the letters show the Republic in the “ordinary texture of its daily life.”¹⁸ Against the requests of Paul Milliet to remove the details of his family's day-to-day life, Péguy painstakingly preserves the personal elements of the letters in order to reveal the true republican *mystique* in the lives of its heroes.¹⁹ These unedited letters, in addition to Péguy's own essay, preserve the republican *mystique* for Péguy in text.

But Péguy does not just care that the story of a *mystique* is properly told, he also cares who hears the story. Péguy's second prescription for the preservations of spirit is the youth. The meaning of the title *Notre jeunesse* or “Our Youth” refers both to the memories of our youth, speaking in the first person, and to our youth, meaning the next generation. Focusing on this second meaning, Péguy preserves the spirit by passing their mystery to the children of the Republic. In the essay, Péguy addresses the next generation of republicans through the young Jean Variot. Péguy urges him to read the Milliets's letters saying, “In the Milliet notebooks, you will find what that republican *mystique* was.”²⁰ To retain the republican *mystique*, the young republican should read what the now-weary republicans wrote, by that which they lived and died. For Péguy, the hope for the *mystique* lies in the careful transmission of the spirit to the youth. By Jean Variot diligently digesting the Milliet letters and hearing the voice of Péguy, he will resist the pressure of the republican *politique* and preserve the republican *mystique*.

¹⁷ Péguy 2001, 4.

¹⁸ Péguy 2001, 4.

¹⁹ Péguy 2001, 80-81.

²⁰ Péguy 2001, 80.

Péguy also urges the youth toward receiving the Republic as an object of affection rather than an axiom to memorize or prove. He tells Variot not to lose hope in the Republic, “It was not always a pack of politicians, behind it there is a *mystique* . . . behind it lies a glorious past.”²¹ If the youth do not inherit the Republic as a *mystique* pursuing freedom, then the Republic will die. Péguy notes the mortal consequences of inheriting the Republic as an “intellectual plot,” planned by intellectuals and carried out by intellectuals.²² Péguy instead makes it his goal to teach the youth how to love the Republic, and points to the heroes of the Republic as the example of love:

The only strength of a republic is that the republic should be, more or less, loved. . . . That so many men should have lived and suffered so much for the Republic, should have believed so strongly in it, that so many should have died for it and should often have borne so many and such great trials for it, that is what counts, that is what interests me.²³

Péguy urges the youth to properly inherit the Republic in a spirit of love, a love that calls them to die for the Republic.

Péguy's hope for preserving the dying republican *mystique* lies first in text and second in the youth, but in his third prescription, he turns to policy, the *politique*. He recognizes the gravitational pull of the *mystique* into the consuming *politique*, as successful movements often birth institutions, but he hints at how the *politique* itself may help preserve the *mystique* from which it received its life. Returning to the aphorism *Toute commence en mystique and finit en politique*, Péguy suggests that everything begins in a spirit and ends in a policy, but his words are more sober admission than pessimistic dismissal. Hope lies in the

²¹ Péguy 2001, 9.

²² Péguy 2001, 68.

²³ Péguy 2001, 81.

politique that honors its mother, the *mystique* which gives it life. Péguy is not pessimistic toward all types of *politique*; instead, he mourns over the prodigal *politiques* which disrespect their parental *mystiques*. Not all *politiques* are equal. Some maintain faithfulness to the *mystique*; some do not. The *politique* has a responsibility to preserve the *mystique* which brought it into existence, but the *politique* often forgets its *mystique* by prioritizing its survival over its origin. By becoming attached to its own institutional life instead of the selfless spirit which brought it into existence, *politiques* often devour their own *mystiques*.

The Dreyfus Affair represents an example of a devouring of the Catholic *mystique*. The Catholic *politique* completely failed to preserve its *mystique*. For Péguy, the primarily Catholic anti-Dreyfusards were absolutely wrong in their blatant anti-Semitism; this failure showed how they had lost the Christian *mystique* of charity because of their *politique*. The Catholic *politique* had become so attached to its own survival and wealth that it opposed the young Republic as a threat to its own institutional influence. As a Catholic himself in 1910 while penning *Notre jeunesse*, Péguy argues that the Catholic Church has “suffered a modernization, [and] has become . . . almost solely the religion of the rich, and is no longer . . . the communion of the faithful.”²⁴ Péguy sees the embarrassing behavior of the French Catholic Church in the Dreyfus affair as the self-serving *politique* devouring the selfless *mystique*. Spiritually bankrupt but monetarily successful, the Church must revive its *mystique* by undergoing a “temporal revolution for eternal salvation” and losing its attachment to wealth to regain its charity.²⁵ The resurrection of the Catholic *mystique* does not occur through cerebral correction, as that would just perpetuate the problem of its *politique* for Péguy; instead, the

²⁴ Péguy 2001, 55.

²⁵ Péguy 2001, 59.

resurrection occurs by giving up money and power. “The temporal price must be paid,” he says.²⁶

Péguy not only criticizes his fellow Catholics but also his fellow Dreyfusards. After the Dreyfus Affair, he noticed the republican *politique* devouring its *mystique* as people attained professorial chairs and secure occupations from their work in the Dreyfus Affair. Péguy describes the difference in this memory: “The republican *mystique* was when one died for the Republic; the political republic, the republican *politique*, is, as at present, that one should live off it.”²⁷ The *mystique* is a dream to die for; the *politique* is a system to improve and sustain. Péguy says that the willingness to die for a *mystique* breathes life into it, while the desire to make a *politique* survive at all costs causes it to die. To return to its own *mystique*, the Republic must care less for its own preservation and fight for what animated its origin, “a primitive, organic, living liberty.”²⁸ The republican *politique* has a responsibility to preserve its own *mystique* by prioritizing its spirit over its own institutional survival. Thus, we have Péguy's three prescriptions for preserving spirits in a modern world: text, youth, and careful policy.

What He Did: Péguy's Prescriptions Appraised

Now, I shall discuss a weakness, before identifying the strength and possible applications of Péguy's prescriptions. First, the critique: everything begins in *mystique* and ends in *politique*, but perhaps not all *mystiques* are good. Surely the *mystique* of antisemitism which helped create the Third Reich was not good, but when Péguy speaks of a *mystique*, he seems to speak of a universal good. The republican *mystique* and the Christian *mystique* offer no opposition to one another, and both coalesce under a banner of human flourishing.

²⁶ Péguy 2001, 60.

²⁷ Péguy 2001, 80.

²⁸ Péguy 2001, 49.

Péguy presses for the preservation of all *mystiques*, but perhaps not all *mystiques* are worth preserving. Péguy's framework lacks the ability to criticize a *mystique*; instead the *mystique* is a universal good, unquestioned and unexamined.

In *Notre jeunesse*, Péguy vehemently rejects the tension between the Church and the Republic in the Dreyfusard Affair, maintaining that the *mystiques* of the Church and the Republic survive together in symbiosis while the *politiques* turn the people of France against one another. Péguy claims, “Our Christian *mystique* was merged so perfectly, so exactly with our patriotic *mystique*” in the Dreyfus Affair. The demand for Dreyfus's liberty and fair trial was the very same as the Christian pursuit of charity and truth. Péguy views the de-Christianization of France and the crumbling of the ideals of the Republic as one and the same happening. Both *mystiques*, in Péguy's mind, live and die together, and both are completely good.

As just stated, Péguy believes that the *mystiques* of the Church and the Republic survive together in symbiosis while the violent *politiques* turn the people of France against one another – but a *mystique* can be just as violent as a *politique*. We see this in the racial element of Péguy's praise of the republican *mystique*. Péguy's great faith in the Republic of France has a tarnished mark in his language about a “great race” throughout the essay.²⁹ Péguy praises the French race for its courage, wit, and passion – all of which engendered the republican *mystique*.³⁰ However, were not the French also colonizers at the same time that they were republicans? Was it not their belief in the exceptional virtue of the Republic that led to their colonial enterprises meant to ‘civilize the savage’? Is there a particular racism embedded in the French *mystique*? If so, that does not mean that the French Republic needs to be tossed out, but that the French *mystique* needs to be criticized and corrected.

²⁹ Péguy 2001, 41 and 52.

³⁰ Péguy 2001, 41.

To criticize and correct a *mystique* requires a framework to measure the good and bad of a spirit. To carry out this process requires a primary *mystique* by which we analyze other *mystiques*. Building on Péguy's imagination of the *mystique*, perhaps all humans live within an animating *mystique* by which they measure other influences which call for their affection and sacrifice. Thus when *mystiques* clash, their disagreement with one another reveals a need for a primary *mystique*, namely a Christian *mystique* and not a republican one. If this point is taken, one has to arbitrate between *mystiques* and choose by which approach to live and to be liturgically exposed.

Thus, while Péguy's identification of the relationship between *mystique* and *politique* holds significant explanatory value for us concerning the demystification caused by modern institutions, there must be room to correct a *mystique* because violence may come from a *mystique* just as much as from a *politique*.

With this critique in mind, I want to offer a brief appraisal of the strength of Péguy's prescriptions and some reflections on how Péguy speaks to imminent academic, political, and ecclesial concerns. Though there is a need to carefully analyze and criticize a *mystique*, Péguy's larger project of preserving the spirits themselves in the age of modernity still stands strong and provides a helpful lexicon with which to deal with faith in a secular age. If the disenchanting frame of modernity pressures a *mystique* with three methods – historicism, individualism, and a distrust of institutions – then Péguy's prescriptions for the spirits resist all three fronts of demystification.

First, historicism, broadly defined, explains the history of a movement in causal terms and threatens a *mystique* by explaining it. Historicism describes a movement in the language of analysis and policy instead of mysticism. Péguy responds to this pressure of the modern age by advocating for a particular way of retelling the past via memory, preserving the passion and mystery of a *mystique* in the

lives of those willing to die for it. One preserves a spirit by retelling its transcendent beginnings.

This first prescription deserves careful emphasis in an academic paper written for scholarly readers. Academics produce analytic texts about significant movements or *mystiques* in human history. In order to resist the forces of modernity, scholars must avoid “the sin of explaining everything.”³¹ Péguy berates professors who crush the *mystique* by feigning total comprehension of it.³² The death of a *mystique* occurs when it must be proved and demonstrated, not remembered and embodied.³³ A robustly spiritual scholar resisting the tropes of modernity must preserve the mystery within the works she reads, the histories she analyzes, and the art she interprets. People have lived and died for these *mystiques*, prioritizing some marvelous cause over their own lives, and how scholars write within their disciplines should preserve and respect that inexplicable passion.

The ecclesial payout of this emphasis on text as a preservation of the “very tissue” of a Christian *mystique* is profound for the Church.³⁴ If a young Christian desires to maintain the *mystique* of Christianity, she must immerse herself in the scriptural canon of the Christian saints, a strangely knit family of apostles, prophets, priests, and kings. Christians must offer the canon attentive affection, giving ear to its words, narratives, and characters. Without it, Christians cannot embody the Christian *mystique* or maintain a Christian *politique*. To remain aloof from offering affection to the well-worn pages is foolish and leads to an unaware submission to the other transcripts that seek to textualize one's life. Only with a firm imagination,

³¹ Péguy 2001, 82.

³² Péguy 2001, 5.

³³ Péguy 2001, 11.

³⁴ Péguy 2001, 4.

furnished with the stories and people of Scripture, will Christians be able to safeguard truly Christian *mystique* in Christian *politique*.

Second, Péguy's emphasis upon transmitting the story to the next generation resists the modern notion of individualism, namely, that belief is individual. Preserving a spirit is a communal task in which one generation passes belief onto the next generation. Péguy directly addresses the youth of the Republic in his essay, urging them to inherit the beauty of the *mystique* rather than the hair-splitting *politique*. One preserves a spirit by passing its memory to the next generation.

This prescription translates easily into the catechetical task of the Church. Under this valence of Péguy's prescription, catechesis must not occur strictly as an intellectual task. Understanding Christian tradition does not simply consist of asking this question and knowing this answer. Instead, catechesis must be mystical, introducing the confirmand to the life of the Church through the saints who were willing to die for the life of the Church. Catechesis must consist of teaching the next generation in the Church how to love and die for the Church's spirit of charity.

Finally, Péguy walks a fine line with the modern distrust of institutions. Although he is wary of formal policy threatening the spirit, Péguy hopes for institutions that will respect their mystical origins. Instead of devouring its *mystique*, a healthy *politique* preserves its spirit. Within its formalities, a healthy *politique* refuses to prioritize its own survival over pursuit of the truth which gave it birth. The willingness of a *politique* to die preserves its *mystique*. And if a *politique* has already devoured its *mystique*, Péguy hopes for its redemption and return to its origin by giving up the necessity of its own life. Thus, Péguy, though modern in his reticence toward institutions, still has a category for good institutions and the repentance of wayward institutions. One preserves a spirit by careful policy.

While the first two prescriptions have rather easy applications, Péguy's prescription of careful policy preserving the *mystique* is

difficult to apply, while still remaining eminently important. I will provide a few directives from Péguy's thought for those American Christians who wonder if the Church in America has lost its faith, and America its founding principles. First to avoid a misinterpretation, Péguy's thought offers no support for dismissing the tradition of the Church. While Péguy criticizes the institution which corrupts the *mystique*, he does not offer any disdain for tradition itself. Péguy's wary attitude toward institutions does not lead him to 'love Jesus and hate religion' or to be 'spiritual but not religious,' which are both common tropes in American spirituality. Péguy critiques the Catholic Church heavily for losing its *mystique* during the Dreyfus Affair, but this frustration was not a rejection of ecclesiastical tradition. Péguy viewed the Church with frustration for good reason; Christianity had become a religion of the rich, of the bourgeois. According to Péguy, the Catholic Church had its mind on money in the Dreyfus Affair, revealing its moral bankruptcy:

It is spiritual poverty and misery, and temporal riches, which have done everything, which have done the harm. That modernism of the heart, the modernism of charity itself, has caused the failure and collapse in the Church, in Christianity, in Christendom itself, which has brought about the degradation of the *mystique* into a *politique*.³⁵

A foundational suspicion of the institution of the Church, and institutions in general, however merited, is not Péguy's project. Péguy's critique of the Church's vacuous morality is structurally motivated by his trust of its tradition. To interpret the division Péguy presents between *mystique* and *politique* as an affirmation of amoebic versions of American spirituality and a condemnation of religion is

³⁵ Péguy 2001, 58.

disorienting, and it misinterprets Péguy's criticism of the Church as suspicion toward its existence rather than hope for its renewal.

After the reader avoids this misinterpretation, Péguy's thought on careful policy and institutions offers two helpful suggestions for American Christians who are disturbed by the state of America and American Christianity. The first suggestion is for the Church in America. Péguy's observation that institutions often lose their *mystiques* by prioritizing their wealth and their own survival should make the Church in the United States worry and examine the quality of its spiritual life. The Church in America is rich, and according to Péguy, temporal wealth often causes anemic spirituality. The buildings, paychecks, and the 501(c)(3) tax benefits enjoyed by religious organizations may eviscerate any substantive confession. Returning to Péguy's prescription for the French Catholic Church in 1910, the modern American Church ought to consider undergoing a "temporal revolution for eternal salvation," resurrecting its spirit of love by losing its wealth.³⁶

The second suggestion is to apply Péguy's thought to the government of the United States; preserving the American *mystique* requires its *politique* to become less attached to its own life and more to its founding ideals. The 2016 national election highlighted a silent critical mass which prioritized the 'survival' of the United States over the mantra of being a land of opportunity for all. The rhetoric of institutional preservation against the forces of change prevailed and placed Donald Trump, and his promises of a wall, in the presidency.

However, applying the above critique concerning the possibility of violent *mystiques*, Péguy's prescription on careful policy preserving the *mystique* takes a different direction. If one allows the criticism of a *mystique*, one might criticize the American *mystique* for being originally violent. Perhaps, the charge to build a wall and the

³⁶ Péguy 2001, 59.

campaign to “Make America Great Again” actually hold true to the violent American *mystique*. Maybe burdening the poor for the leisure of the rich is actually truly American. For the legacy of America is not one of pure freedom for all but freedom for white, property-owning males who thieved land and labor from black and brown bodies. Thus, perhaps the *politique* of the United States under the suspicious leadership of President Donald Trump has indeed preserved the *mystique* of America. And perhaps letting the *mystique* of America die with its dreams of manifest destiny and the city on a hill is the best way forward, either by letting the *politique* devour the *mystique* or by participating in the advent of a new *mystique* to disrupt an ever-illegitimate *politique*. Perhaps the best way to resist this *mystique* of American whiteness is to let its *politique* die. And perhaps the Church has a responsibility to allow and even facilitate the death of the American *mystique* by maintaining its *mystique* of charity toward the poor in all places.

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