

Decolonizing the Imagination: A Paradigmatic Approach to Religious Pedagogy

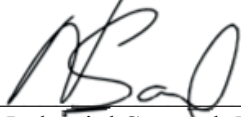
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February 19, 2020

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Doctor of Philosophy in Practical
Theology

St. Thomas University
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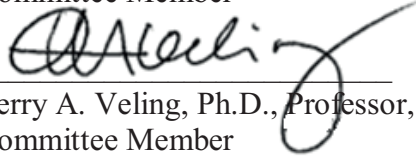
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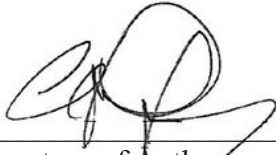
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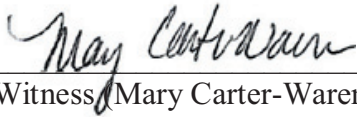
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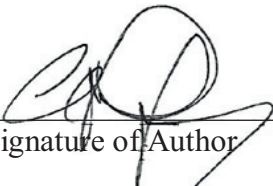
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Abstract

This dissertation articulates a religious pedagogy that is guided by a five step paradigmatic approach consisting of contemplation, engagement, from-giving, emergence, and release. Borrowed from Maria Harris, this method operates under the premise that both teaching and learning is an activity of the imagination. But the imagination, understood as a function of human consciousness, can become coerced and sequestered by dominant and oppressive forces. The imagination is given epistemic privilege in this work, since it is considered to be a precondition for genuine freedom due to its ability to move us beyond the empirical world of the here and now and towards new possibilities for existence. Decolonizing the imagination reclaims the Christian symbols and metaphors that have become domesticated and imperialized in order to reinvigorate them to exert their emancipatory force and the power to speak truth about and for the world.

Keywords: American dream, decolonization, imagination, practical theology, religious pedagogy, theological education

Acknowledgements

There are several people that have earned my deepest gratitude for both their encouragement and patience throughout the duration of my writing. More specifically, I would like express my appreciation to the three members of my dissertation committee. To Dr. Nathaniel Samuel, my advisor and chair, whose steadfast support and encouragement steered me throughout this entire process. Our meetings and conversations were vital in motivating me to move forward with my work. To Dr. Mary Carter-Waren, who was instrumental in bringing me back into the world of academe, always believing in me and inspiring me to teach. For that and our friendship, I am eternally grateful. To Dr. Terry Veling, whose life and work I believe embodies the very subject matter of practical theology, thanks for teaching a once disillusioned man that theology is not relegated to the realm of the abstract or the speculative, but to the very fabric of human living.

I would also like to thank and acknowledge the members of my Ph.D. cohort for the fun-times we spent together, for the support we offered each other in the face of deadlines and complete exhaustion, and for the stimulating conversations in the parking lot – what came to be known as “parking lot theology.” To Wilson Chuchu, Joy Candelario, Edgardo Farias, and Stephen Saawuan, we will always be in it together! To the faculty and staff of the School of Theology and Ministry, those present and those who have moved on, thanks for the collegial rapport and for providing the learning space that made it conducive for dialogue and creative engagement. I wish to express my earnest gratitude to Dr. Ondina Cortez, Dr. Jennifer Kryszak, Dr. Tom Ryan and Cynthia Rose. To Drs. Mercedes and Joseph Iaonnone, who because of their relentless efforts and hard

work, St. Thomas University was able to offer one of the most extensive curricula in the areas of Theology and Ministry. Though unfortunately this year will see its closure, it will nonetheless live on in the many graduates that work and minister in different capacities throughout the world. Thank you. Lastly, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Dr. Bryan Froehle for his unyielding service, his unbreakable resolve, and tireless devotion to the Ph.D. community. Thank you for always being so gracious with your time, for your constant encouragement and for always supporting our scholarly endeavors.

Nobody has been more important for me in the completion of this work than family members and friends. While there are too many to name here, I would like to acknowledge a few people that journeyed with me through the peaks and valleys of dissertation writing. I would like to extend my deepest love and appreciation to Dr. Francisco Castillo, Mr. Benjamin Seiglie, Dr. Ian Robertson, and Father Andres Coucelo for their unwavering encouragement and support. To my students at St. Thomas Aquinas High School, thanks for always taking an interest in my progress and for your constant words of encouragement – love you all! A word of thanks to my big Cuban family that put up with me being distracted and absent from many events. I am forever grateful for your patience and understanding. I hope to have time now to reconnect with each of you. To my sisters and brothers Lydia, Ana, Aldo and Jorge Lopez, I love you all very much. To my nephews and nieces, Tito loves you. To my dearest cousins Marra and Jason, love you and we need to get together soon. To my mother in law, Elsa Fernandez, love you very much and thanks for the coffee. To my father in law Jose Fernandez, let's get together and feel alright. To Juan Diaz, my dearest brother from another mother, thank you for your love and encouragement throughout this entire process. To my brother in

law, Alex Cruz - thanks for the cat pictures, the Tik Tok videos, and the weather reports from Cleveland. You sure know how to distract someone from writing – love you, dude.

To my first ever religious educator, my mother Miriam Lopez. There is no better way to understand divine love than through a mother's love. Thank you for your support, encouragement, and the constant love that has sustained me throughout my life. *Te quiero mucho mi vieja.*

Finally to the two people that breathe life into me every single day. To my beloved wife Isabel and my amazing son Logan. As far as I am concerned this work and everything that will result from it belongs to the both of you. No academic degree or honorific can ever come close to the greatest joy in my life, and that is the joy of being family with the two of you. Thank you Logan for the gift of fatherhood. I now realize that fatherhood is not something you seek out, but something that finds you. And God knows it found me. You are an extension of myself, which means that till the day I die I will experience the world through you. Your joys are my joys, your successes are my successes, your sorrows are my sorrows, and your happiness will always be my happiness. I love you, son. To Isa, my heart, my best friend, my lover, my life, my everything, thank you for always believing in me and being so understanding during moments of frustration and discouragement, for the times when I just wanted to throw my hands up and walk away from this. You always kept me grounded and focused. Your love sustains me and gives me life. I look forward to what lies ahead for us. "There's nothing you and I won't do. I'll stop the world and melt with you." I Love you sweetheart.

Dedication

In Memoriam of My Loving Father

Aldo Lopez (1922-1990)

In Loving Memory of Maria Harris

(1932 – 2005)

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INTRODUCTION

What exactly is the imagination? How does one define such an elusive and difficult concept? Maria Harris, Quoting William Lynch, defines the imagination as “all the faculties of human beings, all our resources, not only our seeing and hearing and touching, but also our history our education, our feelings, our wishes, our love, our hate, faith and unfaith, insofar as they all go into the making of our image of the world.”¹ From a phenomenological point of view, the imagination functions as a distinctive orientation of consciousness “which both intuits and constitutes essential meaning.”² In all forms of pedagogical models, irrespective of subject area, the imagination functions as an indispensable human ability that could either condition or alter the course of our existence. How we view ourselves, the world, and even God is dependent upon our imaginative constructions. Our imaginative impulses do not go untouched by the influences of our sociocultural context, which includes the physical and social setting in which we find ourselves. Our notions of what it means to be human and the way we perceive the world is inspired by historically constructed metaphors and discourses, particularly by those that dominate the collective imaginary.

Religion is rightly considered to be among these symbols and discourses, since religion is comprised of a series of metaphors and narratives that mitigate our concerns and questions about matters of ultimacy. Paul Tillich postulated that religion is constituted by creative acts of culture, where “every language, including that of the Bible,

¹ Maria Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination: An Essay In the Teaching of Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 9.

² Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 6.

is the result of innumerable acts of cultural creativity.”³ Culture as the assemblage of symbolic codes, beliefs, attitudes, and ideas become the reservoir from which the imagination both draws and deposits its data. Culture as both the sum total of the collective constructions and the source from which the imagination is configured. Maria Harris sees a direct correlation between political and scientific impulses and the imaginative drive for meaning. She views the imagination as “expressed in the call not only for more appropriate images and symbols, but, beyond that, for the kind of humane and humanizing social, economic, and political structures that can rise only from visionary work.”⁴ For better or worse, the imagination functions as a catalyst in the formation of consciousness, which results in the way we exist in the world.

The imagination, while a difficult concept to pin down and explain, is a remarkable human ability that creates, shapes, and constitutes an entire world. There is absolutely no doubt, then, that plays an invaluable role in how we understand ourselves, the world around us, and develop our notions about the divine. It is imperative that the imagination be allowed to exercise its visionary potential in an unfettered manner, and freed from the forces that monopolize the images and metaphors contained within our internal archives of interpretative resources, the data from which we draw in order to organize the world and ultimately claim our unique mode of existing. Our pedagogies, will be argued, operate in such a way that they unwittingly disseminate the values and tenets of the dominant ideology. Standard pedagogical models are designed within

³ Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: an Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 107.

⁴ Maria Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 6.

established power structures that have the sole intent of reproducing a culture that supports status quo arrangements.

This work argues that even religious education often falls prey to forms of domestication in order to conform to the dominant global force we know as neocolonialism – a form of global imperialism that exerts political, economic, and cultural influence. For the most part, since religion is relegated to the private sphere, excluded from having a real voice in matters of politics and public policy, then any attempt to cultivate the Christian imagination, of forming and educating in discipleship, must be subdued and toned down so as to accommodate to the dominant system. Many pedagogies in religious education favor a didactic approach, where learning doctrines and moral precepts eclipse the critical and interrogational nature of religious education. If the ways in which we educate theologically become a means by which to reproduce a culture of consumption and marketability, then the Gospel content is manipulated to support dominant ideology and practices.

Decolonizing the imagination means that when dominant cultural artifacts, ideology, or practices generate an all-consuming influence upon our visionary and creative impulses, then religious pedagogy must draw from the subversive sources of Christian symbols, metaphors, and narratives to deepened our critical reflection and contest the imperial forces that vie for complete control of our imaginative resources. Failure to engage in critical questioning of these power structures and to apply religious judgment upon them can lead to a ‘sacralizing’ or sanctioning of these structures in a way

that privileges those in power and perpetuate systems of oppression.⁵ While some would subscribe to the idea that religion no longer plays an essential role in contemporary life, it can be countered that in fact nontraditional forms of religion do. For example, Katherine Turpin writes that “participation in consumer activities take on the character of faith when it provides an ordering of one’s individual life based on loyalty to a center of value shared with others.”⁶ This work, however, argues that while Turpin is correct in her assessment of how consumer culture connects people to a larger system of shared understanding, what she neglects to point out is how neoliberal ideology has managed to inject itself into the already varied and established forms of religious traditions.

This work hopes to expose how religious symbols and narratives have often become hijacked by the totalizing force of market ideology, including the symbols and narratives of Christian faith. The objective here is to advance a pedagogical formula that would help reclaim the Christian transformative discourse by liberating the imagination from the ubiquitous presence of neocolonialism, the aggregate of market systems and imperial ideology that use Christianity as a way to maintain and perpetuate its own values system. This is done by reducing Christianity to a “feel good” and inspirational discourse that aligns favorably with a bourgeoisie existence.

The American Dream is a good example of how an all-encompassing image that dominates the collective consciousness in the United States and even across the world occupies a central place in our imagination, representing an idealized vision of life and a utopic-like existence. A paradigmatic approach in religious pedagogy draws from Maria

⁵ Katherine Turpin, “Consuming,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 72.

⁶ Turpin, “Consuming,” 72.

Harris' vision of education as the "work of creative, artistic imagination... where new forms and shapes come into being whenever we take the risk of becoming artists and creators ourselves."⁷ The question is not whether the symbols and metaphors in Christianity have in themselves become contaminated or reversed in order to support the prevailing ideological stream, since in themselves they "function as a surplus of signification,"⁸ which allows for them to reveal more than just a literal meaning; rather the issue lies in how we use these symbols and metaphors for the purpose of liberation. According to James and Evelyn Whitehead, two pioneers in the work of contemporary pastoral ministry, the Christian "religious heritage contributes to the conversation of contemporary faith not sound bites of salvation but privileged metaphors. These metaphors – God's lasting covenant, our stewardship in creation, the paradox of the cross – illumine our journey of faith. They hint of a plot hidden in the mayhem of human history; they offer trustworthy scripts to follow – scripts of generosity and self-sacrifice, of justice and charity – as we struggle to make sense of our personal and shared lives."⁹ The pertinent question is how we design pedagogical strategies where these privileged metaphors and symbols are freed from the restraints of hegemonic rule and permitted to reveal and effectuate their power to transform and generate life-giving potency.

The particular contribution that this work seeks to make is pedagogical. By adopting Maria Harris' five step teaching paradigm as the overall framework, the

⁷ Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 7.

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Forth Worth: TCU Press, 1976), 55.

⁹ James D Whitehead and Evelyn E Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 7.

imaginative rather than the prescriptive or procedural will define the entire pedagogical framework. Chapter one employs Harris' phase of contemplation, where what you see is what you get. This means that instead of assuming and predetermining what will happen in the learning experience, we must step back and be still and exercise an uncluttered appreciation for the existence before us.¹⁰ This chapter delineates the methodological considerations and proposes decoloniality as a social theoretical tool that will exercise a rigorous analysis throughout the entire project. Decoloniality is the perspective that honors different forms of existence – rejecting any form of imposition from a privileged vantage point. Decoloniality is akin to the contemplative phase insofar that it not only has a commitment to a critical analysis of dominant and oppressive forces that obliterates any form of existence that does not align with a singular version of the human, but it also simultaneously elevates all forms of existence to a place of dignity and respect.¹¹ Decoloniality is utilized in this work as part of an intradisciplinary effort to formulate a pedagogical model that is both transformative and emancipatory.

Chapter two analyses the foundational and all-encompassing metaphor of the American Dream. Harris' second phase of her teaching paradigm is known as engagement, the moment whereby after we stand back and gaze upon the existence before us, we jump right in and immerse ourselves in the subject matter. Harris describes it as moving from beyond gazing and apprising towards the more active work of interaction, interchange, and “messing” with the subject matter- the human subject that matters.¹² The entirety of subject matter, “seen as the world of meaning, order of nature,

¹⁰ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 26.

¹¹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 26.

¹² Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 30.

physical process, pattern of events,”¹³ which makes up the entire field of existence, requires full engagement within this phase of the paradigmatic method. The American Dream is a powerful image that occupies a central place within the imaginative spectrum. This chapter will argue how the American Dream represents a dominant metaphor that shapes our modes of thought, action, decisions and everyday life – the entire subject matter.

The third phase is referred to as form-giving. Chapter three will offer a pedagogical formula that is both critical and constructive. Religious education is describes not as a task of passive learning but rather as the opportunity to participate fully and creatively in our own learning process; providing a site for counter discourse and consciousness raising moments. This religious pedagogical model will both operate and be guided by a Christian hermeneutical analysis. While the social analytical sources employed in this pedagogical formula can be applied to most learning strategies, this model is set apart by its attention to Christian praxis. Form-giving is viewed here as the artistic and visionary task of giving shape to the entire educational experience.

Chapter four seeks to overturn an imperialistic God discourse suffused with an onto-theological program that reduces the incomprehensible to the order of beings. Our ways of engaging in God-talk have been traditionally nuanced with elements of patriarchy and white supremacy. Theology as an imaginative construction is marked by the longstanding effects of Hellenistic thought; thereby advancing a dispassionate and abstract form of God-talk with roots in substance metaphysical formulations. This phase

¹³ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 32.

of the paradigmatic process is identified by the moment of emergence, where in the words of Maria Harris: “something new is born.”¹⁴ What is being born is a new form of God-talk, one that frees up our imaginative impulses from the dominant ideologies and streams of thought that have internalized themselves within the Western theological tradition.

The fifth and final chapter describes the last phase in Harris’ teaching paradigm as the moment of release. Release is depicted by Harris as the cessation of movement, rest, and emptiness. Release as having a kenotic effect, namely, a self-limiting and radical abandonment of self as framed in terms of a deep responsibility for the other. The kenotic self participates self-giving action to re-create the world – released to love in creative action.

¹⁴ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 36.

**CHAPTER ONE. TOWARDS A DECOLONIALITY OF BEING HUMAN:
CONTEMPLATION AS SEEING WHAT IS ACTUALLY THERE**

“The coloniality of Being is thus fundamentally an ontological dynamic that aims to obliterate – in its literal sense of doing away completely so as to leave no trace.”¹⁵

~ Nelson Maldonado-Torres

Introduction

At the very outset of this treatise, it is important to underscore that the aim of decoloniality is two-fold. On the one end, it is directed at the systematic analysis of coloniality, the oppressive and dehumanizing side of modernity. On the other end, it looks towards the creation of a decolonial future.¹⁶ The concept of decoloniality has a degree of difference in that it is set apart from other arrangements or movements designed to destabilize and overturn the colonial hegemony. Though all forms of counter-hegemonic efforts play an equal role in the struggle for emancipation, decoloniality as such will serve as the driving force that will guide this particular study. Both the postcolonial and decolonial projects “drink from the same fountain, however “they are rooted in different genealogy of thought and different *existentia*,”¹⁷ entirely different and unique way of thinking and being in the world.

¹⁵ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007), 258.

¹⁶ Walter Mignolo, “Decolonizing Western Epistemology/Building Decolonial Epistemologies,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham Press, 2012), 20.

¹⁷ Different *existentia* is referenced by Mignolo as the “geo-historical and bio-graphical genealogies of thought,” the very origins of decolonial thinking. Walter Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), xxiii

Although most of the prominent names¹⁸ associated with the work of decoloniality have special interest in the Americas of the South (Central and South America and the Caribbean), the prospect of a decolonial option is not exclusive to any one geographical location or particular historicity, but rather available to the far reaches where the clutches of Western imperialism have taken hold. According to Walter Mignolo, “the words ‘decolonial and ‘decolonization’ have been used widely since the second half of the twentieth century, during the Cold War, to describe the process of liberation mainly in Asia and Africa.”¹⁹ Mignolo asserts that the words liberation and decolonization were used interchangeably among the many movements that struggled against the oppressive forces of colonialism throughout the world. The concept of decoloniality can be traced to the work of Anibal Quijano who described decolonizing as a means to disengage or ‘delink’ from the ubiquitous influence of Western epistemology – the process of breaking the shackles of colonial/imperial knowledge production. Quijano urges:

The critique of the European paradigm of rationality/modernity is indispensable – even more, urgent. But it is doubtful if the criticism consists of a simple negation

¹⁸ The more notable thinkers in the work of decoloniality include: Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Arturo Escobar, Maria Lugones, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Sylvia Wynter, Catherine Walsh, and Rolando Vazquez. Not intended to be an exhaustive list of names.

¹⁹ Anibal Quijano makes a clear distinction between the terms coloniality and colonialism, decoloniality and decolonization. Colonialism refers to the history of Western imperial/colonial expansion, while decolonization was the attempt to take back the state from imperial/colonial control. Coloniality, however, is regarded as the perpetuation of colonial influence within culture, society, and knowledge (consciousness). Decoloniality is regarded as the task to delink from ways of being human that were imposed upon by colonial structures of power, and to recover a way of being human that was systematically disavowed. Mignolo, “Decolonizing Western Epistemology/Building Decolonial Epistemologies,” 19; See Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality And Modernity/rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007).

of the idea and the perspective of Totality in cognition. It is necessary to extricate oneself from the links between rationality/modernity and coloniality, first of all, and definitely from all power which is not constituted by free decisions made by free people. It is the instrumentalisation of the reason for power, colonial power in the first place, which produced distorted paradigms of knowledge and spoiled liberating promises of modernization. The alternative then is clear: the destruction of the coloniality of world power. First of all, epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings as the basis of another rationality that legitimately pretends to some universality.²⁰

Quijano's statement seems to echo Bob Marley's clamor to "emancipate yourself from mental slavery,"²¹ though the option of decoloniality also seeks to "construct paths and praxis towards an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living."²² In other words, a coalescing approach designed to liberate the entire human *being*.

Even though it seems that the project of decoloniality seeks exclusively to override an oppressive epistemic agenda, it is likewise interested in all the different aspects of human life that have been viciously wiped out from existence by the globalization of modern imperial conquest. Some propose that before we venture to decolonize being, we must first begin by decolonizing knowledge.²³ There seems to be a

²⁰ Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/rationality," 117.

²¹ Bob Marley and the Wailers, *Redemption Song* (Kingston: Island Records, 1980).

²² Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

²³ Mignolo, "Decolonizing Western Epistemology/Building Decolonial Epistemologies," 32.

current within decoloniality that demands a space for the development of an alternate modernity, one that does not conform to the designs of the Western epistemic legacy, but rather the opportunity to claim and develop alternative forms of knowledge production.²⁴ The scope of this work, however, will not entertain exclusively nor work towards perpetuating the dominant role assigned to epistemology within the Western philosophical tradition. By the same token, it will also endeavor to call into question and depart from the metaphysical position that privileges presence over absence, or any form of philosophical idealism that assigns priority to the mind over the body.

Methodological Considerations

The process of reflexivity, the critical self-reflection of values, beliefs, knowledge, and ideologies is crucial to any disciplinary work of exploration. The primary task for any theological endeavor that seeks to hold its own among the many contemporary fields of inquiry is the responsibility to delineate the implicit foundations and assumptions that virtually undergirds the entire scope of research. At the very core of practical theology is the unwavering commitment to resist the temptation of methodological purism,²⁵ the impulse to exclude all forms of mediations that are deemed unsuitable, unworthy, or simply not valid when making the case for legitimate theological

²⁴ The legacy of modernity and colonialism are intertwined; thereby creating a domineering matrix that elevates modern epistemology to normative status. See Walter D. Mignolo, "The Darker Side of the Enlightenment: A De-colonial Reading of Kant's Geography," in *Reading Kant's Geography*, ed. Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011); Partha Chatterjee, "Talking about Our Modernity in Two Languages," in *A possible India: Essays in Political Criticism* (Calcutta: Oxford Press, 1998).

²⁵ The notion that theology need not align itself nor accept 'intrusions' from any outside sources that can interfere with the theological scope of operation. On the other hand, "when theology comes to treat a determinate raw material, it must take steps to inform itself precisely as to what it is about to treat." Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 24-27.

reflection. The idea that theological interpretation has an exhaustive reading of reality,²⁶ where everything under the sun finds full expression within its own walls, limits the theological endeavor to a fix network of symbols or language system/game²⁷- purely an exercise in theological reductionism.

Ludwig Wittgenstein understands language as realms of discourse with their own set rules, much like the rules of chess would differ from the rules of basketball or soccer. He applies the notion of language games to all the different forms that make up our discursive universe as possessing a unique language structure. For example, art, science, and even religion are considered to operate within its own set of rules and grammar. Theology can only emerge from within a specific contextual location - essentially within the limits of a particular place and time,²⁸ making it a task that can enjoy different forms of articulations that are not beholden to a universalized theological model. Theology is understood here as an intradisciplinary effort that draws from multiple sources of wisdom. Simply put, the theological task can find a home among a plurality of different language games.

²⁶ Theologism, according to Boff, “consists in considering theological interpretation as the only true or adequate version of the real.” Otherwise stated, theology above everything else stands on its own as the only legitimate interpretative schema to access the primordial, authentic, and unchangeable truth. Ibid.

²⁷ See Chapter 2 on language, meaning, and use. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The English Text of the Third Edition*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Prentice Hall, 1968).

²⁸ Culture, history, and Contemporary thought are all important sources in the task of theological reflection. Steven B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 4.

Intradisciplinary Model

While some practical theologians consider the intradisciplinary approach in theology as the “general epistemological sense that refers to the borrowing of concepts, methods and general techniques of one science by another and the integration of these elements into the other science,”²⁹ intradisciplinary is understood here as the inherent capacity of all systems of inquiry to produce theological wisdom. However, the intention to engage in theological reflection is absolutely necessary, otherwise the inquiry becomes just another attempt at ascertaining a specialized reading of the world.³⁰ All that is subject to the realm of temporal existence has something to say theologically. Or in the words of Terry Veling, “to venture a theological life is to live theologically. It is not so much to ask about ways that theology can be made practical; rather, it is to ask how the practices of life (including all fields of inquiry) can be made theological.”³¹ So instead of borrowing methods and techniques from one another, why not foster theological

²⁹ Johannes A. Van Der Ven, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1998), 101.

³⁰ Practical theology as empirical theology stresses a distinction between three paradigms: “the hermeneutic, the empirical-analytical and the political.” While these three dimensions do not necessarily imply the ‘airtight’ confinement of each, it stresses and accentuates the specific pattern of research as an “object for methodological reflection. This approach attempts to neatly compartmentalize the theological task and render its methodological approach adequate to the reigning modern epistemological paradigm. Ibid, 154. “Matthews, the dean of the Divinity School of Chicago, in *The Faith of Modernism* (1924), explicitly links the application of scientific, historical and social-scientific methods in theology with the struggle between modernism and confessional conservatism. Modernism is defined here as ‘the use of the methods of modern science to find, state and use the permanent and central values of inherited orthodoxy in meeting the needs of a modern world.’ Ibid, 17.

³¹ Veling writes “that learning the various methods of practical theology is important, but we should be wary of turning these methods into a simple ‘how to.’ The world is inundated with ‘how to’ books.” He goes on to say, “along with learning the ‘tools’ and methods of practical theology, we must also develop an essential ‘relatedness’ to theology, whereby theological practice becomes a way of life, where it enters our dwelling in the world and reveals ‘all the hidden riches of its nature.’” While Veling does not discard the importance of method, he does recognize how theology can get lost in the ‘how to’ trappings. Terry A. Veling, *Practical Theology: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (New York: Orbis, 2005), 141.

sensibilities from within? This weakens the notion of method and strengthens the concept of insight and creative breakthrough. Theology thereby reclaims its long abandoned quality of practical wisdom (phronesis) and poetic sensibilities (poesis), while resisting the inflexible characterization of prosaic formulations within its own disciplinary status.³²

The work of reflexivity demands the proverbial laying your cards on the table, so to speak, so as to not only inform others about what drives your work, but to engage in a process of self-discovery, a way of identifying the driving force behind your work. It also demands that we ask what implicit commitments informs your agenda, and ultimately, who are the interlocutors that walk alongside us on this journey. Although this work does not concern itself with the protection of human subjects being utilized for any sort of empirical research, it does nonetheless concern itself fully with the human subject matter. In other words, its driving force aims at proposing a way in which human beings seek to interpret their whole reality in light of religious understandings and practices.³³ The charge against the hidden agenda of modernity, or as Mignolo calls it, the darker side of modernity, does not only meet its antithetical nemesis in the work of decoloniality alone, but in a combination of decolonial strategies coupled with postmodern sensibilities. The combination of decolonial perspectives and postmodern theory will engage in an ongoing conversation throughout this entire work.

³² The history of Christian theology reveals the epochal changes and paradigmatic shifts in the development of theology. Edward Farley offers a cursory survey of the early Christian centuries, the Middle ages, and the Enlightenment to demonstrate the gradual transition of theology from a spirited *habitus* or disposition towards God to a functional scientific specialty. Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 29-44.

³³ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 3.

Praxis of Decoloniality

A praxis³⁴ of decoloniality is not meant to offer “global answers or sketch global designs for liberation, even less to propose new abstract universals,”³⁵ instead it is interested in fostering a dialogue with other “local histories and embodied conceptions and practices of decoloniality.”³⁶ To engage in a praxis of decoloniality does not require one to adhere to an established design or prescriptive method to contest totalizing claims and counter existential violence, but rather it is a call to draw from local sources of knowledge and practices in the work of liberation. To limit decoloniality to one, uniform, universal ideal would discredit its efforts by becoming the very thing it opposes. Thus the praxis of decoloniality will draw from a wellspring of wisdom resulting from different communities of resistance and hope, not a wisdom that solely resonates with specific contexts and local histories, but a wisdom that fosters global imagination and engagement.³⁷

As mentioned previously, theological discourse undergoes different forms of articulation depending on who, how, and where theology is being done. Theological wisdom can conceivably emerge from within any disciplinary effort that seeks in one way or another to say something meaningful about the world. However, because we are

³⁴ Decoloniality as praxis can be best understood with Paulo Freire’s description of the two dimensional constitution of *the word*. “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus to speak a true word is to transform the world.” Decoloniality is characteristically a word committed to transform reality, and there can be no transformation if either one of the two elements is missing; therefore, it ceases to be praxis and becomes just another empty word designed for academic verbalism. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 68.

³⁵ Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 1.

³⁶ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 1.

³⁷ Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 25.

subject to temporal and spatial limitations, and because we operate from within various forms of symbolic and linguistic networks, we must then make use of the inherited resources within the particular tradition we move in. According to George Lindbeck, a cultural linguistic stresses that “religions be seen as comprehensive interpretative schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world.”³⁸ It is therefore that this work be considered a work of decoloniality but within the greater emancipatory tradition of the Christian faith, a tradition seen as a kind of subversive with a dangerous memory.³⁹

In decoloniality lies the voice of the ‘other’ that tells the truth, “the truth that has been repressed and suppressed, omitted and marginalized, or sometimes just plain murdered like Jesus himself.”⁴⁰ For in decoloniality the concept of coloniality⁴¹ emerges, “and therefore the anchor of decolonial thinking and doing in the praxis of living.”⁴² Otherwise stated, decoloniality is a praxis of truth telling – “a truth that has been safely closeted away or repressed.”⁴³ The praxis of decoloniality summons us to live alternatively, to abide in a state of otherwise, a lived experience committed to the struggle

³⁸ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2009), 18.

³⁹ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. James Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2016), 89.

⁴⁰ John Caputo frames the Derridean concept of deconstruction as the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God. The hermeneutics of the kingdom of God is meant to “get at the prophetic spirit of Jesus,” a good news that “delivers the shock of the other to the forces of the same, the shock of the good (the “ought”) to the forces of being (“what is”).” John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 29.

⁴¹ The concept of Coloniality is understood here as the “darker side of modernity.” It comprises an underlying logic – a complex matrix of power perpetuated by the legacy of Western civilization.

⁴² Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 107.

⁴³ Caputo, *What would Jesus Deconstruct?* 27.

for freedom made by past suffering and hope. While decolonial thinking in its various incarnations has sought to resist and counter the dehumanizing legacy and ongoing patterns of power imposed by both external and internal influences of colonialism, the Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition has an even longer legacy of denouncing and contesting imperial ideology. It is within this prophetic tradition that a praxis of decoloniality will find valuable application.

The ‘lighter’ side of modernity, the part that made sense at the time, paved the way for emancipating thinking by breaking with theocratic and monarchical rule and ushering in modern democratic life. But while it shattered the old absolutism of the church and the king, it installed a new kind of absolutism in pure reason. The primacy assigned to the mind elevated epistemology to the plateau of first philosophy. The Enlightenment espoused a very optimistic view of human nature, one that beholds “all” persons (White men) as endowed with the potential for rational thought and enquiry.⁴⁴ Elaine Graham notes that “modernity posits the uniformity and universality of human nature as axiomatic. All people (men) are deemed to share the same conditions and characteristics; all are united and equal by virtue of the possession and exercise of reason.”⁴⁵ While this might have been what inspired modernity initially, we know that it certainly did not translate that way to the world outside of Western Europe.

The goal of decoloniality is to ultimately advance other ways of being, thinking, knowing, feeling, and living. It is not in the business of crafting strategic plans to create chaos, of tossing a grenade through an open door and taking cover, nor does it seek to

⁴⁴ Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 27.

⁴⁵ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 27.

deconstruct without hoping for something better. It is obvious that there can be no decoloniality without understanding the effects of modernity/coloniality that ultimately gave rise to it.⁴⁶ “Without modernity/coloniality,” wrote Mignolo, “there would be no need for decoloniality, because there would be nothing to decolonize.”⁴⁷ Having said that, decoloniality was chosen from among the many decolonial projects and trajectories because of the way it conceives the relationship between modernity and colonialism – coloniality being its long-lasting effects.

Decoloniality was also adopted here because of its commitment to praxis as an essential element of its constructive framework. Some decolonial perspectives might view postmodernity as an extension of the developments started by modernity, a view of postmodernity as a more polished and refined do-over; however, postmodernity is comprised of many strands, some of which vehemently oppose some of the central tenets enshrined by modernity.⁴⁸ It will be the task of this dissertation to draw from a variety of sources, whether that be from decolonial perspectives or from postmodern currents that seek to undermine the overarching and insidious narrative of the “darker side” of modernity. The methodological underpinnings in a praxis of decoloniality will ultimately inform and shape the elements of the religious imagination in this work.

⁴⁶ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 109.

⁴⁷ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 109.

⁴⁸ “Is post-modernity a successor phase to modernity; a collapse and negation of the project of modernity; or a critique and revision of modernism, drawing out ambivalences and contradictions present at the heart of Enlightenment thinking?” There are many voices within the postmodern experience that claim different positions with regards to modernity. This dissertation does not favor one of the above positions over the other; however, it certainly does acknowledge the value of all three as representing a follow-up or departure from modernity. Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 32.

Imagination

The aim of this work will ultimately be to advance a religious pedagogy, building on the work of Maria Harris, that views the craft of teaching as a “religiously imaginative act,”⁴⁹ a creative turn towards reimagining a downtrodden existence forced to subject to a singular representation of the human. A pedagogy designed to reclaim ways of being human that do not conform with colonial, modern, and capitalist designs of monohuman⁵⁰ configurations. Religious pedagogy is therefore understood here as an imaginative endeavor, not the overbearing task of offering pre-packaged responses to questions that are never asked, but instead teaching possesses an “inner sympathy” with the work of deconstruction, or what John Caputo calls, a hermeneutics of the kingdom of God: “a work of memory and imagination, of dangerous memories as well as daring ways to imagine the future.”⁵¹ Education, for all intent and purposes, is definitely risky business.

Presumably any talk concerning imagination is usually relegated to a sphere that includes art, music, poetry, literature - in short, anything that falls under the umbrella known as the humanities or the ‘arts.’ It is generally associated with the exercise of affective, abstract, fictive, and non-logical forms of discourse. The modern project sought to establish a once and for all solution to the ever nagging epistemological aporia by making method central to the investigative task. In doing so, it delegitimized the world inspired by the imagination and subordinated it to the world of the scientific (science too

⁴⁹ Maria Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 3.

⁵⁰ Sylvia Winter employs the term ‘monohuman’ to designate an anthropology specific to the Western world system. A way of being human that is starved from a lack of imagination, the impossibility to think or be otherwise, a humanity subordinated to a system that thrives on consumption and accumulation. See Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter on Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁵¹ Caputo, *What would Jesus Deconstruct?* 35.

is the result of the active imagination). Hans-Georg Gadamer's seminal work, *Truth and Method* rightly critiques this methodologism and scientism. He questions:

Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but just as certainly is not inferior to it? And is not the task of aesthetics precisely to ground the fact that the experience of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind, certainly different from that sensory knowledge which provides science with the ultimate data from which it constructs the knowledge of nature, and certainly different from all moral rational knowledge, and indeed from all conceptual knowledge – but still knowledge, i.e., conveying truth?⁵²

Whereas the language of method speaks of data, knowledge, and verifiable facts, Gadamer, on the other hand, prefers to speak of truth.

Truth with a capital T?

The work of imagination is not subject to any one form of human discourse, it is not exclusive to only the realm of the arts, but to all forms of human practices that are concerned with “truth.” In today's world the notion of truth has become problematic. Truth according to modernists must enjoy universal validity if it is to be rightfully considered true. In order for a postulation to rise to the level of a truth claim, it must survive debate and doubt and achieve universal acknowledgment and applicability. Modernist do not allow exceptions to the rules. While the Greeks understood wisdom as

⁵² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2003), 97-98.

the “love of the highest things, all of them, the true, the good and the beautiful,”⁵³ modernist, however, correlate the truth with what is established through reason.

John Caputo, who is a strong defender of the postmodern experience⁵⁴ poses a very pivotal question: “Can anything really be taken seriously today as ‘truth’ if it is not science or at least modelled after science?”⁵⁵ That question drives at the very heart of the modern project that longs for an ordered world beholden to irrefutable claims, pure objectivity, methodical precision, and absolute certitudes. We cannot overlook or play down the many contributions of the Enlightenment, such things as undoing the hegemony of superstition (church) and absolute monarchy (king), and replacing it with emancipatory thinking and civil liberties.⁵⁶ However, Caputo claims that it went too far: “What the moderns call Pure Reason proved to be a new reign of terror over truth itself, which would elicit eloquent and magnificent howls of pain from the great Romantic poets and philosophers of the nineteenth century. Pure Reason has a low tolerance for anything that is not Pure Reason, which Caputo concludes, is pretty unreasonable.”⁵⁷

The Enlightenment emerged as a beacon of light to illuminate the darkened condition resulting from the inability to think for oneself, or from the lack of courage to think for yourself. This phase in Western history is associated with Immanuel Kant’s

⁵³ John D. Caputo, *Truth, the Search for Wisdom in the Postmodern Age* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 21.

⁵⁴ The postmodern condition is the title of the 1979 book written by Jean-Francois Lyotard where he analyzes the shift in postmodern epistemology as the end of ‘grand narratives’ or metanarratives, which he considers the principal feature in modernity (over-arching, ahistorical truth with a capital T). See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁵⁵ Caputo, *Truth*, 19.

⁵⁶ Caputo, *Truth*, 19.

⁵⁷ Caputo, *Truth*, 19.

response to the question, “What is the Enlightenment?” An essay that urged all church and state control to be abolished and that people be afforded the freedom and autonomy to use their own intellect; rather than having others think for them.⁵⁸ Whilst the achievement of a free and uncoerced mode of thinking marked the salutary effects of the Enlightenment, it equally provided a narrow view of the truth as the property of rational assertions.⁵⁹ Therefore, can anything other than logical assertions and propositional thinking evoke truth?

There are multiple and competing interpretations of the world. ‘Truth claims,’ according to Caputo, “come flying at us from all directions – science, ethics, politics, art and religion.”⁶⁰ And while the perennial questions remains, what is the truth? It would seem more appropriate to ask, whose truth is really true? Not only do we have competing ‘truth claims’ coming at us from all different directions and from different fields of study, but we also live in an age defined by plurality, an excess of competing if not disparate voices that claim to possess the truth. Whereas the tendency to capitalize the T in truth is a long-cherished practice within the Western philosophical tradition, an ambitious attempt at consolidating the truth into universal acknowledgements, today we affirm “that the only universality we recognize is diversity.”⁶¹ So instead of recognizing only one overarching truth (with a capital T) that reigns supreme over all other claims of truth, we can acknowledge that there are many different truths.⁶²

⁵⁸ See Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* trans. H. B. Nisbet (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

⁵⁹ Caputo, *Truth*, 33.

⁶⁰ Caputo, *Truth*, 16. .

⁶¹ Caputo, *Truth*, 7.

⁶² Different truths are not to be confused with relativism, the major threat to the livelihood of truth itself. On the other hand, truth should not be subject to the paralyzing effects

The notion that there are different truths presupposes the function of interpretation. Caputo writes: “the need for interpretation is a function of being situated in a particular time and place, and therefore of having certain inherited presuppositions.”⁶³ In other words, whenever we grapple with matters of truth we are operating hermeneutically, “learning to adjudicate; of dealing with difference judiciously.”⁶⁴ The truth, as conceived here, is not an ahistorical and immutable claim with universal applicability, rather the truth is something we discover in the concrete, in ambiguous situations, in our best interpretive effort. Or as Paul Ricoeur stated, “in hermeneutical reflection – or in reflective hermeneutics – the constitution of the self is contemporaneous with the constitution of meaning.”⁶⁵ Ricoeur refers to this interpretive endeavor as ‘concrete reflection,’ where understanding the text is not the end result but instead the con-text⁶⁶ through “which the self documents and forms itself,”⁶⁷ and from which identity is constituted.

The truth is not an abstract concept that falls from the sky or rigid rules that are manufactured to structure and order the world, rather the truth as understood here is an event, it is the attitude of openness towards possibility, the recognition of our indigent existence that accepts that we can never domesticate or pin down the force of truth. The

of absolutism, the one and only, stable, and all-encompassing truth with a capital T. It would seem that both attitudes towards the truth are dead ends.

⁶³ Caputo, *Truth*, 14.

⁶⁴ Caputo, *Truth*, 14.

⁶⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 2005), 159.

⁶⁶ The origin of the word context dates to the Late Middle English (denoting the construction of a text): from Latin *contextus*, from con- “together” + *texere* “to weave.” See “Context,” Definition of Context in English, Oxford Dictionaries. Accessed May 14, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/context>.

⁶⁷ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Science*, 158.

truth is not considered the exclusive property of pure reason or of the remains of a monochromatic order that dominated the premodern world; instead the truth, according to the ‘postmodern turn,’ is the advent of something unexpected, the unforeseeable arrival that catches us off guard and unsettles our comfortable lives. Truth is not subject to human manipulation, it is not something at our disposal that we can twist and turn and use it to our advantage. Truth happens! Rather than reducing truth to factual assertions, to the way in which we attain ‘real’ correspondence between the object we apprehend and the structures of consciousness, “truth moves about in a multiplicity of contexts and conditions without being confined to a single method or monitored by a single overarching Truth.”⁶⁸ There is no collusion between the truth and the violence espoused by hegemonic forces that endeavor to cast out anything and everything that does not fit in neatly with their fixed arrangements and absolute claims.

There is a close link between the power of the imagination and the truth that happens, the uncontainable life-of-its-own truth that has something to say about the future, that exposes us to the unpredictability ahead of us, to what always “lies in the to come, its promise”⁶⁹- thy kingdom come. To imagine means to envision that possibility, the future, the otherwise, what results from the inbreaking of truth within people, our institutions, religious traditions, and everything subject to the temporal. In a world that generally values a stable and unchanging order, a world that takes comfort in the status quo and in fixed arrangements, those who engage in imaginatively driven endeavors will

⁶⁸ Caputo, *Truth*, 47.

⁶⁹ Caputo, *Truth*, 69.

undoubtedly experience the backlash from established systems that take delight in securing the future – a future determined by the present order.

Dare to Imagine Otherwise

Rather than asking how we arrive at the truth, it would seem better to ask: Whose truth are we seeking out? Whose imaginative world do we abide in? It is impossible for any critic to “distance herself completely from the social pathologies that the liberatory project she espouses aims to redress.”⁷⁰ Any theory that attempts to explain or critique systems and relations is already embedded within a network of motivations that give rise to a particular point of view. It is the task of anyone who challenges any form of ideological commitment to become mindful of the “values, convictions, and beliefs rooted in the symbolic systems through which we express our position”⁷¹ in the world. No critical social theory, therefore, is value neutral.⁷²

Although the nature of this work is in practical theology, a mode of theological reflection that draws from the vast resources of social scientific theories, it nevertheless begs the question, what implicit conditionings shape the theological task? Or in the words of Robert Schreiter, “the approach of church tradition in the development of local theologies means understanding not only how the questions and the content that are in the tradition receive their shape, but also the cultural conditioning of the very paradigms of thought themselves.”⁷³ In other words, do our imaginary impulses, if any, within the

⁷⁰ Roger W. H. Savage, "Judgment, Imagination and the Search for Justice," *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 6, no. 2 (2016).

⁷¹ Savage, “Judgement, Imagination and the Search for Justice.”

⁷² Savage, “Judgement, Imagination and the Search for Justice.”

⁷³ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 77.

theological endeavor provide the language to speak about our reality in ways that are fresh and new, or is it the aim of theology to stop the language of newness that ultimately results in a diminished humanness?⁷⁴

What we access and employ from our “imaginary funds” determines the world we create. Walter Brueggemann writes: “the task is to *fund* – to provide the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined. Our responsibility, then, is not a grand scheme or coherent system, but the voicing of a lot of little pieces out of which people can put life together in fresh configurations.”⁷⁵ This sentiment resonates with Mignolo’s claim that the work of decoloniality never intends to regard other liberational efforts as not meeting an adequate criteria or fulfill a certain standard, instead it too acknowledges the need to confer and draw from the many different voices that share in the same struggle. Contrary to the all-encompassing metanarratives that attempt to provide totalizing and comprehensive accounts of all human experiences and history, decoloniality emphasizes the particular and concrete human experiences and histories from which new and alternative ways to imagine can occur.

The worse kind of violence is generally considered to be inflicted on human lives through the process of physical torture and the denial of freedom; however, Ruben Alves contends that the “control of the imagination is much more effective than the use of violence.”⁷⁶ If the imagination is bound and made to align itself with those in positions of

⁷⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xxiii.

⁷⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 20.

⁷⁶ Rubem A. Alves, *Tomorrows Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 24.

power, then the ability to imagine otherwise, to envision the alternative, to draw from the reservoirs of creativity yield nothing but stifled and restricted imaginary constructions. The imagination becomes atrophied and unable to venture or conjure up anything outside the conditions of the symbolic system it finds itself in, “incapable of going beyond the limits of the dominant reality.”⁷⁷ This makes the person an entirely “functional” being with no ability to dream or envisage a world differently, a being with only the possibility of a future defined by the present.⁷⁸

Breaking out of this imaginative imprisonment is not simple. It demands that hope be directed towards an unforeseeable future with fresh and new possibilities, unrestrained by the present order, and detached from imperial ideologies. This is a daring task. Walter Brueggemann reminds us that we are children of the ‘royal consciousness,’ by which he means “a program of achievable satiation that has redefined our notions of humanness.”⁷⁹ In other words, an ideology of affluence that is driven by greed and self-deception. Brueggemann insists that “all of us, in one way or another, have deep commitments to it.”⁸⁰ So the question is: how can we achieve the necessary freedom to imagine otherwise? How do we learn to weed out those elements that impair the imaginative act? “We need to ask if our consciousness and imagination have been so assaulted and co-opted by the royal consciousness that we have been robbed of the courage and power to

⁷⁷ Alves, *Tomorrows Child*, 25.

⁷⁸ Alves refers to this as a form of imprisonment, a way of being that ‘never looks for a way out.’ He explains, “this is the first principle for control of the imagination: create so many objects of desire that the mind will keep moving from one to another, without ever being able to move beyond them.” Alves is referring specifically to the system of production and consumption (capitalism) that we find ourselves in. He believes that this paralyzes the imagination in such a way that it no longer has the ability to seek out its own aspirations. *Ibid*, 26-27.

⁷⁹ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 37.

⁸⁰ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 39.

think an alternative thought.”⁸¹ So trapped by the modern social imaginary that we cannot fathom an alternative thought.

To have an alternative thought, to consider an otherwise reality is risky and downright dangerous business. Those who have dared to imagine otherwise have been met not just with resistance but with stern opposition, hostility, and fear that this alternative thinking could threaten and even change their orderly world. Those who practice imaginative thinking, we know them perhaps as poets, musicians, artist, preachers, social advocates, teachers, healers, ministers, prophets and the like, speak a word that shakes the ground beneath us. The word they speak may unsettle our established rules and fixed order by unleashing the hidden and unexpected truth that stirs within our constructed frameworks and institutions. Terry Veling will attest that “as with any great poem, novel, painting, or musical composition, they bring with them a radical call towards change, towards a new way of dwelling in the world.”⁸² These various forms of artistic mediums do this by reminding us of our innate human power to make (poiesis), the ability to transform established meaning into new ones and work towards the unfolding of a new world.

The ability to imagine otherwise is not reserved for those who only occupy a specific office or designation, it is not the extraordinary task taken up by an enlightened person who comes along every so many number of years with a message. Abraham Heschel pointed out that “the difference between a prophet and the ordinary person is the possession of a heightened and unified awareness of certain aspects of life.”⁸³ In

⁸¹ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 39.

⁸² Veling, *Practical Theology*, 201.

⁸³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 469.

Christianity it is believed that discipleship comprises the prophetic ministry of Jesus, such that those who are followers of the Way must take on the prophetic task of articulating an alternative world. Therefore, it is imperative that new ways of communicating be adopted, new forms of speech employed, new mediums utilized when attempting to say something about the truth of the kingdom of God.⁸⁴ That is why Brueggemann makes the case that such speech is daring, liberating, and mostly unaccommodating if the aim is to offer new possibilities for being human.⁸⁵

Decolonizing the Human

What do we mean when we speak of being human? What kind of weight do our claims about humanity carry? What does it ultimately mean to be human? While these questions may evoke an array of responses that aim at capturing the essence of the human person, the truth is that any attempt to offer a categorical response misses the mark. Human beings are much more than just pithy definitions. There is much complexity associated with the human condition, much more than what competing disciplines vying for what comes closest to an adequate explanation of what it means to be human can provide. Human beings endure real existential violence when they are grouped into a general category that essentializes them into one indivisible humanity. Or when they are classified under a specific label because they do not measure up to the standards of a normative humanity.

⁸⁴ Jürgen Habermas offers a sketch of communicative ethics as foundational for “ideal speech situation.” This serves as a model for intentional communities engaged in the practice of ‘truth telling.’ See Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

⁸⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 4.

This process of categorization can unquestionably be attributed to the darker side of Western Modernity that created and perpetuated racist and patriarchal conditions to expand, build, control, and structure a dominant knowledge and way of life.⁸⁶ The history of Western philosophy is marked by the ongoing pursuit of universal truths that can provide a sense of coherence and structure for all of reality. Walter Mignolo exposes Kant's epistemic assumptions:

When Kant was delivering his lectures on geography, the epistemic foundation of this particular field (mapping and describing the earth) was not only already mapped (to be redundant), but it was, above all, epistemologically deeply grounded in the belief that knowledge-making about the world was detached from the knower. Although Kant insisted that knowledge starts from senses and experiences, he assumed that there was a universal formula and therefore that all human senses and experiences would lead to the same reasoning and conception of the world. Kant's philosophy, his lecture on geography and anthropology, as well as the anthropological perspective that infuses his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), are all grounded on sixteenth-century theological and cartographic assumptions, according to which not only was knowledge universal, but the knower was equally a universally endowed epistemic subject who embodied the universality of sensing and experiencing – hence, a subject that was beyond the racial and patriarchal hierarchies that the

⁸⁶ Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*, xv.

system of knowledge Kant himself was already embracing had already been established.⁸⁷

The great thinkers of the Western philosophical tradition, while earnestly devoted to the pursuit of truth and unencumbered thinking, were also embedded in a tradition of conquest and domination that implicitly shaped their way of thinking about the world and the rest of the human species.

Decolonizing knowledge does not presume that we rid ourselves of Western epistemic contributions. On the contrary, it means that we “appropriate its contributions in order to then de-chain from their imperial designs.”⁸⁸ It was mentioned earlier that this work will not concern itself too much with questions of knowledge and knowledge production, even though this can be considered an epistemic work of sorts, an effort to produce new and alternative perspectives. It does, however, want to avoid fueling a saturated epistemic legacy already characterized by the overrepresentation of the mind, as detached from the body, where all knowledge is said to be produced. Nonetheless, this legacy of knowledge must be addressed since it has intimate ties with a violent history of oppression, exclusion, domination, and exploitation. Modernity’s subject-centered orientation coupled with the highest regard for reason has greatly shaped our notions of being human.

⁸⁷ Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 187.

⁸⁸ Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 82.

It is important to point out how the damaging effects of coloniality managed to dislocate non-white⁸⁹ peoples of their thought systems to the extent of losing their distinctive intellectual capacities to forge their own destinies. It also managed to rob them of their own sense of human subjectivity and agency. There is no doubt that Western thought, for better or worse, has played and continues to play a vital role in our conceptions of what it means to be human. This work is not interested in the proverbial throwing out the baby with the bathwater. In other words, it acknowledges the good contributions as well as the bad. It does, rather, aim to present and strategize alternative ways of existing – a route to agency through decolonial forms of thinking and being in the world.⁹⁰

Coloniality of Being & Ontological Murder

A fundamental question in Western metaphysics has been: why is there something rather than nothing? According to Wilhelm Leibniz, because “the sufficient reason [...] is found in a substance which [...] is a necessary being bearing the reason for its existence within itself.”⁹¹ From the time of the ancient Greeks the doctrines surrounding the notion of “Being” were mostly derived out of the Greek word *ousia* – a concept used to designate the principle of essence or substance. Ontology (the study of what is – nature of being/existence/reality) is traditionally considered to be at the heart of metaphysics,

⁸⁹ None-whites refers to all non-European histories entangled with Western modernity. This label is meant to identify all forms of indigenous life and culture that became subject to epistemic rationalities and ontologies.

⁹⁰ Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*, x.

⁹¹ G. W. Leibniz, *Leibniz's "Monadology": An Edition for Students*, trans. Nicholas Rescher (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 135.

dealing with questions specifically concerning the existence of entities, and how can these entities be grouped or classified based on similarities or differences.

It wasn't until Martin Heidegger, considered by many as one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, that the question of Being rose to prominence once again. His work embodied a direct attack on modernity and its "epistemologically-centered philosophy with an elaboration of what he referred to as fundamental ontology."⁹² Heidegger sought to formulate a new starting point for philosophy that consisted of a rearticulation of the question of Being. According to Heidegger, the Western philosophical tradition, particularly metaphysics, had fallen into a sort of amnesic state with regards to Being. Heidegger's ontological framework is mainly described by the notion that Being is distinct from being, an entity, or a thing, but nonetheless the Being of beings, that is, something like the overall horizon of understanding for all beings.⁹³ The distinction between Being and beings is what he regards as *ontological difference*.⁹⁴

What makes Heidegger's fundamental ontology distinct from that of his predecessor's metaphysical claims is that he rejected the notion that there is a world "out there," and a mind "in here," "the split that creates both subjectivity and objectivity as two separate things."⁹⁵ He believed that this dualistic manner of thinking is a total

⁹² Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007), 240-270.

⁹³ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: HarperCollins, 1962).

⁹⁴ Ontological difference refers to the distinction between Being (Capital B) and being (lowercase b). Being is not the same as being. Being refers to the general horizon in which all beings (entities) are grounded. *Ibid*, 28-35.

⁹⁵ Nancy J. Moules et al., *Conducting Hermeneutic Research From Philosophy to Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 25.

misapprehension of the way the world is, and the way in which we move about in the world. “In Heidegger’s view, it is too late to be either purely objective or subjective; we are in the world, fully implicated in an already interpreted way of life, operating in a language full of sedimented (i.e., historical) meanings, and oriented by our relationships toward the world in a particular way.”⁹⁶ We dwell in the world in an interpretative manner, we do not stand outside the realm of our experience so that we can make value-free and unbiased assertions, but rather it is in our immersion in the world, our being there (Dasein) that offers the fundamental condition for human understanding.⁹⁷

While Heidegger provides an ontological framework that brings to an end the terror reign of epistemic foundationalism by affirming a way of knowing that is integral to our life experiences, others would say that Heidegger’s philosophical views failed to account for ‘otherness,’ for those deemed ontologically void or just plain murdered. Even though Heidegger sought to turn traditional metaphysics flat on its back by exposing the violence associated with an ontology characterized by schematization, objectification, and calculative thinking, his notion of *dasein* - ‘being there,’ however, may not have taken into account the non-white being. Nelson Maldonado-Torres argues that “while Heidegger’s focus on Being required reflection on Dasein’s comportment and existentialia, reflection on the coloniality of Being requires elucidation of the fundamental existential traits of the black and the colonized.”⁹⁸ Maldonado-Torres contends, as did Quijano and Mignolo, that colonization and racialization are not just

⁹⁶ Moules, *Conducting Hermeneutic Research*, 25.

⁹⁷ Moules, *Conducting Hermeneutic Research*, 25

⁹⁸ Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being," 240-270.

matters only attributable to political and social structures, but have deep metaphysical and epistemological significance.

Cartesian epistemology and Heideggerian ontology underscore the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of Being. Non-whites, whether that be black or people of color, “become the radical points of departure for any reflection on the coloniality of being.”⁹⁹ The incurred invisibility, terror, dehumanization, and existential void becomes the locus for reflection on Being. Those who argue from a decolonial perspective consider alternative ways of being, such as black being or colonial being, as constituting the proper metaphysical question, a question that ultimately leads into an abyss of ontology.¹⁰⁰ In other words, the experience of blackness or of the colonized is deprived of Being, a ground of existence that has no applicability for those outside the white male experience. Calvin Warren argues that while some might declare “that everything has Being – even an object,”¹⁰¹ ontology fails to explain black existence.

Philosophy is not immune or insulated from social and political influence, but rather it is shaped and motivated by implicit attitudes and ideological commitments. In *The End of Modernity* (1998), Gianni Vattimo posits that metaphysics and colonialism/Eurocentrism are intimately connected, rendering them coterminous. Hence the very history of philosophical thought is contaminated with subtle influences of Eurocentrism and white-male supremacy. Maldonado-Torres writes that “what Heidegger forgot is that in modernity Being has a colonial side, and that this has far-reaching

⁹⁹ Maldonado-Torres, “On Coloniality of Being,” 240-270.

¹⁰⁰ Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 12.

¹⁰¹ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 12.

consequences.”¹⁰² Far-reaching in the sense that it affected every corner of the world absorbed by the powers of the Western world system.

How does black or non-white existence inhabit Being? Warren explains that according to Heidegger, “to be, means to emerge and move within Being-as-event. But what happens when such becoming does not occur? When the event of Being does not stimulate a productive anxiety of actualization, but gets caught in a repetition of event-less demise and nothingness. To inhabit such a condition is to exist in perpetual falling, without standing-forth, without Being.”¹⁰³ This describes non-white existence, it defines the human being that does not meet the normative arrangements put forth by Western Metaphysics - what Warren calls ontological terror.

Non-white existence is left out of the universal configurations of Being, a form of existence deemed foreign, alien, with no permanent residence within Western metaphysics. Non-white existence inhabits a world of nothing,¹⁰⁴ a concept that is problematic for ontology. Nothing does not measure properly into the orderly world constituted by Being, but instead it presents a breakdown of ontological structure and metaphysical arrangements. Vattimo maintains that “the end of metaphysics is

¹⁰² Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being," 240-270.

¹⁰³ Warren chose to adumbrate the notion Being, as understood by the Greeks, by delineating Being's twofold sense of constancy: "1) Standing-in-itself as arising and standing forth (*phusis*) 2) But, as such, 'constantly' that is, enduringly, abiding (*ousia*) Not-to-be accordingly, means to step out of constancy that has stood-forth in itself; *existasthai* – "existence," "to exist," means, for the Greeks, precisely not-to-be. The thoughtlessness and vapidity with which one uses the words "existence" and "to exist" as designators for Being offer fresh evidence of our alienation from being and from an originally powerful and definitive interpretation of it." Warren drew this information from Martin Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 12-13.

¹⁰⁴ Warren uses the concept of "nothing" as the paradigmatic frame for describing the "black thing" without using ontological categories. He explains that "*nothing* constitutes a mystery or ontological exception." *Ibid*, 14.

unthinkable without the end of colonialism and Eurocentrism”¹⁰⁵ – which suggests that alternative forms of thinking and being become foundational for understanding the human. It requires a new philosophical orientation characterized by post-metaphysical discourse and decolonial perspectives.

On Becoming Human

The objective here is not to offer a definitive response to an enduring question that finds different articulations based on time, place, and the overall circumstances in which the question is being asked. Figuring out what it means to be human does not have a fixed, unifying, or universal application that offers a sort of one size fits all answer. We now have a greater appreciation for human conditionedness, the awareness that “we understand as we do because we ‘exist’ as we do and, conversely, we exist as we do because we interpret as we do.”¹⁰⁶ Heidegger’s greatest contribution is precisely this notion that our ways of understanding and thinking are not separated from the world that we abide in. So our anthropology, our ways of conceiving the human, are very much determined and fashioned by our particular social and cultural context.

Disembodied knowing, according to Eleazar Fernandez, “portrays itself as pure and value-free (pristine logic), and is associated with male rationality: detachment and objectivity.”¹⁰⁷ This form of knowing arises out of the legacy of Enlightenment thinking and modernity’s contribution to anthropology that views human beings as *res cogitas*, thinking substance or epistemic subjects that pride themselves on pure rational thinking, a

¹⁰⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 12.

¹⁰⁶ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 12.

¹⁰⁷ Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 12.

form of thinking traditionally associated with White males. Also considered a way of thinking devoid of emotions and all other elemental features that can distort our phenomenological analysis of the world we are attempting to comprehend.

Fernandez advocates for embodied knowing, what he considers a celebration of embodiedness. This type of “knowing sees reality through the configuration of our bodiliness and seriously considers the effects of ideas as they bear on bodies and vice versa, especially the disfigured bodies of the marginalized.”¹⁰⁸ Embodied knowing allows for our conceptions of the human to capture every nuance of the lived experience, and it faithfully responds to the particulars of our contextual realities. Fernandez explains how “embodied knowing calls us to a different way of seeing, opening up new and rich dimensions for constructing theological anthropology. Contrary to the understanding that an embodied hermeneutic is myopic and exclusivist, it is broad and responsive to the particularities of a given context,”¹⁰⁹ - sensitive to what is distinctly other and different from all other configurations of the human.

The human body cannot be ignored or trivialized when it comes to the process of knowing, it is the absolute site where all understanding happens, and through which we synesthetically¹¹⁰ apprehend the world that surrounds us. Bonnie Miller-McLemore stresses that “we say and perceive more than we know or understand through our bodies,”

¹⁰⁸ Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 13. .

¹⁰⁹ Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 13.

¹¹⁰ The use of the concept synesthetic is used here to denote the human (neurological) condition whereby the stimulation of one sensory or cognitive function (hearing) leads to other spontaneous or involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive function (vision). In other words, one sense can activate another sense simultaneously in any given experience. This holds much value in the interpretative analysis – in the hermeneutic endeavor. Our interpretative function may be said to result from a total bodily process, a combination of our cognitive and sensory faculties.

and by this she doesn't mean that we "negate the value of systematic doctrinal reflection. But the devil, so to speak, or the divine, she says, is in the corporeal details."¹¹¹ For too long the human body has been consigned to an inferior status with no value or potential for knowledge production. The Western epistemological tradition has long deemed the human body as a distraction to be overcome in order to properly ascertain accurate knowledge. Decolonizing epistemology requires that we question and challenge this dominant tradition, where "decolonial theorist not only explore the implications of the power structures in the production of knowledge but also seek to articulate alternative understandings and vision"¹¹²- this also refers to the ways we understand the human.

Being human is not subject to a set of blueprints handed down by overarching systems that attempt to mold people into a type of generic humanity constituted by ideological arrangements, but rather the human emerges from a particular condition that supplies the fundamental datum of experience, the stuff that forges authentic paths to pursue our human vocation. James Cone, referencing Jean Paul Sartre, alludes to the fact that "there is no essence or universal humanity independent of persons in the concreteness of their involvement in the world."¹¹³ Our humanity is reliant upon our participation in the world that we find ourselves in, the world that opens up possibilities for us to make decisions for ourselves and others. So the truth about becoming human is not dependent upon a totalizing vision that obliterates or invalidates alternative forms of

¹¹¹ Dorothy C. Bass et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), 25.

¹¹² Mayra Rivera Rivera, "Thinking Bodies: The Spirit of Latina Incarnational Imagination," in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham Press, 2012), 208.

¹¹³ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 89.

being human, it is not constituted by theoretical constructs but rather by praxis – the human praxis.¹¹⁴

The truth of being human does not require that “we pawn some of our intellectual possessions” or abandon our modes of being in order to assimilate to the dominant cultural patterns that lay out a particular path for becoming human. The truth of the oppressor does not give credence to the marginal reality of the oppressed. Franz Fanon challenges this notion by claiming that the “fellah, the unemployed and the starving do not lay claim to truth. They do not say they represent the truth because they are the truth in their very being.”¹¹⁵ Contrary to the white-male-bourgeoisie existence signified within Heidegger’s formulation of *dasein*, the entity whose very character derives from his ability to inquire about Being, Fanon employs the concept of the *Damn * – the wretched or condemned of the earth, whose very character develops from her ability to inquire about the coloniality of Being.

The question posed by the *damn * does not compare to that of *dasein*, since the question of the *damn * does not ask about Being but rather about nonbeing, the being who is not there.¹¹⁶ The *damn * existence is marked by a sense of nothingness, an “incarnation of nothing that a metaphysical world tries tirelessly to eradicate.”¹¹⁷ Its existence is

¹¹⁴ The human praxis was a concept developed by Sylvia Wynter in an unpublished paper presented to the editor entitled “Human Being as Noun.” Wynter’s notion of human praxis challenges the “incorporation of all forms of human being into a single homogenized descriptive statement that is based on the figure of the West’s liberal monohumanist *Man*.” Wynter views praxis of being human as defining humanness. McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter on Being Human as Praxis*, 23.

¹¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 13.

¹¹⁶ Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 240-270.

¹¹⁷ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 27.

characterized by terror and the prospect of obliteration. Warren argues that “the Negro is invented, or born into modernity, through an onto-metaphysical holocaust that destroys the coordinates of African existence. The Negro is not a human, since being is not an issue for it, and instead becomes ‘available equipment,’ as Heidegger would call it, for the purpose of supporting the existential journey of the human being.”¹¹⁸ The *damné* is a casualty of ontological murder or onticide, because “Being curses it by creating an entity unintelligible within the field of ontology.”¹¹⁹ Invisibility and dehumanization are the core expressions of the coloniality of Being.

The Western philosophical tradition has concerned itself mostly with the quest for unity and presence, an emphasis on the immediate access to meaning by building upon a metaphysics that privileges presence over absence; conversely, the postmodern perspective seeks to overcome ‘doctrines of unity’ (monism) and doctrines of duality (dualism) by stressing the primordial role of plurality as foundational to all reality. Difference is a concept that does not jibe well with traditional Western metaphysics, it unsettles its neat arrangements and fixed structures that support doctrines of stability and certitude. It also challenges a whole outlook “that privileges the individual’s quest for autonomy, freedom, and self-authenticity. A culture that can be indifferent to the ‘other’ in our very midst – the neighbor, the stranger, the refugee,”¹²⁰ a culture that becomes unsettled at the prospect of anything foreign.

¹¹⁸ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 27.

¹¹⁹ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 27.

¹²⁰ Terry A. Veling, *For You Alone Emmanuel Levinas and the Answerable Life* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 9.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), having been a student of Martin Heidegger, became incredulous of his teacher's ontological project. Once a great admirer of his teacher and mentor, later on he became perhaps the most radical opponent to Heideggerianism. Due to Heidegger's brief stint with the Nazi regime, one that did not extend into the years of the Jewish Holocaust, Levinas nonetheless viewed this affiliation as not only a matter of political preference of the time but as having shaped his philosophical project as well. For Levinas, "ontology became equal to a philosophy of power."¹²¹ In other words, ontology *as first philosophy* ultimately becomes complicit with violence. Therefore, it became Levinas' philosophical agenda to not destroy or overcome metaphysics once and for all, but metaphysics as the turn to exteriority or the absolute other.¹²²

[Metaphysics] is turned toward the "elsewhere" and the "otherwise" the "other." For in the most general form it has assumed in the history of thought it appears as a movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us ... toward an alien outside of oneself, toward a yonder... The metaphysical desire tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolute other.¹²³

This new direction paints a different picture of philosophy and the conception of the human vocation. Rooted in the prophetic tradition that seeks to articulate an alternative world, "Levinas tracks a way of reading and responding to life that resounds with the message of the Hebraic tradition, a tradition that has never found a comfortable

¹²¹ Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being," 240-270.

¹²² Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 3.

¹²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 33.

place in the dominant streams of Western thought.”¹²⁴ Levinas’ project paves a new path for an otherwise way of being, or an *otherwise than being* – a mode of existing that abandons the language of ego and self-love and prioritizes the other before the self. Levinas will say that “in divesting the ego of its imperialism, the hetero-affection establishes a new undeclinability,”¹²⁵ a fundamental human responsibility that cannot ignore or refuse the one who faces me, the one “who asks after me, who asks me to be, not for myself alone, but also for the ‘stranger, the widow, and the orphan,”¹²⁶ the other whose very presence has priority before the self.

Rather than privileging ontology as first philosophy, Levinas, one could say, elevates ethics to first philosophy. He, however, views his philosophical project as what he calls the face to face relationship as metaphysical. “In metaphysics a being is in a relation with what it cannot absorb, with what it cannot, in the etymological sense of the term, comprehend.”¹²⁷ By classifying the face to face relationship as metaphysical, Levinas is referring to the repetitive everyday event of relational encounters, the face to face encounter that Veling describes: “every face we encounter is a face of otherness, a face that says, I am other to you; don’t kill me; don’t absorb me into your world; don’t assimilate me by making me the same as you. I am other. I am different. I am not you.”¹²⁸ This outcry stems out of the existential experience of those who resist being classified and absorbed under racial and colonial categories of the human. Levinas made a link

¹²⁴ Veling, *For You Alone*, 9.

¹²⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2016), 121.

¹²⁶ Veling, *For You Alone*, 12.

¹²⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80.

¹²⁸ Veling, *For you Alone*, 35.

between ontology and power, while those who argue from a decolonial perspective make the connection between Being and the colonial enterprise.

A Narrative Rendering of the Human

We have come to witness in recent times the explosion of numerous contextually rooted forms of theological discourse. According to Stephen Bevans, “there is no such thing as ‘theology;’ there is only contextual theology.”¹²⁹ Among other things, great emphasis has been placed on gender, social, political, and cultural experiences as the starting point for theological reflection. Bevans posits that “the contextualization of theology – the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context – is really a theological imperative.”¹³⁰ While some may consider this a relatively new form of theological engagement, the truth is that theology has always been the byproduct of a social, cultural, and historical locations. Theological discourse does not result from a purely neutral position with no exposure to the surrounding elements that constitute the cultural horizon, but rather it develops from out of a complex web of meaning from which we draw the symbolic and linguistic arsenal for the interpretative task.

Bevans will argue “that what makes contextual theology precisely contextual is the recognition of the validity of another *locus theologicus*,”¹³¹ namely, the variety of sources from which theology can find expression. Together with cultures, historical periods, and contemporary forms of thought, as well as scriptures and tradition, themselves also bound by these temporal features, all become the indispensable constituent of theological knowledge. So if theology is to say something meaningful

¹²⁹ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3.

¹³⁰ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3.

¹³¹ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 4.

about God, then it should have something meaningful to say about the human. David Tracy asserts that theology is simultaneously speech about God and the human. He notes that “there is no theology which is not also anthropology. There is no Christian anthropology that is not also a theology. The Christian doctrines of God and the human rise and fall together.”¹³² They constitute one and the same discourse by which to say something meaningful about the human and the divine.

Reality is not an objective phenomenon that resides out there; “reality is mediated by meaning, a meaning that we give it in the context of our culture or our historical period, interpreted from our own particular horizon and in our own particular thought forms.”¹³³ Since theology comprises an understanding of the human, then in effect our theological understanding of the human must too be mediated by the context of culture, history, and particular forms of thought. So echoing the words of Terry Veling, “what kind of humanity do we speak of when we speak of God? He proceeds to say that “to speak of God is never simply to respond to the question of God’s meaning and existence, as if God existed in a realm isolated and apart from us. Rather, Veling says that to speak of God is at the same time to inquire into humanity. The significance of our language about God is its significance or its referral to humanity.”¹³⁴ Which explains why certain theological constructs have deeply shaped our notions of being human.

It would seem by Veling’s statement that the language we choose to speak of God signifies a referent to our conceptions of the human, or vice versa. Having said that, and

¹³² David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 435.

¹³³ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 4.

¹³⁴ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 101.

considering everything that has been discussed about the relationship between theology and anthropology, how do we make sense of the human in light of the Christian faith? Or better yet, how do we respond to our fundamental vocation of being human, theologically? Whereas many theologians have endeavored to construct a theological anthropology that accounts for human subjects situated within a specific historical experience, still the tendency towards absolute declarations regarding conceptions of the human remain. The intention here is not to advocate on behalf of either a universally accepted framework from which to establish our understanding of the human, or the singling out of one contextually based agenda that reflects a specific socio-cultural reality. Instead this work aims at underscoring the ambiguous nature of the human person, what makes up human identity in all its complexity.

Human beings are the result of much more than one would expect, they are formed and shaped by the stories we tell and the stories we create with our lives. Humans come to terms with who they are through the construction of personal narratives. One of Paul Ricoeur's most treasured contributions is the way he links narrative discourse to identity formation. He considers stories to not only have aesthetic quality, to be something entirely separate from human experience, but also views stories as rooted in the very fabric of life with the capacity to profoundly refigure the world.¹³⁵ Human beings are embodied stories – they are itinerant beings who encompass a unique and rich narrative that forms their identity and sense of self. Henry Venema declares “that the journey of self-discovery is brought to language through narrative discourse, and that one

¹³⁵ Henry Venema, "Paul Ricoeur on Refigurative Reading and Narrative Identity," Symposium 4, no. 2 (2000): 237-248.

could argue that the task of becoming a self, is not only given articulate shape through narrative language, but is constituted through the narrative mode of discourse itself.”¹³⁶ Otherwise stated, how we come to understand ourselves is very much determined by the contrasting, wide range, often conflicting and separated across time stories that make up a meaningful and organized whole that make up the self.

Everything mentioned before with respect to culture, history, and the distinct forms of thought provide the sources from which narratives are constructed, including the narratives we draw from in theological reflection. Stories are not conjured up in a vacuum, insulated from cultural reference and detached from human experience; on the contrary, stories are imbued with nuance and constructed through the substance of culture, situated within a particular historical period, and influenced by various currents of thought. If Ricoeur’s theory of narrative discourse has any cogency, then one must question how the prevailing narratives shape our conceptions of self and others. Venema writes, that “coming to terms with who I am not only takes place through the construction of personal narratives; but, I come to understand myself as a character within the stories I tell about myself, and I see possibilities for being other-wise in the stories of others.”¹³⁷ We identify with characters within stories because our identity is inherently narrative in structure.

Ricoeur’s notion of narrative emplotment has a mediating function, it arranges different situational motifs, i.e. events, agents, and objects into a meaningful whole. He views the function of the character in narrative discourse as embodying the function of a

¹³⁶ Venema, “Paul Ricoeur on Refigurative Reading and Narrative Identity,” 237-248.

¹³⁷ Venema, “Paul Ricoeur on Refigurative Reading and Narrative Identity,” 237-248.

plot. He notes “that the identity of a character is comprehensible through the transfer to the character of the operation of emplotment, first applied to the action recounted; characters, we will say, are themselves plots.”¹³⁸ So if characters are in themselves plots, then we who identify with characters and are ourselves a character in the plot of our lives, engaged in a process by which the characters we play unfold the plot of our very existence – then the realization that the ultimate meaning between narrative and life come about through “analogous transferability of the identity of the text to that of persons and communities by way of refigurative reading.”¹³⁹ Narrative identity is not composed of a singular meta-narrative or one all-encompassing story that totalizes human experience, but instead the result of commingling stories that together form a personal narrative. “Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the same incident... [as for example the four Gospels] so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives.”¹⁴⁰ This may support the sense of ambivalence we experience as human beings. We cannot pinpoint or isolate one particular source from which we derive our sense of self.

Rendering a narrative account of the human is very much at the core of any theory of decoloniality. Narratives, according to Ricoeur’s philosophy of identity formation, offer an “imaginary linguistic model or configuration for living that become identifiable with who we are through the reconnection of narrative and life.”¹⁴¹ By the same token,

¹³⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 143.

¹³⁹ Venema, "Paul Ricoeur on Refigurative Reading and Narrative Identity," 237-248.

¹⁴⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol 1 trans, Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 249.

¹⁴¹ Venema, "Paul Ricoeur on Refigurative Reading and Narrative Identity," 237-248.

Walter Mignolo understands the importance of narrative discourse in identity formation.

He writes:

The story is well known, and this is not the place to repeat it. What is necessary here is to understand how the narrative built around the idea of modernity, its rhetoric and goals, assumed the logic of noncontradiction and the semantic of binary opposition. It is this assumption that made and still makes it possible to tell stories and brand promises and build hopes of salvation, progress, development, democracy, growth, and so on; stories that hide and silences coloniality: the darker side of Western modernity.¹⁴²

Mignolo recognizes the power of narratives, particularly the damaging effects that overarching narratives play in human aspirations, hopes, and in the formation of human identity.

Though Paul Ricoeur did not overtly espouse a decolonial agenda, he did, however, stand within the critical tradition of the so called masters of suspicion. His hermeneutical theory was deeply shaped by the likes of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. Ricoeur did not subscribe to a face-value or uncritical reading of the text. Nothing of the sort. Rather, Ricoeur understood the role of narrative discourse to constitute an interaction between the world of the text and the world of the reader – it calls for the codification of the narrative in the life of the reader. Venema says it best:

Reading is a ‘vital experience’ that calls for readers to concretize the image of the text through the refiguration of their own experience. Never static, every act of

¹⁴² Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 155.

reading enters into a dynamic exchange between the configured structure of the text and the imaginative world of meaning, either to fall prey to its persuasive force and succumb to the illusion of familiarity, or to appropriate some portion of its polysemanticism in order to “transform” experience. The act of reading lives within this dialectic of “freedom and constraint,” that is, within the space of imagination which Ricoeur continually describes as the interplay of activity and passivity.¹⁴³

The act of reading the text, the source of narrative discourse in whichever genre it presents itself, is understood by the individual in community with other readers and the traditions within which they read. “Every generation responds to a text through its own “logic of question and answer.”¹⁴⁴ It is therefore this dialectic of activity and passivity that renders a narrative account of the human consequential in terms of understanding identity formation and notions of humanness.

By all accounts, if narrative discourse has anything to say about the human person, then it must play a valuable, if not indispensable role in theology and Christianity. According to Johann Baptist Metz, “a theology that has lost the category of narrative, or that issues a theoretical proscription of story-telling as a precritical form of expression, can only push ‘authentic’ and ‘primordial’ experiences of faith off into the realms of the unobjective and the unspeakable.”¹⁴⁵ This deeply concerns Metz since he is afraid that narrative would only play an indeterminate role, with no power for the

¹⁴³ Venema, “Paul Ricoeur on Refigurative Reading and Narrative Identity.”

¹⁴⁴ Venema, “Paul Ricoeur on Refigurative Reading and Narrative Identity.” See also Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 172.

¹⁴⁵ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 187.

exchange of experiences. Building from the work of Ernst Bloch, Metz views the role of narrative as “pressing toward the practical communication of the experiences amassed in it, as well as the way that the narrator and the one listening are interrelated to one another in a liberating way in the experience being narrated.”¹⁴⁶ Narratives have practical and performative qualities that link the lives of those engaged in telling the story with those listening to the story and the experiences contained within the story.

Theology like all other fields of human inquiry cannot pretend to stand outside the realm of narrative discourse. Metz argues persuasively: “are there not narrative moments in the sciences, and if so are they only ancillary and of heuristic value, at best? Must not, for example, a ‘logic of research’ also make use of narrative patterns in order to explain change, continuity, and discontinuity in scientific processes?”¹⁴⁷ In any event, theology must pay attention to the narrative language of the people, it needs to reclaim its poetic character and avoid trying to play up exclusively to the exigencies of science (which forbids narrative discourse). Theology must thrive in the power of metaphor and language to give shape to our perceived reality and our human longings. In order to do this, theology needs to undergo what Callid Keefe-Perry calls a “re-fleshment” of theological discourse. He advocates “for a turn to the flesh that will simultaneously bring with it a turn to the poetic rather than the prosaic, to a surplus of meaning rather than a linguistic mechanicalism, and to the Christian imagination rather than ossified doctrine.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 188.

¹⁴⁷ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 197.

¹⁴⁸ L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014),

To reimagine the human requires that the Christian imagination permeate the theological task while allowing the narrative structure to internally affect its operative function. A praxis of decoloniality informing the theological enterprise cannot neglect the narrative depth structures within theology. Therefore, an imaginatively driven and narratively structured theological anthropology that emerges from within a praxis of decoloniality reframes our understanding of the human in light of the Christian imagination that ultimately subverts all forms of dehumanizing forces and imperial designs. This whole emancipatory project revolves around the power of the imagination – the ability to reconfigure present order and to imagine a world otherwise. Theology becomes inconsequential if devoid of imagination. Amos Wilder notes:

Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering, realizing, and anticipating; all faith, hope and love. When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic. It is at the level of imagination that any full engagement with life takes place.¹⁴⁹

The imagination affords one to think freely, to move beyond the rigid designs that attempt to perpetuate sameness through structures that are fearful of difference and new prospects. To paraphrase Paul Roceur, imagination has no limit. However, this imaginative endeavor has a Christian contour, an otherwise way of envisioning the world and a breathtakingly powerful way to reimagine the human.

¹⁴⁹ Amos N. Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Lima: Academic Renewal Press, 2001), 2.

What You See is What You Get

The act of seeing what is actually there is what Maria Harris describes as the first moment of teaching. Harris appropriates this term from the traditional religious usage whereby “contemplation implies a totally uncluttered appreciation of existence, a state of mind or a condition of the soul that is simultaneously wide-awake and free from all preoccupation, and interpretation.”¹⁵⁰ Her first step in teaching consist of ‘stillness,’ avoiding the precipitous act of getting ahead of ourselves by assuming we know what is best for the existence before us. Instead Harris encourages an attitude of silence, reverence, and respect. She sums up her first step in the teaching endeavor as “what you see is what you get.” She describes the essence of contemplation as “cultivating the healthy virtues of poverty and simplicity which make us ready for seeing, and then discovering that the seeing is a necessary condition for hope, for possibility, for future.”¹⁵¹

The use of contemplation in our religious pedagogies acknowledges the humanity before us, a humanity that resists any imposition of essentialist classifications or fixed and seemingly natural foundations or essences that define human identity.¹⁵² In the educational exchange there is an undeniable power dynamic that characterizes the entire learning experience. On the other hand, the role of the teacher is to be at the disposal of others who avail themselves to learn and be formed. Contemplation invites a humble and free appreciation for the beauty and truth we behold when we teach. William Dyrness

¹⁵⁰ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 26.

¹⁵¹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 27.

¹⁵² Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 125.

borrows a definition from John Navone for contemplation as a “vision kindled by the act of turning toward something in love and affirmation.”¹⁵³ Contemplation by virtue of affording the space *to be* without any pretense or desire to control constitutes an act of love. A loving relationship “where a community of people come together as a community of hope; a coming together of people, each of whom brings her or his radical particularity as this unique person.”¹⁵⁴ This radical particularity embodies the site from which genuine learning can emerge and new possibilities unfold.

Contemplation offers a beautifully correlating thematic unity with the subject matter presented in this chapter. Teaching as understood here will work towards advancing a decoloniality of being human that begins with contemplation, with the highly anticipated event of discovery, of allowing the learning event to disclose the truth that lies dormant within each and every individual that freely decides to enter into the teacher’s presence. Decoloniality provides a way by which to liberate oneself from the chains of coloniality. It seeks to do so by ongoing processes and practices, pedagogies and paths, to build and cultivate new and fresh ways of being and becoming human. However, in this particular case, decoloniality is only a dialogue partner, a way by which to distill our ways of teaching theologically from the inherited distortions of imperial and market ideologies.

What you see is what you get is the first step in Maria Harris’ teaching program. She understood that teaching, no matter how much experience one might have, never follows the precise designs and schemas we set before ourselves. She knew that we can

¹⁵³ William A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2011), 199.

¹⁵⁴ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 28.

never assume that the way we exist in the world will find direct correlation with the existence of those we teach. In her own words: “The first moment in teaching (contemplation) is the stopping, the taking time, the wide-awakeness necessary to ‘take in’ the personhood (s) involved.”¹⁵⁵ Simple yet profound was Harris’ infectious phrase: what you see is what you get.

¹⁵⁵ Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 28.

CHAPTER TWO. THE AMERICAN DREAM: ENGAGEMENT WITH THE HUMAN SUBJECT MATTER

“I have learned this, at least, from my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”¹⁵⁶

~ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854

Introduction

There is a symbolic, mythic, and narrative quality that organizes the ideal of the American Dream. This ideal does not just consist of an abstract utopian fantasy or the pleasures associated with an idyllic lifestyle, but with the attitudes and beliefs ingrained in the American imagination. Countless books have been written that address the achievement of the American Dream by profiling the lives of those who have ascended to great levels of success.¹⁵⁷ There is also much published work that outlines strategic plans that can propel the reader forward in their quest to reach this most coveted goal. Much too can be read on the topic of those who do not seem to enjoy access to the Dream, who for various reasons have either been denied or cut off from the prospects of ever reaching this sought after vision of fulfillment. At any rate, the American Dream embodies a series

¹⁵⁶ Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁵⁷ The use of the word success throughout this chapter is understood to mean opportunity for upward mobility, the notion that through hard work, sacrifice, and some risk taking, rather than by chance, any citizen can achieve social and economic prosperity. Education and home ownership are considered to be pathways by which to attain the greatest levels of success. Certain ethical influences are believed to have shaped American perspectives regarding success.

of values and beliefs that have come to define the ethos of a nation and the aspirations of a people that are sold on the guarantees of this promise.

The American Dream, or as it will be referred to at times, the Dream, underwent changes throughout the course of American history. What was once an ideal that sprung out of the Declaration of Independence, later on incurred an emblematic quality signifying the pursuit of social and economic stability, becoming the ideal model by which to achieve our fullest human potential. What follows is a sketch of the development of this idea. Though the intention is not to give an exhaustive history or chronological account, it provides a cursory look and analysis of this age-old image that is deeply rooted in the American imaginary. It will make the case that the American Dream functions as a sort of primal myth, or a foundational symbol around and through which people organize their lives and construct their world of meaning.

The Development of an Ideal Existence

The phrase ‘American Dream’ is not just a worn out cliché with no background history from which to trace its origins. No. This overly used expression by politicians, novelist, dramatist, polemicist of every persuasion, historians, journalist, and sociologist, just to name a few, was conceived by historian James Truslow Adams in 1931. Adams was fond of his new catchy phrase but his publishers persuaded him to name his book of that same year, *The Epic of America*. His publishers felt that people might feel deterred from buying a book with the word dream in its title. The phrase paid off nicely for Adams in what happened to be one of the worst years of economic hardship in American history. *The Epic of America* turned out to be a best seller in the midst of the Great Depression when people hardly had money to even buy a book. Seemingly offering a glimmer of

hope, Adam's book reaffirmed an optimistic future for those who could hang on to the long established beliefs of a better, richer, and fuller life and not lose faith in the promise that is America. Adams wrote:

The dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. The very foundation of the American dream of a better and richer life for all is that all, in varying degrees, shall be capable of wanting to share in it. ¹⁵⁸

What Adams refers to in his epilogue as better, richer, and fuller life for all sounds like a fine idea, as far as that goes, but as Jim Cullen would say, "the devil is in the details: just what does better and richer and fuller mean?"¹⁵⁹ Cullen would say that the answer varies, and that those words today could be taken to mean accumulation of wealth as well as "religious transformation, political reform, educational attainment, sexual expression: the list, Cullen notes, is endless."¹⁶⁰ This chapter will explore the imaginative impulses and influences that have solidified the American Dream as the energizing force that motivates all aspects of American life and beyond.¹⁶¹ It will argue that the dream symbolizes the

¹⁵⁸ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (New York: Garden City Books, 1933), 317-323.

¹⁵⁹ Cullen, *The American Dream*, 7.

¹⁶⁰ Cullen, *The American Dream*, 7.

¹⁶¹ Beyond refers to the 21st century phenomenon of global capitalism. Contrary to the previous methods of exerting military and political control, a neo-colonialism or neo-imperialism involves the use the dominant economic apparatus to influence 'developing' countries. The

plenitude of human actualization and the fulfillment of a promise heavily entrenched in market ideology, a paradigmatic framework that impels capitalist-industrial ambitions towards an idealized form of humanity. In other words, the American Dream comprises a powerful symbol that lies at the very core of American culture and shapes the way we organize our lives and imagine the future.

Foundations of the American Vision

Even though James Truslow Adams is credited with first using the phrase, he borrowed the idea from a pantheon of thinkers that developed different aspects of the Dream. Notable thinkers like Tocqueville, Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau, as well as more known historical figures like Jefferson, Franklin, and Lincoln gave shape to this promise of American life. Cultural icons like Babe Ruth, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Mickey Mantle, Henry Ford, Walt Disney, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hugh Hefner, Oprah Winfrey, Donald Trump, and Barack Obama are considered to be the very embodiment of the American Dream.¹⁶² No surprise that only one woman and two black people found their way into that list. According to Lawrence Samuel, “the American Dream is as American as Mom, apple pie, and Chevrolet, the purest, boldest expression of who we are as people.”¹⁶³ This ideal is the very hallmark of American life and aspirations.

American Dream now becomes the Global Dream. No longer is the American Dream the exclusive property of the United States of America, but is now appropriated by the transnational state, a new world hegemony. See William I. Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class, and State in Transnational World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

¹⁶² Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 3-4.

¹⁶³ Samuel, *The American Dream*, 4.

The birth of the American Dream can be traced to the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. This document asserted an emancipatory declaration that the thirteen colonies at war with the Kingdom of Britain would now declare themselves to be thirteen independent sovereign states, no longer under the grip of British rule. While the document is an extensive list of grievances concerned with the royal administration of the colonial courts, and complaints about the quartering of British troops, the beginning of the Declaration underwrites the American Dream.¹⁶⁴ It reads: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹⁶⁵ These words not only set the foundation for what would become the modern United States of America, a nation built on the promise of equality and the protection of basic rights, but words that also structure the details of everyday American existence. Many scholars have pointed out, even foreign observers, that America is perhaps one of the only nations in the world that was founded on a creed. The Declaration of Independence is considered to possess strong dogmatic and theological lucidity.¹⁶⁶

This creed has engendered a collective sense of purpose and attitudes that guide how we arrange our lives and make decisions: where we go to school, who we marry, what we buy, what jobs we take, what goals we set before ourselves. Jim Cullen will

¹⁶⁴ Cullen, *The American Dream*, 38.

¹⁶⁵ "The Declaration of Independence: Full Text," Ushistory.org, accessed June 20, 2019, <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>.

¹⁶⁶ Calvin C. Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 3. See also G.K. Chesterton, *What I saw in America* (Dodd, Mead and Company: New York, 1923).

argue that “in other times and places, people have made such decisions on the basis of the greater glory of God, the security of their nation, or the obligations of their ancestors. We usually don’t, Cullen says, and on those relatively rare occasions when we do, there is a powerful perception that such decisions are atypical, even foolish.”¹⁶⁷ Cullen believes that our very existence, the way we dwell in the world, how we prioritize our lives is significantly driven by the phrase that concretely becomes the realizable objective: the pursuit of happiness. But what does happiness entail, and what must we do to achieve this happiness?

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness has a teleological appeal insofar that the signed Declaration vows to safeguard pathways by which to live out our God-given rights. As a result, a development of doctrines for American life were designed to provide a roadmap from which to pursue our destiny, a distinctly American destiny. The notion of American destiny is predicated upon the mythical qualities ascribed to the American ideal. According to Gabriel Moran, “from the beginning to this day, ‘America’ has had a mythical quality. ‘America’ as a new world refers to a world before this world or after this world or outside this world. By not being of this world, ‘America’ has functioned as an ideal or standard. It has been a religious idea about the end of history and a secular idea about the bounties of the future.”¹⁶⁸ In either case, the idea of America contains a teleological character with an endgame in sight, it possesses an ethical, anthropological, and perspectival compass that determines how our choices will effectively lead us to a

¹⁶⁷ Cullen, *The American Dream*, 38.

¹⁶⁸ Gabriel Moran, *America in the United States and the United States in America: A Philosophical Essay* (Bloomington: IUniverse, 2018), 19.

particular desired outcome. In other words, if you follow everything that is required of you and live according to the established creed you can rightly live the American Dream.

During his first year in office, Bill Clinton delivered a speech to the Democratic Leadership Council, he reminded his listeners: “The American Dream that we were all raised on is a simple but a powerful one – if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you.”¹⁶⁹

Working hard and playing by the rules might get you there, according to the president. And while that recipe does not necessarily provide a guarantee, if the president says it does, then there must be some truth to it. In the same manner Clinton in 1997 during the State of the Union address said this: “America is far more than a place. It is an idea.”¹⁷⁰ He understood the power and the motivational strength, as well as the religious value that infuses the idea of America. Countless presidents throughout history have maneuvered this idea in one way or another, either through speeches or while addressing the entire nation, awakening our deepest national sensibilities and renewing our commitments to the American ideal.

There is certainly a civil religion in America that embodies “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that are drawn from American history and institutionalized in a collectivity that function not as a form of national self-worship but as the subordination of the nation to ethical principles that transcend it in terms of which it should be

¹⁶⁹ "Clinton Administration First Year," C-Span, December 3, 1993, accessed June 21, 2019, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?52694-1/clinton-administraion-year>. President Clinton addresses the Democratic Leadership Council annual meeting discussing his administration's first year.

¹⁷⁰ "Transcript of Clinton's 1997 State of the Union," CNN, January 31, 2005, accessed June 21, 2019, <http://www.cnn.com/2005/ALLPOLITICS/01/31/sotu.clinton1997.4/index.html>.

judged.”¹⁷¹ Even though civil religion does not enjoy any form of sanction or state recognition either by established laws or by decree, it is supported and perpetuated by the customs and traditions in American society.¹⁷² When a president speaks, whether that be through a State of the Union address or during a time of national crisis, she discharges a solemn function that taps into the collective imagination that harbors the beliefs and values that constitute the American ideal.

Civil religion strengthens the bonds of allegiance and commitment to the American ideal. While that ideal may seem to possess uncompromising and stable values and beliefs, the truth is that the American ideal can look differently depending on how the American creed is being interpreted, and whether it has an inclusive or exclusive tone. At its most exclusive, some beliefs enshrined within American civil religion can include absolute allegiance to government, a willingness to take up arms to maintain social order, affiliation with specific religious and racial identities, and the implicit belief that God’s will can be known through the American experience.¹⁷³ Some of this has become apparent during the Trump presidency. Since the beginning of his presidential campaign Trump offered a new definition of what it means to be an American.

He took advantage of the bully pulpit to awaken deep-seated attitudes of nativism and exceptionalism. And while Trump himself does not seem to rely on any sort of fixed ideological commitment or adherence to his party’s political agenda, flip flopping on

¹⁷¹ Benjamin P. Marcus and Murali Balaji, "How Trump Is Reshaping American Civil Religion," *Crux*, July 11, 2017, accessed June 21, 2019, <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2017/07/11/trump-reshaping-american-civil-religion/>. Also see Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Religion Today: A Reader*, 2017.

¹⁷² Conrad Cherry, ed., *Gods New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 8.

¹⁷³ Marcus, "How Trump Is Reshaping American Civil Religion."

different issues and at times even contradicting the conservative Republican platform which he is expected to uphold, his political success however stems from the way he appealed to the anger and frustration of those who felt disenfranchised and counted out of the American promise of a better, richer, and fuller life. Trump's populist approach has managed to split American society into "two homogenous and antagonist groups: the pure people on the one end and the corrupt elite on the other," making it seem as if he is guided by the will of the people.¹⁷⁴ Identifying himself not with the values of the rich and privileged, but with the values of the working class. The moral dimension in Trump's populist rhetoric explains how someone like him, who clearly does not come from humble beginnings, can pretend to be the voice of the people.¹⁷⁵

No matter how it is used or for what purpose, the American Dream will always find explicit or implicit usage in American political discourse. Donald Trump's campaign slogan which has also morphed into a pop culture phenomenon, *Make America Great Again* (MAGA) harbors not only a racist code for those who long for the white America of a bygone day, but also a message for those who feel a sense of loss as other groups have become more empowered within American society. Make American Great Again is a clarion call to reclaim what belongs to you, to take back what now seems to be up for grabs, a cry to keep American life intact and protected from outside influences. One could say that the MAGA slogan is a form of political speech designed to fire up Americans to take back the Dream that was once within their grasp but is now under assault and threaten with extinction. A dream that for some Americans seem to be

¹⁷⁴ Marcus, "How Trump is Reshaping American Civil Religion."

¹⁷⁵ Marcus, "How Trump is Reshaping American Civil Religion."

disappearing, a way of life that is becoming less and less attainable. The Dream represents more than just a goal driven illusion, more than a targeted destination reserved for those with big ambitions, and yes even though that too reflects the idea of the American Dream, it also represents a way of life that is distinctly and exclusively American; the idea we buy into by virtue of our participation in American society.

All things considered, the American Dream is a powerful metaphor that shapes the belief structure of American culture. Despite the fact that there is no one definition that can fully capture its spirit, rather different articulations that attempt to describe an ideal of human potential understood in terms of abundance, consumer freedom, and a comfortable lifestyle,¹⁷⁶ this work understands the Dream to be the most foundational ideal that drives all social, political, economic, and yes even religious practices in American culture. The American Dream is a metaphor for success, symbolic of a market consciousness that views life in terms of transactional dealings and commodity value. What was once a dream that imagined a world in terms of civil liberties and the pursuit of our fullest human potential, now consists of a credo that imagines an open, competitive, and a market driven society where the opportunity to succeed becomes widely available.¹⁷⁷

The dream of American life has become synonymous with social and economic welfare. The case can be made that the Dream ultimately shapes the hopes and longings

¹⁷⁶ See Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, & Culture, 1830-1998* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999). Ownby views consumer culture as the driving force behind the quadripartite structure of the American Dream or dreams. He describes these four powerful dreams as the Dream of Abundance, Dream of a Democracy of Goods, the Dream of Freedom of Choice, The Dream of Novelty,

¹⁷⁷ Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 5.

of all Americans who are seduced by the idea of wealth and personal fulfillment, whatever that means for each person. No matter how we define the American Dream or how we choose to interpret this powerful American trope, one thing is for sure, this ideal holds the deepest desires and hopes of every American. Throughout the history of the United States the American Dream has acquired a different tenor based on the particularities and the distinctive cultural landscape of the era. It is important to note that meaning grows out of different forms of articulation, always dependent upon different cultural forms and discourse.

Simply put, culture is essentially about ‘shared meaning’ while language is the “privileged medium in which we make sense of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged.”¹⁷⁸ Therefore, the American Dream makes sense insofar as the possible meanings and nuance shifts are analyzed within specific historical, political, and economic contexts.¹⁷⁹ However, the Dream can be said to have a persistent motif that has remained constant throughout the course of American history, recurrent themes that fosters notions of success and fulfillment. By today’s standards the American Dream is a life built on wealth, consumerism, profitability, and certain class distinction. The American Dream continues to play a vital role in American consciousness. The phrase still finds its way into our colloquial speech and other mediums of communication.

¹⁷⁸ Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation - Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE, 1997), 1.

¹⁷⁹ A careful study of the development and evolution of the American Dream is not the intention of this study. Though the American Dream does reflect the hopes and aspirations of the contemporary age, it nonetheless preserves a transhistorical quality (metanarrative) consistent with ideological presuppositions. However, note that the ideological substructure that undergirds the American Dream is not necessarily a static but fluid system of thought that is subject to the changes and particularities of a given historical period. The American Dream, while preserving its fundamental character, also enjoys a subtle nuance produced by the cultural landscape of the time.

Whether in prose or in poetic forms of expression, including musical composition and the visual arts, the Dream continues to pervade the creative imagination.

Much music, poetry, and other forms of art media have attempted to interpret the concept of the American Dream in ways that speak profoundly about the hopes and aspirations of American life. Whether we listen to Don Mclean's *American Pie* or David Wilcox's *Rusty Old American Dream*, their music seeks to give expression to an all-encompassing ideal that offers meaning to the American experience. The former personifies Miss American Pie as the synthesis of all that is deeply and uniquely American, while the latter employs the image of an old 1958 American car as emblematic of the durability of American life. A vast amount of artistic work, too numerous to account for here is dedicated to making sense of this highly influential phrase that has shaped the American imaginative landscape. The American Dream resists all attempts to be pinned down to any one definition, and does not fit well into one overall description, but instead it is open to a plurality of imaginative constructions, to various forms of interpretative formulations. Moreover, the American Dream operates as the guiding principle in American life – no matter how we make sense of it, the dream is a powerful source from which we learn to be human. Because the American Dream has a powerful affect upon our imaginative impulses, it is almost coterminous with the entire scope of our visionary field, and certainly occupies a lot of real estate within the horizon of our imaginative range. Essentially the American Dream exerts a colonizing influence on how we conceive and envision what a fulfilled humanity ought to look like and who can benefit from it.

The Dream envisioned through a Mechanistic Paradigm

The use of metaphors, whether in speech or in writing, is as much a common human practice¹⁸⁰ as eating, walking, sitting, standing, or just simply putting on your shoes every morning. Utilizing metaphoric forms of expressions is not a foreign activity for human beings. In fact, the way in which we interact with one another and share meaningful insight is communicated in coded forms of metaphoric discourse. The greatest thing by far, wrote Aristotle, is to be a master of metaphor.¹⁸¹ He considers a person who is skillful in the use of metaphors to be a genius, “since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity of dissimilars.”¹⁸² It would seem that Aristotle understood the nature of metaphors to somehow be linked to our deepest imaginative capabilities, with a certain inherent human ability to apprehend and deduce meaning from things that have absolutely no relationship to one another.

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges in Western philosophy was to try to coherently elucidate the structures of the imagination and its confounding function in human experience. And while some of the biggest names like Aristotle and Kant attempted to explicate this most enigmatic of human faculties, it remains at best a part of human nature that eludes our most sophisticated forms of analysis. Stephen Asma says that “apart from some cryptic passages in Aristotle and Kant, philosophy has said almost

¹⁸⁰ Everyday practices takes place within the tensive relationship of strategies and tactics. Strategies are employed by organizational power structures, such as the state, corporations, or big institutions defined as power structures that are deemed ‘producers,’ while the average person identified as ‘consumer’ acts in the environment defined by strategies, operates by using tactics. This notion undermines the social scientific point of view that understands people as passive receivers of culture with no creative agency. See Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2011).

¹⁸¹ Richard McKeon, ed., *Introduction to Aristotle*, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 666.

¹⁸² McKeon, *Introduction to Aristotle*, 666.

nothing about imagination, and what it says seems thoroughly disconnected from the creativity that artist and laypeople call ‘imaginative.’¹⁸³ Asma’s article juxtaposes the more conventional understandings of the imagination, those that are born out of a Hellenistic philosophical tradition with a more contemporary approach that examines a pre-linguistic, evolutionary process defined by a raw system constituted by emotional and perceptual associations. In other words, an inherited reservoir of images that precedes language and is produced by conditional associations rather than with propositional coding.¹⁸⁴ Asma suggests that the imagination is one of the earliest of human abilities, that although language improves upon the act of thinking and communicating, nevertheless ‘thinking with imagery’ or as he also describes it, ‘thinking with the body,’ must have preceded the act of language in the human evolutionary process.

No matter how we approach the study of the imagination, one thing is for sure, the imagination, as Asma writes, “Is intrinsic to our inner lives.”¹⁸⁵ Ultimately, we humans “invent animals and events that don’t exist, we rerun history with alternative outcomes, we envision social and moral utopias, we revel in fantasy art, and we meditate both on what we could have been and on what we might become.”¹⁸⁶ The imagination, whether it is something considered to fall under the category of human faculty or a synthesizer of the senses and understanding, it definitely constitutes the source from which new meanings emerge and new worlds unfold. However, the imagination is fragile

¹⁸³ Stephen T. Asma, "Imagination Is Ancient," *Aeon*, September 11, 2017, accessed July 16, 2019, <https://aeon.co/essays/imagination-is-such-an-ancient-ability-it-might-precede-language>.

¹⁸⁴ Asma, “Imagination Is Ancient.”

¹⁸⁵ Asma, “Imagination Is Ancient.”

¹⁸⁶ Asma, “Imagination Is Ancient.”

and can easily become hi-jacked by prevailing ideologies and certain metaphoric networks. Reigning paradigms of thought and all-encompassing metaphoric forms of discourse can sequester our imaginative resources and stunt our potential to consider alternative possibilities.

Metaphors are the product of deep imaginative constructions and associations, they provide the means by which we can re-describe reality. Some metaphors carry greater weight than others insofar as they find their way into the innermost archives of our interpretative resources – the stuff that molds our imaginative energies. Ricoeur considers a “metaphor to be a trope of resemblance. As figure, metaphor constitutes a displacement and an extension of the meaning of words; its explanation is grounded in a theory of substitution.”¹⁸⁷ Ricoeur’s study offers an extensive and in-depth analysis of how language has the ability to create and recreate meaning through the use of metaphor. According to Ricoeur, the most distinctive and fundamental feature of metaphoric discourse is the tensive relationship between the what ‘is’ and what ‘is not,’ the process by which discourse releases its power to speak some truth about the world.¹⁸⁸ Interpretations of the world, no matter what model or disciplinary framework we subscribe to, are grounded and oriented by symbols that originally founded them.

Root Metaphors

In order to properly diagnose the maladies of our social space and determine what generates and structures the world we live in, we must first endeavor to explore that which gives a sense of coherence and direction to our lives. According to Gibson Winter,

¹⁸⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.

¹⁸⁸ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 5-6.

“certain metaphoric networks become dominant in a total society, shaping modes of thought, action, decision, and life.”¹⁸⁹ Winter drew from the work of Robert Nisbet to show how the power of metaphor shapes and organizes human thought and experience. While Nisbet believes that the organicist metaphor continues to dominate Western society, Winter, on the other hand, “argues that organicism was displaced as a dominant metaphor in the West by mechanism.”¹⁹⁰ What is important for Winter is to be able to identify the all-encompassing metaphor that gives structure to the way we think and arrange our lives. In order to have a good grasp of the reality we abide in, we must first acknowledge that to be human is to be in a constant state of understanding. Winter says that human beings “dwell in the world through thoughts and feelings that are mediated by language and symbols.”¹⁹¹ Basically, we operate within a system of meaning constituted by linguistic and semiotic formulations.

What separates the organicist from the mechanistic is precisely the influence it exerts over the collective consciousness of a people. No matter which one occupies the role of ‘reigning paradigm,’ they equally generate a comprehensive understanding of the world we experience. The organicist or biological image, notes Winter, informs a world characterized by a “more-than-human powers, ordered according to the rhythms of biological or organic growth and decay.”¹⁹² This means, strictly speaking, a world defined analogously to the human body, a mode of thinking and living designed around

¹⁸⁹ Gibson Winter, *Liberating Creation: Foundations of Religious Social Ethics* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 6.

¹⁹⁰ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 6.

¹⁹¹ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 4.

¹⁹² Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 2.

the patterns of birth, maturity, and death.¹⁹³ The mechanistic image, on the other hand, involves a world that conforms to “highly routinized and repetitive patterns of work and life.”¹⁹⁴ An image that is deeply anchored in epistemic and cosmological perspectives shaped by sensibilities that support linear and calculative processes. This paradigmatic drive originally sought to free society from traditional and naturalist conceptions of world order.¹⁹⁵ The mechanistic paradigm is said to serve as the foundation of modern civilization.¹⁹⁶ In other words, a foundational metaphor that both gives life and is the result of an industrially shaped and market driven mode of being that is patterned in relationships of exchange and calculation. In this present inquiry, a link will be established between the mechanistic model of our age with the deeply held commitment of achieving the American Dream.

The organicist and mechanistic paradigms, while representing very different views, are both considered to be root metaphors. The study of root metaphors help us uncover the concealed life commitments implicit within certain ideological structures. For example, the modern world is presumed to be secularized, operating under its basic assumptions about reality. As Winter points out, “the secularization thesis is an ideology that conceals the life commitments of the technological age. Critique of this ideology involves a reconsideration of the foundational role of symbols in human dwelling.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1988), 33.

¹⁹⁴ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 3.

¹⁹⁵ According to Winter’s chapter 1 footnote number 4, “the mechanistic imagery is already dominant in the thought of Rene Descartes who envisioned the body as a machine and of Thomas Hobbes for whom reality is composed of entitative forces.” Winter intends to underscore the philosophical presuppositions that give shape to the mechanistic image. The root metaphor animates and is the result of a modern/industrial/capitalist society. Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Holland, *Social Analysis*, xvi.

¹⁹⁷ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, xii – xiii.

Human dwelling is the very action through which we make sense and interpret the world around us. Winter describes human dwelling as a “lived interpretation of the symbolized world.”¹⁹⁸ Human dwelling constitutes the way we decipher the coding of the symbolized world that surrounds us, and the way by which we engage in the process of meaning making.

In proposing engagement as the second movement of teaching, Maria Harris knows very well that the world we move around in is precisely the object of our deepest concern. After pulling back and allowing those who stand before us to be, acknowledging their otherness and marveling at the reality that they cannot be reduced to mere sameness, we then proceed with the act of engagement. Engagement for Harris “means diving in, wrestling with, and rolling around in the subject matter”¹⁹⁹- the human subject matter. The study of root metaphors provides the clues from which we come to understand our notions of humanness. Since at the present time the mechanistic metaphor is said to be the dominant mode by which we interpret our reality, then the purpose of engagement is to grapple with the matter that makes up the human subject. In other words, the purpose involvement in the processes that shape our thinking, our practices, ultimately our mode of being-in-the-world. Engagement requires that we stir the pot, so to speak, so that whatever lies beneath could rise up and make itself known to us. That is to say, the foundational symbolizations that furnish important clues to the way we construct meaning, most importantly the stuff we piece together to help make sense of who we are. Winter said it well, “as mechanism shaped science and technique, capitalistic

¹⁹⁸ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, xiii.

¹⁹⁹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 30.

organization and political systems, it became the dominant mode of interpretation of nature, life, and cosmos,²⁰⁰ namely, everything that constitutes human existence.

The study of metaphors becomes an incomplete task unless a rigorous analysis is carried out to further understand the way it bears influence on another one of society's integrative elements, the symbol.²⁰¹ Ricoeur's study of metaphors was the result of an effort that proved futile when his direct analysis of symbols became inadequate. For Ricoeur, the interconnectivity of different metaphors form a cluster that supplies the datum that forms a root metaphor and gives rise to a symbolized environment. He writes:

Metaphoric functioning would be completely inadequate as a way of expressing the different temporality of symbols, what we might call their insistence, if metaphors did not save themselves from complete evanescence by means of a whole array of intersignifications. One metaphor, in effect, calls for another and each one stays alive by conserving its power to evoke the whole network. The network engenders what we can call root metaphors.²⁰²

In the quote above, Ricoeur succinctly stresses how interdependence among metaphors is crucial in order to conserve²⁰³ their livelihood and collectively form a root metaphor. It is precisely this process where metaphoric clusters give rise to particular traditions. For

²⁰⁰ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 5.

²⁰¹ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 8.

²⁰² Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976), 64.

²⁰³ The word conserve has strong implications within an organicist context. The philosophical conviction known as conservatism is principally marked by strong commitments towards tradition, hierarchy, and evolutionary change. At times conservatism has become outright oppositional, harking back to a model of society considered to be appropriate for all times. The livelihood of metaphoric signification and its perennial sustainability becomes paramount here.

example, Winter compares it to the “different ways in which the divine mystery is metaphorically interpreted in a religious tradition”²⁰⁴ – through metaphors that belong to particular linguistic community and cultural model. Ultimately, root metaphors provide the “imagery rather than a mere fact or transcendent idea which gives the clue to the archetypal energies that generate the world of meaning.”²⁰⁵ Put differently, they provide source from which worlds unfold, practices are shaped, knowledge develops, and notions of what it means to be human are formed.

A Means-to- End Existence

To describe the American Dream is no simple task. Yet, even though multiple interpretations have been rendered, this present work included, it nonetheless constitutes a central image in American society. Make no mistake, the American Dream is a non-negotiable, highly cherished, indispensable commitment to the American way of life. That is why the intention here is to show how this most revered belief operates within every aspect American existence, including the way it serves to guide Americans on how they should lead their lives and reach fulfillment. As it was stated earlier, the American Dream has a history that dates back to the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Although the Dream has managed to preserve a consistent thematic core throughout the history of the United States, it also underwent various adaptations according to the specific time period and the overall cultural climate. It is important to note that what was once a dream about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness mutated into a dream about a life defined in terms of material prosperity, professional

²⁰⁴ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 9.

²⁰⁵ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 8.

achievement, and upward mobility. All three of these categories are subject to a quantifiable measure process. In other words, they are all appraised and judged in terms of calculable estimations. Depending on how much wealth we amass and how much we climb the ladder of success, will determine how close we are in fulfilling the promise of the Dream. Whether it be money, accomplishments, or the social class level we fall under,²⁰⁶ quantifiable measures end up determining the extent of success and the personal fulfillment we have attained.

This work supports Winter's claim that in the West the organicist metaphor was displaced by the mechanistic. As Winter cautioned, "if one is careful not to project an unwarranted homogeneity on these various peoples and cultures, it can be safely argued that a common source of imagery provides coherence in their worlds."²⁰⁷ Namely, he warns about the danger of imposing our own assumptions and reducing different cultures to a uniform model, while at the same time recognizing that at a very fundamental level lies an all-consuming metaphor that provides an organizing unity. With regards to the American experience, a cultural system that has managed to insert itself and dominate the global stage, only one root metaphor cannot claim exclusive rights.

People in modern American society organize their lives not just around mechanistic processes, but also through organicist patterns of life; thus achieving a bit of a break from the proverbial norm through weekends, the holidays, family reunions and

²⁰⁶ Social stratification is a social scientific concept that places people into socioeconomic ranking based on their level of wealth, income, social status, occupation and power. In Western societies, the stratification system is divided into a three major tiers that comprise a social class: upper class, middle class, and lower class.

²⁰⁷ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 2.

gatherings.²⁰⁸ The mechanistic source, however, unseats the organicist insofar that the former seems to occupy much greater cultural and social real-estate. Both the organicist and mechanistic paradigms do not share coterminous territory within American society. In reality, the mechanistic pattern associated with a business as usual like attitude, one that is marked by calculative logic and means-to-end rationale, prevails over the leisurely and the more organic processes.

The American Dream is basically understood as an ideal or a way of conceptualizing what American life is supposed to look like - subject to the rhythmic patterns of a mechanistic paradigm. According to Winter, “Mechanistic thought and action reduce work, politics, marriage, and education to a technical, means-end process which flattens the world, suppressing the symbols and rituals that found and orient human life.”²⁰⁹ This could be taken to mean the suppression of the symbols and rituals that generate creative disclosure. Simply stated, the displacement of a whole emblematic life system that reveals something more about human existence in all its complexity and ambiguity instead of reducing all existence to mere utility. What unsettles mechanistic thought is the absence of a means to an end logic in any human activity.

Unless human thought or action possesses instrumental value, supported by a mechanistic root metaphor, then whatever else falls outside of this purview has no real worth but for only amusement or entertainment purposes. Take art for example, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the world and nature was understood as a rational order, the arts only provided clues to support the purpose of that rational order but only in

²⁰⁸ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 3. .

²⁰⁹ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, xii.

terms of subjective appreciation. As Winter explains, “An esthetic of subjective appreciation and objectified art of a high culture originally produced a counterpoint to spreading industrialism, science, and technical process.”²¹⁰ As a result, the artistic process was relegated to the periphery, removing art from everyday life and putting it in museums, galleries, or concert halls for the appreciation of the elite. Art becomes something of a pastime, having no real effect or usefulness in society, unless commodified to suit the demands of the market.

As stated earlier, the Dream has served as the guiding mythology and image of American life. The pursuit of prosperity marked by affluence and social status is endemic in American society. This idea is best depicted in the words of the song *The American Dream* from the musical *Miss Saigon*. It reads:

I'm fed up with small-time hustles
I'm too good to waste my talent for greed
I need room to flex my muscles
in an ocean where the big sharks feed
make me Yankee, they're my fam'ly
they're selling what people need

what's that I smell in the air
the American dream
sweet as a new millionaire

²¹⁰ Winter, *Liberating Creation*, 11.

the American dream
pre-packed, ready-to-wear
the American dream
fat, like a chocolate éclair
as you suck out the cream

As noted above, the Dream is what encapsulates the American experience. Make me a Yankee, reads the verse, and I too can have what they are selling. A lifestyle comprised of a nice house with the white picket fence and the car, the job, and everything else that goes with it is up for grabs if, and only if, we follow the right formula. The American Dream embodies a success ethic that strongly impacts the everyday life of Americans and those who experience the effects of the global capitalist market. What was once a purely American “dream,” an ideal only possible for those who can rightly call themselves Americans, now extends itself to the far reaches of the globe where the comingling of American pop culture and market ideology have taken hold.

There is an inner sympathy between the ethics of success and a means-to- an- end process. Pursuing, upholding, and living the American Dream is formulated in terms of certain basic values and character traits, according to DeVitis and Rich. Americans generally believe in achievement, success, and materialism in combination with equal opportunity, ambitiousness, and hard work as the only means for attaining the Dream.²¹¹ Seeking out this form of human fulfillment involves a sort of a business mindset. Among the core beliefs underlying the Dream, DeVitis and Rich explains, “Is to work hard in

²¹¹ Joseph L. DeVitis and John Martin Rich, *The Success Ethic, Education, and the American Dream* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 5.

order to succeed in competition; those who work hard gain success and are rewarded with fame, power, money, and property; since there is equal opportunity, it is claimed that those who fail are guilty of either insufficient effort or character deficiencies.”²¹² For starters, equal opportunity is an illusion since a level playing field²¹³ is not provided for in this competitive enterprise, leaving those with prior circumstances over which they have no control to be at a disadvantage. Secondly, to work hard in order to succeed in a competitive process is aimed at some sort of compensatory outcome; it operates under a means-to- an-end process. Your hard work will pay off... that is what we commonly hear as the popular trope for success in popular American discourse.

The American Dream operates under a means-to- an-end process whereby the achievement of this most sought-after existence can only be attainable through the mechanisms of a capitalist economic system. In other words, the Dream is only realizable if one observes and abides by the principles and practices of a capitalist market system. The American Dream is what life is supposed to look like if we as competitors and actors within the market can effectively exert our dominance in a cut-throat economic arena. Only if we survive the perils of the volatile market and play our cards right can we then expect to enjoy the fruits of American bliss. It is this mechanistic approach that

²¹² DeVitis and Rich, *The Success Ethic*, 5.

²¹³ The level playing field is a core idea within the subject of distributive justice. This concerns the socially just allocation of goods. Distributive justice is fundamental to Catholic Social teachings. “Distributive justice requires that the allocation of income, wealth, and power in society be evaluated in light of its effects on persons whose basic material needs are unmet. The Second Vatican Council stated: ‘The right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one’s family belongs to everyone. The fathers and doctors of the church held this view, teaching that we are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of our superfluous goods.’ Minimum material resources are an absolute necessity for human life.” See National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 1986, No. 70.

permeates every dimension of existence, and this paradigmatic framework that provides the inner logic that motivates all endeavors and aspirations. Some theorists and philosophers declare capitalism to be a system consonant with human nature, an economic apparatus that aligns perfectly with our deepest human tendencies. They even allege that capitalism is clearly identifiable in most ancient societies. Other experts would argue otherwise:

Many people speak of capitalism as if it were as old as the hills, as ancient as the Bible, implying that there is something about the system that accords with human nature. Yet, on reflection, this is not clearly the case. Nobody ever called the Egyptians pharaohs capitalist. The Greeks about whom Homer wrote did not comprise a business society, even though there were merchants and traders in Greece. Medieval Europe was certainly not capitalist. Nor would anyone have used the word to describe the brilliant civilizations of India and China about which Marco Polo wrote, or the great empires of ancient Africa, or the Islamic societies of which we catch glimpses in *The Arabian Nights*.²¹⁴

All the same, capitalism has become a ubiquitous force that governs all levels of modern society. In fact, what was once considered a mere model for economic exchange and production that was founded on the premise of human competitiveness and profit motive, a complex system designed to protect individual property, has become the very rationale that provides a sense of coherence to our mundane existence. The saying goes, ‘you can’t

²¹⁴ Robert L. Heilbroner and Lester C. Thurow, *Economics Explained* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 11-12.

get something for nothing.’ A simple saying that generally intimates something of our economic practices is instead saying something about our social relationships.

The capitalist consciousness is marked by a means-to-end logic. The end goal is wealth produced by market stimulation generated through production and consumption. This economic framework subsumes all levels of human activity, even the religious. According to Mark Fisher, “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable... the fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment.”²¹⁵ So entrenched in our collective consciousness is a capitalist ideology and way of life that few bother to even question it. In the North American context, or anywhere in the world where the market economy thrives, the American Dream, or any other version of it, has sequestered ‘the dreaming life’ of the people. So when everything else is pretty much negotiable, including religion, the dream, on the other hand, is not.

Kathryn Lofton in her critically acclaimed book, *Consuming Religion*, offers a brilliant account of how at the deepest levels of the imagination, neo-liberalism and religion, and the practices of both have and continue to be completely intertwined. If the American Dream is the embodiment of a neo-liberal fantasy, then we can rightly argue that the Dream offers a world based on relationships with commodities.²¹⁶ Namely, a world that operates under a market logic. Lofton argues that “Neoliberalism might therefore be understood as a form of religious occupation of the economy: a way of

²¹⁵ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 8.

²¹⁶ Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2017), 12.

seeing the self in the world as a calculatingly sovereign person enfolded in systems of power, class, and experience through the selection of particular goods and services.”²¹⁷ A mean-to-an-end rationale motivates and orders all features that make up human existence. Lofton views the marketplace as the ‘primary archive’ of religious belief and practices. She contends that in order to “study any contemporary subject - person, place, or thing – is to study one dancing amid tropes messily occupying economic and spiritual metaphor, despite the illusion that the regulations managing each may be separated by legal code and stock portfolio.”²¹⁸ This of course exemplifies the tangled web of symbolic and metaphoric discourse that powerfully constitute the world of meaning we dwell in.

Vocation of the Human Subject

The intention here is to offer a critical analysis of the American Dream, a fluid but persistent trope that shapes the imaginative life of a people in terms of a creed, a set of values, and a vision. More than that, however, the dream can be understood as an all-encompassing image by which we organize our lives and envision a future. When attempting to define religion, Lofton contends that sociality and its practices are a universal feature of human behavior whether or not there is any form of sectarian affiliation.²¹⁹ Furthermore, she views the dreaming life of a people as the imaginative source from which religious structures emerge. Lofton writes:

Whenever we see dreams of and for the world articulated, whenever we see those dreams organized into legible rituals, schematics, and habits, we glimpse the domain that the word religion contributes to describe. Whenever we see the real

²¹⁷ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 9.

²¹⁸ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 6-7.

²¹⁹ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 3.

ways we organize ourselves to survive our impossible distance from those dreams, we grasp why religion exists. Not because the religious is that dreaming of those realities. Because religion has been a word used to summarize the habits by which we demarcate ourselves as certain kind of dreamers and makers.²²⁰

Lofton views the word religion to mean that which establishes us as certain dreamers; thus, as people who consolidate into communities of practice fashioned through our imaginative sources. To be a certain kind of dreamer, particularly an American dreamer, suggests an observance to a market dogma which generates a world and a specific way to exist in that world.

Maria Harris understands our fundamental human vocation as a process of becoming subjects, human subjects. For her the most basic decision that can be made by any human being is between speaking or remaining embedded in a culture of silence, between naming oneself or being named by others, between remaining an object or becoming a subject.²²¹ For Harris the vocation towards becoming a subject rather than an object is the ability to separate oneself from the world within one's own consciousness, or as she puts it, to "be critical of it, act on it, and transform it – in the process of making the world a subject, too."²²² Subject matter for Harris involves more than just the act of handing over material and covering the required lesson, rather she views subject matter as a system of clues concerned above all with human existence. Her pedagogical approach seems to exhibit an uncanny compatibility with decolonial options.

²²⁰ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 3.

²²¹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 32.

²²² Harris, *Teaching & Imagination*, 33.

Although Harris does not explicitly state a commitment to undermine hegemonic forces, nor does she direct her efforts towards exposing colonial structures of power, her pedagogy on the other hand, is very much grounded in a praxis of liberation. Harris declares that “authentic existence demands freedom, and the conflict preceding and leading to that freedom is one between either being a spectator to one’s own reality or being an actor who initiates her or his own activity toward the world, an actor who is engaged.”²²³ In her teaching paradigm, Harris’ second movement is known as engagement, what she conceives as the act of bringing in the contemplative imagination to bear on the tangible, and allow for our imaginative resources to take on flesh. Engagement with the human subject matter means that we grow in the awareness of our human condition and grapple with the very stuff that makes up our world of meaning. Our world of meaning consists of those things that inspire our sense of the human and provide coherence to the world we inhabit. A root metaphor furnishes that stuff, it provides those clues that Harris describes as entirely concerned with human existence. If the American dream-life supposes a form of existence defined in terms of monetary success, then the Dream must be treated as that which provides the system of clues about our notions of the human.

Harris describes the act of teaching as the “creation of a situation in which subjects, human subjects, are handed over to themselves.”²²⁴ By this she means that our vocation to be subjects does not only demand that we remain in constant engagement with the world around us, but that we also learn to stand back to look at how we

²²³ Harris, *Teaching & Imagination*, 32.

²²⁴ Harris, *Teaching & Imagination*, 33.

understand and help create the world. Whether we are aware of it or not, we participate in the building up of a world - a world that bears the fruits of our imaginative impulses or dream-life. According to Ruben Alves, “Emotions, like desires and imagination, grows out of the particularity of our situation.”²²⁵ Because we are submerged in a market-driven, means-to-end, calculatingly and transactional reality, our dream-life may only conceive of a world marked by more of the same. This is why Harris stresses the importance of becoming subjects, not by only answering the call to engage with the world but also to transform it (praxis).

True education is the experience by which women and men discover that they are creators of the world, and that the work they put forth is creative.²²⁶ Education can only and truly be considered education unless it becomes the process in which we can effectively pursue our fundamental vocation to be subjects. In other words, it cannot be an exercise of domination, a practice of indoctrination into the oppressive world order. Instead, education must render authentic liberation – the process of humanization whereby notions of a mechanistic order of consciousness is rejected in favor of a praxis orientation. “Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information.”²²⁷ Otherwise education becomes complicit with the naturalization²²⁸ of a fixed and nonnegotiable ideological position. It does everything it can to maintain the

²²⁵ Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*, 44.

²²⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 15.

²²⁷ Paulo Freire coined the phrase the ‘banking system,’ the educational model by which dialogue, critical thinking, and creativity are inhibited. This approach to teaching views students as empty receptacle that require knowledge be deposited. Teachers are understood as active subjects while students as passive objects. *Ibid*, 60.

²²⁸ The notion that ideological positions can never really have success unless it becomes naturalized. According to Mark Fisher, “an ideological position cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact.” Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 16.

status quo by discouraging any form of alternative thinking or imagining while disseminating more of the same old thing. Many would argue that much suspicion is warranted when any ideological position presents itself to be natural. Fisher claims that neoliberal ideology manifested through a capitalist realism has successfully installed what he calls a ‘business ontology,’ where everything that comprises society, including healthcare and education must be run like a business.²²⁹ This supports the notion that reality can be ideologically mediated, and that education can serve to reinforce and perpetuate ideological positions that claim to be of a natural order.

A business ontology can conceivably be associated with a means-to-end logic, both serving as the fundamental ground of existence – from which notions of being, essence, identity, and possibility are marked by a business schemata. In other words, a way of being-in-the-world that operates within a business paradigm, a relationship towards the world characterized by a particular type of dwelling. Standing back to contemplate what is actually there is part of our vocation as subjects; therefore, we try our hardest to stand back and identify what is going on, what is it that has taken a hold of us, why do we operate within a particular framework of understanding, how is it that certain values are given priority over others, and ultimately, how does all this work for or against our becoming human.

A Dream Deferred

Although the American dream can be said to embody a capitalist, neoliberal, and market logic that inspires a desire for success and material wealth, to dream alternatively

²²⁹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 17.

requires that we work towards decolonizing the dream-life of all who aspire to become subjects. To dream is as much a part of being human as our capacity to breathe. Some consider dreaming to be nothing more than just random brain activity, or the disguising of disturbing impulses manifested through archetypal symbolization. No matter what theory you stand by, one thing is certain, dreams serve as a driving force in the construction of a world. Martin Luther King's speech, *I have a dream* richly articulates a world contrasting the racial injustices of his time. A dream described as "transforming the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."²³⁰ And while King declared his dream to be deeply rooted in the American dream, we can presume that his version of the Dream did not mirror the ruthless and cut-throat values fostered by a market consciousness.

Engagement with the human subject matter, according to Harris, involves the "gathering of disparate ingredients in teaching and catalyzing them towards re-creation."²³¹ In other words, after standing back to gaze upon what is actually there, like sculptors who maintain an adequate distance from the material before they decide to jump in and become engrossed in the experience, teachers too must also move beyond the act of contemplation and begin to grapple with the subject matter. In order to do this we must take the nature and the meaning of the subject matter seriously.²³² Otherwise education becomes just another process of perpetuating the status quo, where people

²³⁰ Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream," Address Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, January 25, 2019. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.

²³¹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 30.

²³² Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 30.

remain objects with no agency and no possibility of becoming subjects and actors within their own reality. The American dream has completely absorbed the educational life in the United States. It has inserted itself into most curriculums where the principal objective is to acquire the necessary skills to succeed in life. Success here operates under a utility²³³ function (mean-to-end) within education, a process where people are provided with the needed technical competence in order to ‘make it in the real world.’ Thus making education solely a hurdle to overcome on the path to success.

Engagement as the second movement in Harris’ teaching paradigm serves to short circuit this dominant approach to education and reclaim the sense of *paideia*. What Edward Farley describes as the “culturing of a human being in areté or virtue.”²³⁴ In its original Greek sense *paideia* was geared towards the rearing and making of the ideal member of the polis or state, the ideal citizen. On the other hand, it supports the human character of education by stressing the importance of human beings as the subject who matters.²³⁵ This reinforces what Harris considers to be the gathering of disparate ingredients in the process of recreation, the unifying craft of teaching, of making it all about the human subject that greatly matters. Harris’ second stage of her pedagogical movement requires a critical recognition of those things that serve to suppress the process towards becoming human subjects, so that in echoing Freire’s praxis of conscientization we may begin to wrestle with those overarching social myths and narratives that paralyze

²³³ In the late nineteenth century supporters of the new sciences and the proponents of the classics competed for dominance in American higher education. The utility ideal rose to prominence as the notion of practicality and the spirit of vocationalism began to shape the curriculum in universities. See the section in chapter 6 titled *The Utility Function*. DeVitis and Rich, *The Success Ethic, Education, and the American Dream*, 84.

²³⁴ Farley, *Theologia*, 152-153.

²³⁵ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 32.

our ability to dream in ways that do not conform to the dream-life that dominates the social order.

If engaging in subject matter ultimately means that we are to grapple with the complex world of meaning, or as Harris would call it, the “labyrinth of reality,” toward which the system of clues is designed to point, then we may rightly presume the American dream to be a legitimate source of clues which has something important to say about the imaginative life of the people. Its all-encompassing effects have stifled our capacity to dream otherwise, it has forced us to defer our dreams in favor of the dominant one. The American Dream both expresses and formulates what the world is supposed look like, it makes no concession for a life that does not fall in line with a system of production and consumption, or a reality that does not operate under a market logic. This imaginative straightjacket hinders our ability to interpret the world differently, its overarching structure of patterned beliefs, values, and overall meaning fully inhibits any possibility to dream – making it the only viable option.

So what happens to a dream deferred? This question opens up one of the many compelling poems written by Langston Hughes. It speaks about the lives of black Americans in Harlem during the 1920’s and 30’s. This poem evokes the pains and longing of a people who are forced to put their dreams on hold and submit to a dream-life that does not take their hopes and aspirations into account. It reads:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?²³⁶

Incredibly poignant in emblematic content, this poem evokes a deep sense of invisibility and hopelessness. When people are not granted the permission to dream, or their dreams are not allowed to develop a life of its own, then the potential to become a human subject is lost. A dream deferred is a humanity deferred. This is why Harris stresses freedom as a precondition for authentic existence, an imperative in the process of becoming true subjects.

The American Dream epitomizes what human life is supposed to look like, and what we ought to do in order to attain it. And while the Dream is said to be at everyone's finger tips, accessible to all who desire a slice of the proverbial pie, the truth of the matter is that not everyone can visualize themselves living this dream. Depending on what version of the Dream we subscribe to, for the most part, it is not a dream that everyone can claim as their own. Ta-Nehisi Coates says it best:

I have seen that dream all my life. It is the perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to

²³⁶ Langston Hughes. "Harlem by Langston Hughes." Poetry Foundation. Accessed September 13, 2019. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>.

fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, bedding made from our bodies.²³⁷

Coates understands the Dream to be outside the horizon of the thinkable for him and his son. The Dream has nothing to do with the reality of living within a black body. *Between the World and Me* is Coates attempt to answer some of the most pressing questions about his life as a black man in a letter format to his adolescent son. He tells him that “now that the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream, is the question of my life, and the pursuit of this question, I have found, ultimately answers itself.”²³⁸ It is in the process of engagement with the human subject matter that we are able to recognize and address the totalizing effects of the Dream upon people, irrespective of racial, social, and economic conditions. While the Dream may not reject anyone who wants to pursue it, the ideals and values it harbors within will always favor some over others.

Maria Pilar Aquino points out how the global capitalist market has managed to domesticate the thinking life of the people. Varied in the ways it has seeped into the global consciousness, she contends that it guides, informs, and shapes our entire existence.²³⁹ She proposes a wisdom that is grounded in feminist spirituality that has its roots in the everyday lives of people living in diverse global contexts and reflecting a diversity of cultural expressions. Like Harris who understands the moment of engagement to be a time for actors and not spectators, so too does the wisdom advanced

²³⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 11.

²³⁸ Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 12.

²³⁹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Maria Pilar Aquino, eds. “En El Poder De La Sabiduria: Espiritualidades Feministas De Lucha.” *Concilium* 5, no. 288 (November 2000): 787–94.

by Aquino require that we become active participants rather than passive observers of our own situation, so as to establish a free space where the everyday lives of people can become sources of wellbeing, true joy, and produce humanizing and liberating experiences for all.

The widespread of market ideology in the world, primarily due to the influence of industrially developed countries, is proof to how much the power of the market to engender an ideal society has captivated the global imaginary.²⁴⁰ The American Dream is a perfect example of how this dominant metaphor has managed to inject itself into people's imagination. What was once a dream about democratic society and the benefits of civil liberties has now morphed into a dream that envisions a particular way to be human and to exist in the world. The Dream is so entrenched in our ideologies, practices, hopes, and overall meaning systems that we cannot begin to imagine an alternative. Engagement with the human subject matter is the act of reclaiming dreams rather than deferring them.

According to Harris, imagination brought to bear on the act of teaching becomes an opportunity for instituting and constituting what is humanly possible.²⁴¹ This solemn practice can alter human existence by engaging in different forms of counter discourse that would provide oppositional definitions of reality.²⁴² Hence, the possibility to dream differently, to hope and imagine ways that are not in accordance with a neoliberal consciousness. Neoliberalism is astir in the American imaginary; therefore, it has plagued

²⁴⁰ Maria Pilar Aquino, "The Dynamics of Globalization and the University," in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (New York: Orbis, 2003), 386-387.

²⁴¹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 3.

²⁴² Mai-Anh Le Tran, "When Subjects Matter: The Bodies We Teach By," in *Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World*, ed. Eleazar Fernandez (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 48.

the dream-life of the people, and by that the religious imagination – it has made those who are under its grip a certain kind of dreamer and maker.

**CHAPTER THREE. FORM-GIVING AS THE SHAPING OF CONSCIOUSNESS:
RELIGIOUS PEDAGOGY AS A HUMANIZING AFFAIR**

“No one is born fully-formed: it is through self-experience in the world that we become what we are.”

~ Paulo Freire

Introduction

Along the lines of Paulo Freire’s quote, we can rightly say in the most simplest terms that to be human, or becoming human, is an ongoing process that undergoes a reconstitution of the self and identity. Self-experience, as he puts it, by and large is the totality of everything we have lived and experienced up until the moment we become cognizant and self-aware of our present condition. That does not mean that the process culminates there, but rather as Henry Giroux contends, it “draws attention to the ways in which knowledge, power, desire, and experience are produced under specific basic conditions of learning and illuminates the role that pedagogy plays as part of a struggle over assigned meanings, modes of expression, and directions of desire, particularly as these bear on the formation of the multiple and ever-contradictory versions of the ‘self’ and its relationship to the larger society.”²⁴³ In short, the moment we come to the realization that what determines our sense of self, why we do what we do, and how we bring meaning and value to bear is the result of specific learning conditions aimed towards formative processes.

Education by contemporary standards is the result of an increasingly prevalent approach that endorses an instrumental rationality where subject matter is broken down

²⁴³ Henry A. Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 4.

and compartmentalized for the sake of economic growth, job training, and mathematical utility.²⁴⁴ In other words, education is largely reduced to a transactional or means-to-end model that is restricted to the maintenance of a “culture of conformity and the passive absorption of knowledge.”²⁴⁵ Education functions as a mode of social, political, and cultural reproduction, especially when its ultimate goal is defined through a promise of monetary and social success.

While religious education is considered to operate under a whole set of different expectations and goals, the truth is that the proverbial apple does not fall far from the tree of neoliberal education. Or better yet, the pedagogical theories that undergird the methods adopted in religious education are not very different from all other ways in which we educate. Whether it is formal theological studies or religious education for children and adults, faith formation programs typically acquire legitimacy through some kind of institutional sanction. Namely, they must adhere to a certain curriculum standard or specific guidelines in order to be considered worthy of an academic discipline. Theological education was not always the sole property of the schooling system. In fact, theology has a historical trajectory that according to Edward Farley has everything to do with the evolving story of theological education.²⁴⁶

With the rise of the modern university theology was added to the list of scholarly disciplines alongside other academic areas of study, placed among all other subject areas within the broader school curriculum. Moreover, theology underwent a process of fragmentation, a division of sorts that stresses both its ecclesial and scientific status. In an

²⁴⁴ Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 5.

²⁴⁵ Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 5.

²⁴⁶ Farley, *Theologia*, 30.

attempt to reconcile the historical influences of Enlightenment thinking and German Romanticism, Friedrich Schleiermacher endorsed a fragmented approach to theology as a way to exert an influence upon the whole.²⁴⁷

Religious pedagogy, as understood in this work, echoes Maria Harris' distinction between the curriculum of education and the curriculum of schooling. Harris resists the reductionist tendency to equate the educative task to the rigid model of schooling. She stresses that "we must learn to say "education" when we are referring to all the life forms that do educate: family, sports, work, and worship. We must learn to say "schooling" as well, when we are referring to that one form of education, and not use the generic term in reference to it."²⁴⁸ She considers this reductionist approach as deeply damaging, particularly when we consider the transformative possibilities that may result from educational models that are not limited to schooling.

According to Harris, curriculum must be viewed as including a broader scope than just schooling alone. It should take into account all the facets of human practices and activities that can properly be considered ministry.²⁴⁹ What follows will endeavor to offer a religious pedagogy that resists any reductionist tendencies to limit education to a pure matter of schooling. It will frame religious pedagogy as a process of forming

²⁴⁷ He argues that no one can perfectly account for the full spectrum of theological information. "Those who devote their attention wholly to one area are in a position to accomplish most in a purely scholarly way." The logic that if one commits to a particular area of theological inquiry, then the communication between scholars in their respective fields can improve on the whole of theological knowledge. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Louisville: WJK Press, 2011), 7-9.

²⁴⁸ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 65.

²⁴⁹ Ministry involves a broader and less restrictive function than just commissioned or ordained roles within the ecclesial sphere. Harris seems to denote ministry as a way in which all aspects of church life educates and forms human consciousness. Ministry can rightly be considered the moments of both teaching and healing, coequally belonging to the Kingdom of God.

consciousness rather the banal task of teaching pre-specified subject matter that can be applied with a total disregard for context. This effort will attempt to articulate a pedagogy that is deeply grounded within a synthesis of decolonial and deconstructive perspectives, one that John Caputo persuasively argues is analogous to the reign of the powerless, the Kingdom of God. More will be said about this later on in the chapter. Simply put, it offers a pedagogical framework that privileges collective participation in the learning enterprise; where “teachers and students work together with material, contemplating it, engaging it, bringing to it as much as they possibly can; but that for true form-giving to occur, any and all prior absolute conviction regarding the exact nature of the form itself must be absent.”²⁵⁰ In other words, education that draws from the reservoir of the Hebrew imagination, where preexisting matter and the element of indeterminacy in all things was an essential idea of mainstream Judaism, long before it was colonized by Hellenistic metaphysics and Neoplatonic dualism. Contrary to current practices of religious pedagogy, a model that to this day still bears the contours derived from the dominant philosophical categories of the first half of the second century, this pedagogical approach will undertake the critical task of challenging attitudes of absolutism and reductionism within theology and education.

At times religious education has managed to stifle the potential for learning by stressing dogmatic formulations and universal applications that often shatters our sense of singularity and context. Its prime directive is the consumption of doctrines and the adherence to inflexible, wooden, and often blind application of rules. Religious pedagogy, as proposed here, will emphasize a practical reason (phronesis), “the capacity

²⁵⁰ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 34.

to see how the general schema can be brought to bear upon the singular situation.”²⁵¹ This approach in religious education challenges the empty schematic knowledge of ethical and doctrinal universals and raises it up to the reality of concrete lives, of what can be done and lived out in the here and now. Too often religious pedagogy is the vacuous endeavor of communicating abstract concepts and generalized ethical principles that divorce its content from the social, political, and cultural life – a world entirely conceived as a network of interconnections. It neglects to understand that human beings abide within social, political, and economic structures that shape their daily lives and require thorough examination.

Religious Education as Critical and Constructive Practice

There seems to be an adverse reaction to the word politics when mentioned or used within theological discourse. The privatization of religion is one of the main accomplishments of Enlightenment thinking, considering theological reflection to only be a matter of personal conviction with no relevance to public life. As a result, religious education has been domesticated to conform to the dominant culture by perpetuating an apolitical agenda divorced from matters of human, animal, and overall ecological justice. Religious metaphors and narratives lose their value when they only seek to reinforce orthodoxy and maintain status quo arrangements that keep things stable and unchanging. In other words, they lose their worth when they perpetuate a way of educating that works to reproduce and legitimize the dominant culture through religious content. That is why the impetus in this work seeks to advance an educational paradigm where meaningful living, learning how to hold power and authority accountable, and developing the skills,

²⁵¹ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: a Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 142.

knowledge, and courage to challenge commonsense assumptions while willing to struggle for a more socially just world will be at the very core of this pedagogical approach.²⁵² Religious education is presented here not as a way of supporting the dominant modes of knowledge and reinforcing oppressive methods that perpetuate more of the same, but as education that is both critical and constructive in building up all forms and ways of being human. To do this necessitates that our practices of educating become opportunities that elevate certain experiential moments to the level of consciousness in order to identify their emancipatory value.

A Consciousness-raising approach

As stated previously, religious education like all other forms of pedagogical practices is shaped by a powerful, neoliberal, ubiquitous force that has inserted itself into its content and methods. Simply stated, educating is often nothing more than just another process that defines itself through a logic of commodification. It is often a part of a greater “cultural apparatus that has been largely hijacked by the forces of neoliberalism, or what some theorist would call a new and more intense form of market fundamentalism.”²⁵³ We see this in how governments, irrespective of ideological commitments, have designed educational programs with the exclusive goal of training future workers. In other words, knowledge has become the exclusive property of technical interest. Increasingly in the United States, all roads in education lead to the most desired employment opportunities. Education has been reduced to a goal-driven venture where the promise of gratification, stability, and security have become the hallmark of a fulfilled neoliberal existence. Hence, education becomes a process where

²⁵² Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 7.

²⁵³ Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 7.

knowledge is transmitted for mere consumption, rather than being transformed it for the sake of furthering learners' capacity to become critical agents in the world, and be more responsible for the moral and political problems of the time by acknowledging the importance of the collective struggle.²⁵⁴ This is where religious pedagogy suffers from the same ailment. It too is often focused on the task of knowledge consumption instead of bringing about real transformative outcomes that affect real time and place.

While Henry Giroux does not concern himself specifically with religious education, his critical approach aligns perfectly well with Maria Harris' position regarding the curriculum of schooling and education. While Harris alludes to a variety of ways in which we educate to include the mundane task of family, sports, work, and worship, Giroux, on the other hand, recognizes the function of media platforms as an educational force to be reckon with. By singling out modern media he decided to advance a critical pedagogy to include sites other than the sole practice of schooling. He writes:

During the 1980's, I observed how the educational force of the wider culture had become more powerful (if not dangerous) in its role of educating young people to define themselves simply through a logic of commodification. In response, I expanded the notion of critical pedagogy to include sites other than schools. The growing prevalence of a variety of media – from traditional screen and print cultures to the digital world of the new media – necessitated a new language for understanding popular culture as a teaching machine, rather than simply as a source of entertainment or a place that objectively disseminates information.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 7.

²⁵⁵ Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 7. .

As a way to address the phenomenon of modern media outlets and its influence on the broader culture in shaping people's perspective and interpretative framework, Giroux sought to develop a public pedagogy that would enlighten the educational practices within the larger cultural apparatus. Harris would agree with Giroux insofar as she claims all educational forces to be forms of church ministry. And while she outlines a plethora of ways in which the church educates, modes of learning that extend beyond Bible studies and catechesis, she recognizes the multiple nature of educational ministry to include the work and service lives and causes for which choose to advocate.²⁵⁶ Mostly, educational ministry as multiple and manifold – as learning endeavors that take place within and outside of ecclesial structures.

Harris stresses the rhythms of community life as the source of where the curriculum of education is constituted. She writes that “the rhythms of community life – among ourselves as families and church members, with other Christians groups, with people of other religions – rhythms where the curriculum of education is constituted by community life itself.”²⁵⁷ Learning is here constituted as a collective effort characterized by mutual engagement and reciprocity. Leonardo Boff adds that “community must be understood as a spirit to be created, as an inspiration to bend one's constant efforts to overcome barriers between persons and to generate a relationship of solidarity and reciprocity.”²⁵⁸ These become the sites of genuine learning, intentional arrangements that seek genuine ways of being together and learning from collective experiences and struggles. Intentional is understood here to mean precisely what Terry Velting described

²⁵⁶ Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 65-66.

²⁵⁷ Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 65-66.

²⁵⁸ Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: the Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, trans. Robert R Barr (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 5.

in his book, *Living in Margins*. “Intentional means ‘deliberate,’ ‘attentive,’ or ‘actively pursued.’”²⁵⁹ He proceeds to describe intentional communities as marginal or critical, opposed to some that are situated within the mainstream ethos. The marginal, in contrast, adopts a critical distance from institutional structures.²⁶⁰ This marginal experience affords the space “where modes of analysis that interrogates texts, institutions, social relationships, and the ideologies that are part of the script of official power”²⁶¹ can be carried out.

We can rightly consider this to be applicable to the dialectical relationship between the structures of the curriculum of schooling and the curriculum of education. Though Giroux seeks to advance a critical pedagogical formula that would penetrate all levels of schooling and beyond, and even while his work bespeaks of the importance of organizing, classroom learning, and social relations, he nonetheless neglects to fully articulate the role of intentionality, of the collective efforts in seeking alternative strategies. The mainstream, characterized by the structures of institutional life, is not always the site where alternative modes of discourse are fostered, where counter practices emerge with the aim of effecting change within the existing state of affairs.

Institutional structures are mainly concerned with the reinforcement of values, norms, and perspectives that safeguard the very life and longevity of the institution itself. This fosters an attitude that perpetuates status quo arrangements and, often a fear towards anything fresh and different. It is not surprising when institutions exert some kind of punitive measure on those who dissent from the established order, or to those who adopt

²⁵⁹ Terry A. Veling, *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 3.

²⁶⁰ Veling, *Living in the Margins*, 3.

²⁶¹ Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 4.

a form of discourse that appears threatening to their stable arrangements. While this work does not intend to confine critical discourse to the periphery exclusively, it also emphasizes its value within the mainstream field. At any rate, the idea of a critical pedagogy within religious education is crucial insofar that it draws attention to the questions about who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge, values, and learning practices.²⁶² In the case of the United States and all other industrialized countries, education has become sequestered by a market-driven culture with the sole aim of economic profitability. What Giroux describes as a form of pedagogical practice influenced by a politics of economic growth, scientism, and technical rationality. He asserts:

As a pedagogical practice, neoliberal pedagogy also pervades every aspect of the wider culture, stifling critical thought, reducing citizenship to the act of consuming, defining certain marginal populations as contaminated and disposable, and removing the discourse of democracy from any vestige of pedagogy both in and outside schooling. The political sphere, like most educational sites, is increasingly driven by a culture of cruelty and a survival-of-the-fittest culture. I believe the threat to critical modes of education and democracy has never been greater than in the current historical moment.²⁶³

What Giroux articulates here is applicable to religious education. Although it may not be explicitly oriented towards economic goals and utilitarian ends, it often, on the other hand, possesses a logic that fosters strategies of rote learning, memorization, and skewed forms of testing that ignore a multiplicity of learning modalities. This logic reduces the

²⁶² Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 5.

²⁶³ Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 8.

role of religious education because of its non-utilitarian function, rendering it nonessential and useless.

Most forms of theological or religious education embrace a model that is tied to teaching pre-specified subject matter, which prefers to offer content that is interpreted as ahistorical or anachronistic because it fails to acknowledge the invaluable questions and the role of students as critical agents. When forms of traditionalism, what Carol Hess describes as “a static, homogenized, and rigid understanding of the faith of those who came before us that can lead to a closed and dead faith”²⁶⁴ dominates our religious discourse, then our models of religious education become ossified and hallow, disconnected from real life experiences with no relevance to historical conditions. On the other hand, traditioning is itself an open-ended trajectory with no end-goal, but rather a creative and ongoing process that is always making and remaking rather than declaring it finished.²⁶⁵ Tradition is a living, breathing story with a developing and ongoing plot, always adding to the narrative and always in the process of becoming. In other words, tradition is not fixed or static, but ever moving and developing, creating and recreating, dialectically characterized by its movement between past, present, and future.

Religious education must afford the space for questioning and reinventing; what Hess refers to when she says that “education must begin with curiosity, existential questions, and the risk to rethink and reinvent existing answers.”²⁶⁶ She warns about dangers of “auctioning off the question mark,” or borrowing from Freire, the “castration of curiosity” whereby the educator becomes the sole guardian and dispensator of answers

²⁶⁴ Carol Hess, “Religious Education,” *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 300.

²⁶⁵ Hess, “Religious Education,” 300.

²⁶⁶ Hess, “Religious Education,” 300.

without ever being asked a question. When religious education becomes nothing more than the acceptance of doctrinal formulations and the adherence to universal ethics with no possibility for questions, particularly questions that lurk within the margins, then it strictly becomes an exercise in futility. In his engrossing conversation with Paulo Freire, Antonio Faundez raises a very insightful point regarding the task of asking questions as the origin of all knowledge. Freire retorts:

I am very struck by what you said earlier about asking questions, which is something I emphasize very much – the authoritarianism running through our educational experiences inhibits, even if it does not repress, our capacity for asking questions. In an authoritarian atmosphere, the challenge implicit in a question tends to be regarded as an attack on authority. And even when that is not openly admitted, the experience finishes up with the suggestion that it is not always convenient to ask questions.... I must stress, however, that the point of the question is not to turn the question “what does it mean to ask the question?” into an intellectual game, but to experience the force of the question, experience the challenge it offers, experience curiosity, and demonstrate it to the students.²⁶⁷

Freire insightfully points out how questions in an authoritarian environment are perceived as hostile and threatening, challenging to the established order and knowledge that encourages a spirit of complacency and blind obedience rather than an interrogative and curious disposition.

Authoritarianism runs deep within the institutional church, particularly in the task of teaching confessional theology. In the Roman Catholic tradition, for example, the case

²⁶⁷ Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question: a Pedagogy of Liberation* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 35-37.

has been strenuously made about the Church being protected from error “when it solemnly defines matters of faith or morals.”²⁶⁸ This notion of human infallibility can be problematic in an educational model that encourages critical thought and dialogical engagement. When assertions of faith and morals stem from a position of absolutism, a rigid and non-negotiable claim that demands full acceptance and observance with no possibility of reinvention or rearticulation so as to acquire vitality within a given context or historical moment, then all possibilities for a counter argument is closed off. On the other hand, an indifferent, relativistic position will undoubtedly offer another form of authoritarianism by forcing a void in the process of replacing certain truth claims with hallow reason and a value free scientism. Both ends of the spectrum shuts down the capacity for critical engagement and social agency, making religious education simply a practice in teaching age-old formulaic, theological theories that are unaffected by historical processes and immune to hermeneutical analysis.

So what then does a critical pedagogy look like in religious education? For starters we must first acknowledge that while this work considers any form of critical method vital to all educational endeavors within any religious tradition, this project, however, will only advance a Christian religious pedagogy. This means that in spite of all the different fields of inquiry from which we can draw in order to effectively account for a pedagogical strategy, ultimately it is the Christian experience that stirs within this learning endeavor. Meaning, a Christian hermeneutical framework that pervades the entire educational enterprise. It does not mean that there is no room for the inclusion of other religious metaphors and narratives, or other sources of wisdom that resist being

²⁶⁸ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 759.

placed under the category of religion, but an integrative effort that seeks emancipatory outcomes. Thomas Groome correctly asserts that “if all education is ultimately a reaching for transcendence and an expression of that human quest, then all good education can be called religious.”²⁶⁹ However, the term religious requires some unpacking since the adjective itself harbors imperialistic origins.

Defining the concept of religion has proven to be one of the most difficult undertakings for those involved in making sense of this abstruse phenomenon. In fact, every attempt at capturing the essence of religion proves futile due to either the way certain religions understand themselves or because of the particular angles from which certain academic disciplines approach their study. Anthropologist, sociologist, psychologist, or other scientist all have something to say about this common human experience that will ultimately support their own interest. Many have realized this to be problematic and have offered their insight on the matter. John Macquarrie writes, “Religion assumes such a variety of forms that attempt to give a succinct definition covering them all have usually turned out to be unsatisfactory.”²⁷⁰ In the same way David Tracy claims that “there is no universally agreed upon single definition for the human phenomenon called religion.”²⁷¹ Needless to say that the term religion is a Western construction that for a long time has sought to impose its own assumptions and predefined framework on the human experiences of transcendence and questions of ultimacy.

²⁶⁹ Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 21.

²⁷⁰ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 149.

²⁷¹ David W. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: the New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 92.

Thomas Groome, renowned for his work in religious education offers a definition for religion that he himself considers influenced by his particular life-world condition. He defines religion as “the human quest for the transcendent in which one’s relationship with an ultimate ground of being is brought to consciousness and somehow given expression.”²⁷² Although his definition offers a very tight and comprehensive description of religion as a primal human experience, it nonetheless reveals Western ontological presuppositions that ultimately inform his horizon of understanding.

The point made here is not to suggest the abandonment of what we bring to bear upon the task of knowledge production or our attempts at developing definitions, but rather a conscious, critical awareness of how the dominant systems encroach upon the lifeworld and legitimate certain perspectives as being normatively conditioned.²⁷³ Groome acknowledges the importance of drawing from particular traditions, or different traditions, or from no particular tradition at all depending on the scholarly objective that attempts to understand the religious phenomenon. What is important to underscore here is the danger of obliterating different and unique experiences that give expression to religious discourse by invalidating what does not resonate or conform to our established definitions. We have to admit that our religious discourse is very much the product of our cultural politics. Culture cannot be understood as separate from the systematic relations

²⁷² Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 22.

²⁷³ According to Jürgen Habermas, ideas of social importance are mediated through a process of linguistic communication grounded in rules of practical rationality. In contrast, technical rationality control systems of instrumentality, such as the large industrial complex that is intertwined with social or political systems, creating a profit driven mechanism for these systems. When instrumental ideas are filtered through forms of communication, then the lifeworld has effectively become colonized and our ways of communicating systematically distorted. See Habermas Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

of power or politics in the production of knowledge and identities. To make religious pedagogy a practice devoid of cultural and political import is not only educationally delusional but utterly naïve.

The Politics of Religious Pedagogy

People's attitudes, perspectives, beliefs, opinions, as well as media and art give shape to social order and political opinion. What is deemed as cultural politics should not be considered as two separate categories of investigation since they are entwined and connote the very substance that influences our social relations and political discourse. What makes up culture, the complex whole that emerges out of a human collective consisting of beliefs, values, behaviors, and certain orientations to life, has direct ties to political identity and policy making. It too shapes the learning content and method in order to perpetuate the authority and interest of the dominant group.²⁷⁴ Education is under siege according to Giroux, especially when "media technologies have redefined the power of particular groups to construct a representational politics that play a crucial role in shaping self and group identities as well as determining and marking off different conceptions of community and belonging."²⁷⁵ Hence media and other forms of technology have become sources of cultural proliferation, crucial sites for the production of knowledge and avenues for the formation of consciousness. This is where Christian religious pedagogy offers a counter narrative.

Christian religious education should be conceived as praxis, not just the work of indoctrinating with precepts and dogmatic statements but a unique way of learning to live and be in the world, an "alternative reading of reality that can interface the dominant

²⁷⁴ Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 49.

²⁷⁵ Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 49.

reading of reality freely, imaginatively, and critically.”²⁷⁶ It should serve as a site of counter-discourse, particularly when public forms of pedagogy, i.e., television, radio, internet (social media), serve to propagate nefarious and dehumanizing views. It is the task of religious education to empower a form of engagement that distills some of the cultural distortions that infuse religious content and methods. Religious education, like all other forms of pedagogies can become complicit with promoting certain attitudes and perspectives ingrained within the dominant cultural framework.

Theology, and primarily the ways in which theology is taught, can either be an exercise in soothing or mollifying cultural and social expectations, affirming our contentment and uncritical acceptance of the dominant power structures and their dehumanizing effects, or the act of combining hope, critical reflection, and the collective struggle in the work of liberation. The former mirrors an educational, theological model that is supportive of status quo arrangement, argued in this work as a religious pedagogy that is inextricably caught in a web of oppressive, neoliberal and market ideology, while the latter embodies a form of religious pedagogy that “makes visible the languages, dreams, values, and encounters that constitute the lives of those whose histories are often actively silenced.”²⁷⁷ Guided by decolonial perspectives that not only challenge the dominant voices that for a long time have been the sole articulators of theological truths, but those that continue to play a vital role in setting forth the normatively approved ways to exercise our humanity.

²⁷⁶ Walter Brueggemann, “The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic,” *Education for Citizenship and Discipleship*, ed. Mary C. Boys (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 13.

²⁷⁷ Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), xxi.

If this pedagogical formula is applied to the way in which we educate theologically, abandoning the “banking” method of education where students are expected to “capitalize” on the material being offered through memorization and the total disregard for themselves as a knowing subject, then religious pedagogy becomes then a powerful political discourse. Religious education is no longer the task of passive learning but instead the opportunity by which the learner participates fully and creatively in the process of their own learning; a type of education that is liberating at its very core. Freire says it best:

Education of a liberating character is a process by which the educator invites learners to recognize and unveil reality critically. The domestication practice tries to impart a false consciousness to learners, resulting in a facile adaptation to their reality; whereas a liberating practice cannot be reduced to an attempt on the part of the educator to impose freedom on learners... Education for domestication is an act of transferring “knowledge,” whereas education for freedom is an act of knowledge and a process of transforming action that should be exercised on reality.²⁷⁸

There is politics inherent in all types of educational endeavors. When the political is regarded as “any deliberate intervention in people’s lives that influence how they live their lives as social beings,”²⁷⁹ then we can rightly identify education as political activity.

²⁷⁸ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 102.

²⁷⁹ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: a Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: the Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 12.

According to Groome, “education in Christian faith clearly should shape the lives of people as agents-subject in right relationship²⁸⁰ with God, self, other people, and all creation.”²⁸¹ Although the Christian church, as Vatican II points out, “is not identified with any political community nor bound by ties to any political system,”²⁸² it is therefore nonsensical for an entity that educates in matters of love, peace, and justice to be considered apolitical.²⁸³ Even models of religious education that are strictly concerned with the transmission of doctrines and moral precepts are invariably charged with political import. Moreover, it is important to underscore that the subject matter in theology, or better yet, practical theology is often described with words that are action-driven. Bonnie Miller-McLemore suggests that practical theology is often described with words that imply movement. She proceeds to list words like: action, practice, praxis, experience, situation, event, and performance. She follows up by stating that the subject of practical theology is also “associated with action-oriented religious words, such as formation, transformation, discipleship, witness, ministry, and public mission.”²⁸⁴ How can the subject of theology, characterized by these words, not be considered political? And how can a form of theological reflection that takes human experience seriously not be considered an inherently political endeavor? Theology as an imaginative human impulse cannot be divorced from the circumstances that configure human existence. By

²⁸⁰ Groome describes the agent-subject dialectic to be “consciously aware, reflective, discerning, and responsible people. Agent as a modifier of subject also helps to avoid the possible connotation of the latter as a position of subordination as in subject to.” The use of agent-subjects in relationship “indicates that the authentic “being” of people is always realized in “relationship” with others in time and place.” Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 8.

²⁸¹ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 13.

²⁸² Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II* (New York: Costello, 1996), 984.

²⁸³ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 13.

²⁸⁴ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012), 103.

the same token, how can education, considered to be a practice of liberation by the awakening of our critical consciousness not be viewed as political?

Educating for Christian Discipleship

The disciple finds herself entrenched in a world of politics. In fact, to follow in the steps of a master, guru, a spiritual sage, a teacher, or any leader that promotes total adherence to a specific ideology or rule of life is to be fully implicated in politics. Christian discipleship is not a one-person arrangement, but a concerted, coordinated effort at “building genuine relationships with people who are seeking fullness of life that is mirrored in the life of Jesus.”²⁸⁵ The call to discipleship is ultimately a mandate to disciple others.

Discipleship is not in the business of seeking an ascetic solitude that abandons the world in order to eradicate the ego and lose one’s sense of self, but instead the disciple “must enter into the world of victims to better grasp the truth of their situation and to establish relationships of solidarity between victims and nonvictims. The world of the victims more clearly reveals the consequences of injustice, helps unmask its causes, and draws us into a process of conversion that places us alongside the victims and against their oppressors.”²⁸⁶ Discipleship is constituted by a Christocentric body politics where the body of Christ is made visible as a radical and transforming presence in the world.²⁸⁷ John Howard Yoder would distinguish a reading of this previous statement as reflective

²⁸⁵ Roderick R. Hewitt, “Evangelism as Discipleship,” *International Review of Mission* 103, no. 2 (2014): 200-214.

²⁸⁶ O. Ernesto Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino,” *Theological Studies* 74, no. 3 (2013): 655-682.

²⁸⁷ Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 250.

of a conscience-theology instead of an order-theology.²⁸⁸ What he considers to be a theology that interprets the Biblical narratives as illuminating the political issues we come into contact with today rather than a theology that strictly draws from the Biblical sources in order to coherently formulate doctrines of faith.

Yoder points out that Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem depicts a large scale political demonstration where his "authority cannot be evaluated as anything but messianic."²⁸⁹ He reminds his readers of how Jesus chose to enter the city on a donkey, perceived as a distinctly "un-kingly" animal during that time. Jesus flipped the political script, so to speak, upsetting the Zealots and the people by exerting a power of powerlessness, a weak force, reversing the worldly notions of power with divine rule - the Kingdom of God. It is this power of powerlessness that confounded the people of Jesus' time and continues to pull the rug out from under people's feet even today.

The disciple must undertake the task of witnessing to this power of powerlessness, called to stand with the "despised outsiders who are null and void in the eyes of the world."²⁹⁰ John Caputo writes that "the Romans could extinguish Jesus but not his memory, the primal scene of suffering's most dangerous memory. The dead are the stuff of dangerous memories, constituting a weak force, harnessing all the power of powerlessness."²⁹¹ This resonates with what Yoder meant when he characterized Jesus' political authority as being purely messianic. Messianic is understood here to mean not a triumphant, strong lordship defined in terms of worldly powers, but a claim made upon us

²⁸⁸ John H. Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2003), 54.

²⁸⁹ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 56.

²⁹⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 48.

²⁹¹ Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 48.

by the weakest of all, the whispers of the victims who were violently oppressed, murdered, and erased from the chronicles of history. It is what Caputo refers to as the “ever-accumulating heap of ruins called history, where the ruins are irredeemably ruin lives of the dead upon which “progress” is built.”²⁹² Progress as defined by the overarching story of the strong obliterating the weak, a history that is future-bound and does not look back but to only recount a past depicted by the events of victories and conquest.

Discipleship is “charged with the messianic role of redeeming the past, of seeing to it that the dead have not died in vain, and that each one, down to the smallest and most insignificant, is recalled from oblivion.”²⁹³ This is the task of Christian discipleship, of raising from the dead the victims whose lives were cut short by the powers of the strong. Not in the way that graves are left empty but by calling forth the lives of the dead in the act of remembering. Remembrance as redeeming the “dangerous memories” of violence, suffering, and oppression. Not for the sake of mourning the terrible events of long past, but to fan the flames of hope, to rob death of its sting, and reclaim the stories of the dead in manner that testifies to the sufferings of the past and promises of a messianic future. Calling forth the lives of these victims can trigger dangerous insights, subversive memories that make the establish order uneasy and apprehensive.²⁹⁴

From a pedagogical standpoint, this way of educating for Christian discipleship supplies the learning process with “critical standards; the insight that ‘restoration of the power of memory goes hand in hand with the restoration of the cognitive content of the

²⁹² Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 95. .

²⁹³ Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 95.

²⁹⁴ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 178.

imagination, and thus a vehicle for liberation.”²⁹⁵ It is the work of also decolonizing the imagination from the hegemonic forces that seek to strip Christianity from its political voice. When the institutional church becomes complicit with the powerful, domesticating the idea of what it means to be a disciple with abstract ideals that have no real bearing in the social order, then it is doing the bidding of the kingdoms of this world. Or in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract Christology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, renders discipleship superfluous, and in fact they positively exclude any idea of discipleship whatever, and are essentially inimical to the whole conception of following Christ.”²⁹⁶ Adherence to Christ, or discipleship, ultimately signifies our allegiance to the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom that in the words of Jesus himself, is not of this world.

The Kingdom of God embodies a power of powerlessness that is antithetical to the powers of this world. It is the hermeneutical framework from which to read reality, for the Kingdom of God is what the community of disciples, the church, must witness to and use to counter the powers of this world. Dorothy Day best puts this into words when defending the *The Catholic Workers’* stance on War, perhaps the biggest attestation of worldly power, she says this about the church: “For she is our Mother, the Bridegroom of Christ. But she is more than real estate, she is more than temporal power, her spirit is not the spirit of the world and she has no need to be defended by the arms of the world. No

²⁹⁵ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 178.

²⁹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1979), 63.

more than her Divine Master who refused such defense.”²⁹⁷ The community of disciple witness to a different kind power, a power of powerlessness that counters the logic of this world with what Caputo calls a “sacred anarchy,” what flips the logic of this world on it back, turns it inside out and upside down by the logic of a sacred anarchy.²⁹⁸

The kingdom of God embodies a radical logic, one that does not align well with the logic of the world. It is driven by a “gift beyond economy, justice beyond the law, hospitality beyond proprietorship, forgiving beyond getting even.”²⁹⁹ The church always prays for the coming of this kingdom, a rule that destabilizes our notions of order, logic, regularity, and stability. Jesus embodies this logic, and therefore if discipleship truly means complete adherence to a Christocentric body politics, then we should expect nothing less of discipleship.

Discipleship means that one must contest the prevailing order that privileges some and pushes out the others. The kingdom, according to Caputo, “belongs to the unwashed, not the aristocratic.”³⁰⁰ In other words, made up of those who do not measure up to the standards of what the worldly powers deem as suitably human. The “characters in the kingdom are a cast of outcasts, of outsiders: sinners, lost sheep, lost coins, lost and prodigal sons, tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, lepers, the lame, the possessed, the children. A list that we today can easily update: gays and lesbians, illegal immigrants, unwed mothers, the HIV-positive, drug addicts, prisoners, and, after 9/11, Arabs.”³⁰¹ Just

²⁹⁷ Dorothy Day, “We Are Un-American: We are Catholics,” *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh, Jeffrey W. Bailey, and Craig Hovey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 344.

²⁹⁸ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 102.

²⁹⁹ John Caputo, “Poetics of the Impossible,” *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 479.

³⁰⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 133.

³⁰¹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 133.

the sort of folks some would suggest could jeopardize the value of our gated and pristine communities by threatening its homogenous character and disturbing its well-ordered and comfortable lifestyle – robbing us of our delightful bourgeoisie peace and tranquility.

The disciple must operate under a different paradigm, she must help foster the right rationale to help build the church as a community that is skilled in standing against the principalities of this world.³⁰² The church exists in a buyer's or consumer's market, so it operates within a calculative framework by producing and dispensing religious services by paid people (priest, deacons, pastoral workers, office personnel, etc.).³⁰³ Conversely, people also volunteer their time and provide services without any expectation of remuneration. What all this means is that the church operates fully in a manner that is consistent with the mechanisms of supply and demand, "it possesses a certain marketability."³⁰⁴ Because of this the church adheres to certain quality assurance standards, and at times, even models itself after private social service programs.

The church by virtue of being assimilated in this model becomes what Stanley Hauerwas refers to when he says that in order to maintain a presence in modern society the church becomes a "community of care."³⁰⁵ He makes the distinction between the church as a community of care and the church as a discipline and disciplining community. In other words, while the care the church offers is quite remarkable and compassionate, Hauerwas contends that it lacks the proper rationale to be faithful

³⁰² Stanley Hauerwas, "The Politics of the Church: How We Lay Bricks and Make Disciples," *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh, Jeffrey W. Bailey, and Craig Hovey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 657.

³⁰³ Johannes A. van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1996), 453.

³⁰⁴ van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context*, 456.

³⁰⁵ Hauerwas, "The Politics of the Church," 657.

witnesses of the Kingdom of God. It could get too caught up in the business of “friendliness” and providing quality service and thereby forgetting its true purpose in the world. The church is not just a company, as van der Ven postulates, but a “people, movement, group, network, community,” and most importantly, a community of disciples.³⁰⁶

Educating for Christian discipleship means that the church must strive to be more of a disciplined community rather than a community that seeks service quality assurance and abides by the rules of the market; instead, the church must be measured as “the people of God, Jesus movement, body of Christ, building of the Spirit, and church of the poor.”³⁰⁷ It must educate for discipleship, as Hauerwas proposes, by resisting the modern pedagogical formula that discourages people to think for themselves. While this claim sounds utterly authoritarian and oppositional to some of the views already expressed in this work, it does provide a counter approach to “conformist consumers in a capitalist economy by assuming that ideas are but another product that you get to choose on the basis of your arbitrary likes and dislikes.”³⁰⁸ Hauerwas tells his students that his main objective is help them think like him. By this he means that he must “introduce them to all the sources that think through him, and in the process they will obviously learn to think not only like him, but different from him as the different voices that think through him provide them with the skills that he has not appropriated sufficiently.”³⁰⁹ This is what Hauerwas is referring to when he talks about a community of discipline and disciplining - a community that properly trains, or rather educates for Christian discipleship.

³⁰⁶ van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context*, 457.

³⁰⁷ van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context*, 464.

³⁰⁸ Hauerwas, “The Politics of the Church,” 661.

³⁰⁹ Hauerwas, “The Politics of the Church,” 661. See footnote 8 on page 661.

This pedagogical approach opposes how the Enlightenment has endeavored to show how the mind is immediately available to the factual world without any training whatsoever.³¹⁰ In fact, the turn to the subject has proved to be incredibly decisive for education, insofar that it has placed great suspicion upon any form of authority.

Livingston and Fiorenza explain it succinctly:

It was, however, the modern “turn to the subject” that proved decisive. Kant’s call for “autonomy,” for the individuals “release from a self-incurred tutelage” to such heteronomous [external] authorities as the Bible and the Church, embodied the spirit of the Enlightenment. Increasingly, individual reason and conscience became the arbiters of religious truth. Although the Romantics rejected the appeal to autonomous “reason alone,” they nevertheless shifted the source of spiritual authority to the “religious self-consciousness,” that is, to religious experience. The entire nineteenth century can be viewed as an effort to resolve the problematic issue of authority.³¹¹

While the Enlightenment served its purpose by breaking up the absolute powers of religion and the monarchy by ushering in emancipated thinking, its drastic turn to the self ended up instilling another form of absolutism. Authority should not be mistaken with authoritarianism, it cannot be conflated with the forceful imposition of the will over an individual or group with the intent to fetter human agency, but a position of servitude that is fully vested in the practice of freedom. The authority bestowed on a teacher should not reflect a distrustful and fiercely protective attitude towards knowledge, an unwillingness

³¹⁰ Hauerwas, “The Politics of the Church,” 667.

³¹¹ James C. Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought: Twentieth Century, Second Edition, Vol.2* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 2.

to twist and turn the subject matter for fear of compromising its epistemic integrity, instead it is a commitment to both safeguard and interrogate the wisdom tradition to which they belong.

The educator undeniably holds a position of authority in relation to students; however, this should not be confused with a perverse power dynamic between the student and the teacher. Alternatively, authority is understood to mean the guardianship of the wisdom of the ages that is entrusted to the educator, and the responsibility to break open that knowledge critically, constructively, and imaginatively. Similar to Hauerwas who compared the role of the teacher to a bricklayer, (a profession he is well acquainted with due to a long line of bricklayers in his family), Maria Harris likens the teacher's role to that of a sculptor or artist. Her idea of teaching authority does not translate as the one who has absolute control over the subject matter and is charged with the responsibility of disseminating the material intact and with no aberrations, instead Harris views teaching authority as the incarnation of the subject matter: "The incarnation of subject matter in ways that lead to the revelation of the subject matter."³¹² What she considers to be at the very core of teaching subject matter – meaning that human beings are the true subject matter of any educational endeavor. This is how Jesus educated for discipleship, he is the incarnate subject matter, the very paragon of the power of powerlessness – the Kingdom of God.

Teaching as an Artistic Endeavor

Maria Harris offers a unique vision for teaching that accentuates the imagination as the core element of all educational endeavors.³¹³ The more she teaches,

³¹² Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, xv.

³¹³ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 25.

Harris declares, the more she is convinced that teaching, “when understood as a religiously imaginative act, is able to save and redeem.”³¹⁴ Teaching cannot be reduced to a formula-like model that follows a behaviorist stimulus-response approach, whereby I do X, then in turn the student does Y.³¹⁵ Viewing any form of education from this standpoint falls very much in line with a way of thinking that views all forms of human relationships as transactional. As Patty Phelps states, “Unfortunately the pressures of accountability, unrealistic self-expectations, and the orientation of student as customer/consumer can diminish our tendency toward creativity.”³¹⁶ Otherwise put, the mere fact that education has become just another business-like venture with a profitability motive, where the teacher must deliver so that the student may get their money’s worth can thwart the educational experience and make it just another commodity worth investing in.

Trying to break out of the consciousness of transactionality is not quite so simple. In fact, as mentioned earlier, neoliberal values and perspectives pervade all aspects of the wider culture; therefore, attempting to overcome and rise above the prevailing cultural ethos requires that the act of teaching take on a form-giving function. Form-giving is an exercise that is fully dependent upon the imagination.³¹⁷ According to Harris, “teaching in a form-giving way is possible only if the teacher imagines that it is possible.”³¹⁸ The act of form-giving within Harris’ pedagogical project is the process by which the teacher’s creative imagination gives shape to the content or subject matter and envisions what can

³¹⁴ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 3.

³¹⁵ Patty H. Phelps, “Embracing the Creative Side of Teaching,” Faculty Focus (Magna Publications, March 18, 2014), <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/embracing-creative-side-teaching/>.

³¹⁶ Phelps, “Embracing the Creative Side of Teaching.”

³¹⁷ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 35.

³¹⁸ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 35.

result from this process.³¹⁹ That the subject matter, namely, the human subject matter is not just a passive recipient of content, but together with the content itself comprises the very stuff, the *materia prima* from which new life (creation) emerges.

The Teacher as Form-giver

Teaching, or the teacher for that matter, cannot be conceived as an object of trade with economic value.³²⁰ The teacher should not be viewed as a bureaucrat or a mere functionary with duties to uphold and certain expectations to fulfill. Teachers should rather be embraced as artist, as visionaries whose imaginative capabilities shape the entire educational task. As Phelps writes:

An artist has a fresh view and an open mind. An artist looks at things from various angles and perspectives. Being an artist gives one freedom to do things differently. An artist is not afraid to try something new. He or she looks for inspiration in all kinds of experiences. As teachers, we should take more of an artist view of ourselves.³²¹

Comparing a teacher to an artist is not a novel idea; in fact, Maria Harris recalls a simple exercise with clay that her teacher from Union Seminary had her do in order to illustrate a lesson. She explains how they played with the clay, stretching it as much as they could before it came apart. She also explained how too much air would harden the clay and make it difficult to mold into the desired shape. At any rate, Harris was profoundly moved by this activity. The image of molding and giving shape to clay became analogues

³¹⁹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 35.

³²⁰ Under advanced capitalism, the process of commodification extends itself into every dimension of human life, with deleterious effects on the social, political, educational, and the religious sectors of culture. When commodifying penetrates all human activities, then all imaginative endeavors become colonized and therefore stripped of any creative possibilities.

³²¹ Phelps, "Embracing the Creative Side of Teaching."

with the moment in her teaching paradigm that she refers to as form-giving. Harris considers the artistic to be a quality intrinsic to the practice of teaching.³²²

Form-giving in the practice of teaching came alive for Harris when she realized in the simple clay exercise that a “form already exists within the ball of clay,”³²³ and that as an artist we are to elicit that form from the formless matter before us. Important to note, however, that Harris does not compare a student to formless matter, as if the teachers encounters a formless, amorphous human being with no prior shape. What she means by form-giving is the process that involves “forming, informing, formation, and form-giving in the activity of teaching.”³²⁴ In other words, the relationship between the teacher and the student as they “work with the material, contemplating it, engaging it, bringing to it as much as they possibly can.”³²⁵ What Harris stresses the most is the fluidity of the entire process. That in order for true form-giving to take place, all prior assumptions or determining viewpoints about the nature of the form must be abandoned.³²⁶

Harris is ultimately stressing the unpredictability of learning, the unforeseeability of what will transpire in the form-giving process. While the artist may be able to visualize what their work might look like when it is done, the truth is that the final form could end up pleasantly surprising them. The same applies to the teacher vis-a-vis the student insofar as the teacher can only provide the outlook, perspective, wisdom, and the categories to help define and sort out the student’s experiences while then standing back to marvel at the new form that emerges. Harris contends that the “new form comes into

³²² Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 143.

³²³ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 34.

³²⁴ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 34.

³²⁵ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 34.

³²⁶ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 34.

being because we take the risk of becoming artists, becoming creators, becoming teachers.”³²⁷ Ultimately, the moment of form-giving attempts to put subject matter together, that is, both the content and human subject matter – a total humanizing affair.

The moment of form-giving, according to Harris, “is one where the creative imagination gives shape to the content or subject matter.”³²⁸ Again, subject matter is understood here to mean not only the content but the human subject matter – bringing both of them together. Teaching is an artistic endeavor, the process of form-giving where the one who is involved in the shaping of human consciousness is fully immersed in the work of the imagination. Harris claims that at “the heart of teaching is the imagination,”³²⁹ what she describes in her quote from Paul Ricoeur as “the instituting and constituting of what is humanly possible; in imagining possibilities, human beings act as prophets of their own existence.”³³⁰ If this is the case, and if by imagining we are really in the business of instituting and constituting what is humanly possible, then teaching as an act of the imagination carries enormous responsibility. Harris rightly declares that “every real conversion is first a revolution at the level of our directive images, that we can alter our existence by changing our imagination.”³³¹ Cultivating our imaginative capabilities can either alter consciousness, shaping it in creative and life-giving ways, or perpetuating the dominant influences that hold our imagination captive.

³²⁷ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 36.

³²⁸ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 35-36.

³²⁹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 3.

³³⁰ Harris draws from Ricoeur’s work in her analysis of the imagination. She is very much struck by the religious language that Ricoeur employs in his work. Words like redemption, salvation, and prophet permeate Ricoeur’s work and provides Harris with an adequate framework from which to develop her theology of teaching. Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, , 3-4. See Paul Ricoeur, “The Image of God and the Epic of Man,” in *History and Truth* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1965), 127.

³³¹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 4.

Since the imagination is at the very core of the teaching activity, then the process of form-giving will require that our imaginative impulses undergo a distillation from all the oppressive and dehumanizing influences that dominate the collective consciousness. Teaching not only involves the acknowledgment of what is there, contemplating what already lies before you and then diving in and wrestling with the subject matter - the human subject matter, but rather demands that we visualize the potential in the work of form-giving, the work of “fashioning and refashioning of the forms that human life offers.”³³² This means that human life does not only come in one, single, monohuman fashion. If the purpose of education is to replicate a citizenry in terms of homogeneity rather than a humanness imagined outside of the dominant arrangements, then education will only serve as a mechanical system of reproduction, of keeping things at bay and not allowing for it to spin out of control so as not to disturb the established order and threat our notions of what it means to be properly human.

The clay image that Harris employs in illustrating the process of form-giving teaches us that the very nature of forming, informing, and formation is always ongoing and never closed - ended but always open-ended.³³³ In other words, Harris embraces the fluidity of the educative task as a process of creation and recreation. She understands that world is ever changing, that creation itself does not evince a pure stasis or unchanging form, but instead it is marked by newness and recreative processes. John Caputo describes creation not as “a movement from non-being to being – which is what makes the heart of metaphysicians everywhere skip a beat – but from being to beyond being, from a mute expanse of being to the bustle of living things, from barrenness to the bloom

³³² Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 41.

³³³ Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 41.

of life, from silence to the word that makes the empty full and the barren buzz with life.”³³⁴ A beautifully poetic way of countering the undoubtedly most powerful narrative of the omnipotent power of God who creates out of nothing - *creation ex nihilo*.

Caputo does not interpret the Genesis account of creation to be a tale that delights in the hierarchical and patriarchal powers of a God who snaps his fingers and creates life out of nothing, but instead of a poetic masterpiece that speaks of a “concert of forces, one active and formative and the other more open-ended, free floating, fluid and unformed.”³³⁵ He likens the role of God to that of an artist fashioning material, where the elements are not hostile towards God but the stuff that is mutable and transformable, like clay for a potter who forms a magnificent piece out of crude material.³³⁶

Conceivably one can view this image of God as akin to that of a master teacher who uses preexistent form and reforms it into something surprisingly new. This is the work of education, not to be confused with the amount of information and skills we need to master and be able to quickly spit back out at the drop of a hat, but as Harris writes, “education like all other artistic endeavors, is a work of giving form. More specifically, it is a work especially concerned with creation, re-creation, fashioning, and refashioning of form.”³³⁷ In religious education form-giving is the arranging of materials in relation to one another. It is the mixture of content with context, of subject matter with the human subject matter, what Catherine Keller describes as the clay of human perspectives mixed within the contextual elements of historical geography, social, ethnic-racial, and sexual

³³⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 58-59.

³³⁵ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 59.

³³⁶ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 61.

³³⁷ Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 40.

patterns that shape our perspectival position.³³⁸ This reaffirms the notion that form-giving is always an open-ended process where context affects content, while content reciprocally affects context. A process that through this interaction, for better or worse, always brings about change.³³⁹

Freeing the Imagination

This work underscores the role of the imagination as central to the practice of teaching. It views the imagination as the source from which new worlds arise and old ones become extinct by the process of reimagining. Throughout the history of Western thought, the imagination has been understood to function in two ways. Richard Kearney explains it succinctly: “1) as a representational faculty which produces images from a pre-existing reality, or 2) as a creative faculty which produces images which often lay claim to an original status in their own right.”³⁴⁰ Either way, these two notions of the imagination are the result of a long history that dates back all the way from the Greeks up until the modern existentialist. What is important here is that the imagination has no definitive definition. According to Kearney, the question is not how we define the imagination, but “actually to narrate the stories of this concept, to recount the history of how it came to be.”³⁴¹ Kearney wrote a whole genealogical account of how the concept of the imagination was understood within different epochs. His methodological approach employs the notion of narrative identity that stresses the historical mutability as a process of self-understanding.³⁴² In the end, Kearney’s genealogical reading of the imagination is

³³⁸ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 10.

³³⁹ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 10.

³⁴⁰ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1994), 15.

³⁴¹ Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 17.

³⁴² Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 17.

paradigmatic. Instead of analyzing the development of the imagination in a historically linear fashion, he applies a hermeneutic method that demonstrates the mutability of human understanding throughout Western history.³⁴³

The mutability of understanding also applies to the way context is considered a legitimate source by which the imaginative language emerges to express hopes, dreams, and the conjectures of a people. Paul Ricoeur claims that “the imagination, in so far as it has a mytho-poetic function, is also the seat of profound workings which govern the decisive changes in our visions of the world.”³⁴⁴ This has profound implications for the teacher. For if the educator sees the task of teaching as the work of the imagination, then teaching becomes more than just the mere development or exercise of the intellect alone; rather, it must cultivate and allow for the free exercise of that which makes us fully human, everything from our desires, our hopes, dreams, our likes and dislikes, our pains and sorrows, our passions and our indifference, a way of educating the entire human person - teaching as a total humanizing affair.

The task of humanization is not confined to the intellect alone, even though “modern” thinkers would argue otherwise. Education is more than just the sharing of information, it is the loving and selfless act of teaching someone how to live.³⁴⁵ But to teach someone how to live requires that freedom be a precondition, since life without freedom cannot be considered true living. Unfortunately though, most often people are unaware that they are subsumed under certain conditions that impinge upon their existence. Hannah Arendt considers the human condition to be constitutive of everything

³⁴³ Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 17.

³⁴⁴ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 127.

³⁴⁵ Harris and Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education*, 32.

that human beings encounter. She maintains that everything we come into contact with turns immediately into a condition of our existence.³⁴⁶ By this she is not just referring to the natural surrounding that make an impact on our lives, but “whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence.”³⁴⁷ This is something we seldom think about. We invariably come into contact with a number of things that condition for better or worse the way we live, work, make choices, and ultimately exist in the world.³⁴⁸ Ruben Alves says “that to be alive and conscious is to be permanently involved in a complex network of relationship which are going to condition my being and my behavior.”³⁴⁹ Whatever enters our complex web of sustained human relationships, to use Arendt’s phrase, also encroaches on our imaginative potential by demarcating the limits of our reach.

Zetta Elliot is a writer and educator who writes from the experience of being a black woman who immigrated to a British colony when she was a little girl. She recounts how she grew up reading fairy tale stories about magical wardrobes and secret gardens, and how very early on she learned how “only white children had wonderful adventures in distant lands; only white children were magically transported through time and space; only white children found the buried key that unlocked their own private Eden.”³⁵⁰ What

³⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2018), 9.

³⁴⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.

³⁴⁸ The concept of facticity involves the intractable conditions of our existence: physical and psychological properties, as well as social facts, history, and character traits. Heidegger explains facticity as the unsolicited thrownness into existence. The qualities of which disclose themselves through what Heidegger deems as moods. It would seem that while some of these conditions are non-negotiable and inalienable assets of the human condition, some others do not possess such determining influence and are subject to be reversed.

³⁴⁹ Alves, *Tomorrow’s Child*, 103.

³⁵⁰ Zetta Elliott, “Decolonizing the Imagination,” *Horn Book Magazine*, March 2010, 16-20.

Elliot experienced was a borrowed imaginative construction, a world of possibilities that she could not claim as her own. What in her own words did not serve as “much of a mirror for my young black female self.”³⁵¹ In her engagement with these images and narratives, Elliot experienced a profound disconnect, an existential dissonance between her world and the world that came through in the stories she read.

Elliot’s imagination was colonized and forced to submit to the prevailing white narratives that filled the books she read as a child. She was unable to find herself within those fairy tale stories, could not even draw hope from them. It was as if these stories never had a young black girl in mind when they were written. These fictional narratives were written in such a manner that utilized mythological symbols and ideas that are intimately tied to Anglo-Saxon ascendancy. Elliot writes that one benefit of being so completely excluded from the literary realm was that she had to develop the capacity to dream herself into existence.³⁵²

Dreaming oneself into existence best captures the idea of freeing one’s imagination and allowing it to dream beyond the scope of colonial influence. For a long time Elliot began to think of herself as an “anglophile” in training, rejecting what she considers as her blackness because of her love for European literature. She later realized that she does not have to abandon her love for the books she grew up with, but instead as a writer and educator she will make it her goal to always engage the tropes of captivity, migration, oppression, racial identity, and transformation in narratives that are thrilling, evocative, and always revealing.³⁵³ As an educator and fictional writer, Elliot believes

³⁵¹ Elliot, “Decolonizing the Imagination,” 16-20.

³⁵² Elliot, “Decolonizing the Imagination,” 16-20.

³⁵³ Elliot, “Decolonizing the Imagination,” 16-20.

that she can open a doorway to places that would help meet the needs left unfulfilled by an unjust reality³⁵⁴ - portals into imaginative spaces where we can reclaim identity and human agency.

When our ability to imagine becomes thwarted by a colonizing force that prevent us from going beyond the boundaries of the dominant reality, then we are robbed of our most fundamental human ability to envisage otherwise, to conceive alternative possibilities, and to act upon the world in ways that transform and affect our reality. In the present globalized world our imaginative potential is held captive by a foundational ideology of industrial capitalism that includes both political-economic and a cultural-spiritual philosophy.³⁵⁵ It keeps our consciousness at bay by making it seem as if this is all there is, nothing more. It fosters what Paulo Freire calls a naïve consciousness, a way that understands “causality as a static, established fact, and thus is deceived in its perception.”³⁵⁶ This is how the all-encompassing, dominant forces colonize our learning practices, by cultivating a passive and gullible attitude that is incapable of transcending its own situation. In the words of Stacey Gibson, “imagining is an act of liberatory adventure since it feels borderless, boundaryless, and free of the constructs that blind. To imagine is to transcend.”³⁵⁷ Contrary to a naïve consciousness that feeds off a paralyzed and colonized imagination, conditioned to understand and read reality in a manner that

³⁵⁴ Elliot, “Decolonizing the Imagination,” 16-20.

³⁵⁵ Joe Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age 1740-1958* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2003), 22.

³⁵⁶ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 44.

³⁵⁷ Stacey A. Gibson, “Sourcing the Imagination: Ta-Nehisi Coates’s Work as a Praxis of Decolonization,” *Schools* 14, no. 2 (2017): 266-275.

neglects to interrogate it and subject it to rigorous scrutiny; a free imagination, on the other hand, enables curiosity and urgent inquiry.³⁵⁸

Freeing the imagination involves that what has been stolen and held captive, namely, the authentic imagination, the unfettered and boundless human faculty that naturally engenders a picture of the whole context within which human life is lived, be reclaimed and consciously empowered to transcend the conditions of inertia and domesticity. Teaching, then, as the work of the imagination requires that we challenge curriculums, both schooling and educational curriculums that reinforce systems of domination that impede critical and creative learning experiences. Liberating the imagination should be at the very center of any educational task; otherwise, it become more of the same repetitive rote learning that lacks any real life-changing potential. By the same token, breaking the shackles that hold our imaginative abilities hostage to a singular representation of human experience allows for opportunities to re-imagine, to reclaim, and to forge alternative modes of existence. Freeing the imagination is a precondition for any true liberating experience, of any real and unfettered existence that releases itself from the totalizing clutches of imperial dominance.

Educating for a Racially Just World

At the heart of the educative task is the work of freeing the imagination. In fact, freeing the imagination, especially within religious education, involves that as teachers we learn to work within a plurality of interpretative frameworks that elicit images and concepts of God and human existence. In a world that is ever shrinking, marked by advances in technology, where we have everything we need at the touch of a button,

³⁵⁸ Gibson, "Sourcing the Imagination," 266-275.

where we can travel anywhere in just a matter of hours, and communicate with anyone in the world without being in the same room, you would think that we would have developed what bell hooks drawing from Dr. Martin Luther King calls a “world perspective.” Instead, however, we cling to attitudes of narrow-nationalism, isolationism, and xenophobia.³⁵⁹ Notwithstanding this world of interconnectedness, extreme right-wing conservative movements around the world spreading an ideology of racial supremacy are on the rise. Now more than ever are educators to become more attuned to the ways in which subject matter and certain learning strategies, particularly as they affect teaching, how we teach, and what we teach, work towards building a racially just world.

Educating for a racially just world must permeate all levels of education, both formal and informal, and should be at the very center of all curriculums, even curriculums for religious education. Eleazar Fernandez considers teaching for a culturally diverse and racially just world to be disruptive because it must disrupt white hegemony.³⁶⁰ While the origins of what we know today as Christianity started as a hybrid between Judaism and other cultures mixing within the Roman Empire, later on became almost exclusively identifiable with European or white civilization.³⁶¹ In fact, Christianity was and in some instances continues to be used as a weapon of domination and violence. For example, when the colonizers imposed a white religious imaginary on the indigenous people of America, it destroyed their inner world-vision which gives cohesion and

³⁵⁹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 28.

³⁶⁰ Fernandez, *Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World*, 15.

³⁶¹ Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, eds., *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 4.

meaning to their existence.³⁶² This is unequivocally an act of violence! When members of church hierarchy, educators, and theologians interpret the gospels according to the cultural and political interest of white people only, this too is an act of violence.³⁶³

Educating for a racially just world means that teachers become disruptors as Fernandez described. It means that we “construct and resurrect” counter-narratives that challenge normative readings of the world.³⁶⁴ It means that we develop theories that are “rooted in an attempt to understand both the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance that would transform our current reality.”³⁶⁵ It also means that the truth we hope to discover in our learning experiences are not truths that are preordained by the authorities who claim total guardianship of the educational system, but instead a truth that arises out of the collective learning relationship. Parker Palmer writes:

If we regard truth as something handed down from authorities on high, the classroom will look like a dictatorship. If we regard truth as a fiction determined by personal whim, the classroom will look like anarchy. If we regard truth as emerging from a complex process of mutual inquiry, the classroom will look like a resourceful and interdependent community. Our assumptions about knowing can open up, or shut down, the capacity for connectedness on which good teaching depends.³⁶⁶

³⁶² Christopher Tirres, “Decolonizing Religion: Pragmatism and Latina/o Religious Experience,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham Press, 2012), 226.

³⁶³ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 2003), 43.

³⁶⁴ Mai-Anh Le Tran, “When Subjects Matter,” 49.

³⁶⁵ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 67.

³⁶⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teachers Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 51-52.

The truth that Palmer is referencing here is a truth that arises out of the learning community, a collective of bodies that are particularly raced, classed, nationalized, and sexualized bodies over against the essentializing of human identity.

Bodies do matter when we teach for a racially just world, especially in religious education. Everything about our bodies matter: our hair, our complexion, our facial features, our physiques. Bodies matter because as Ivone Gebara writes, “the biological human being is a biological enculturated being, a biological entity that does not exist independent of the reality – social, communitarian, “other” – in which each person lives.”³⁶⁷ Gebara’s work focuses on the question of evil from the perspective of gender. While this section highlights racialized bodies as sites for liberation in the educative task, it cannot exclude gender as an interpretative category. This work would be remiss if it did not render an account of gender, particularly women bodies as a source of prejudice and injustice.

In education, especially in religious education, when we speak about humanity we are not just referring to men but the combination of both women and men. Each with their own roles, and each with their own way of organizing the world, expressing themselves, uniquely thinking, believing, and articulating their deepest convictions as shaped by their fundamental biocultural and racialized reality that constitutes their being.³⁶⁸ The subject of racialized bodies, though a specific category in itself, does not preclude all the other bodies that do not fit the adequacy of a normatively defined human being to bring their existential condition to bear on the educative task. Educating for a

³⁶⁷ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Womens Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 64.

³⁶⁸ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 65.

racially just world does not exclude the predicament of women of color, men of color, gay, lesbian, transgender, queer, bisexual, or any other version of the human person that does not align with the figure of the singular human that is linked to a legacy of white supremacy and Western bourgeois models.

Educating for a racially just world demands that we sometimes engage in conflict as the “necessary ingredient of dialogue, especially when conditions of inequality prevail among dialogue partners, as they often do in pedagogical situations.”³⁶⁹ Moacir Gadotti subscribes to the notion that “educating presupposes a transformation, and there is no kind of peaceful transformation. There is always conflict and rupture with something, with, for instance, prejudices, habits, types of behaviors, and the like.”³⁷⁰ Education is not a peaceful enterprise. It is the kind of work that keeps pushing the boundaries and never relents. Teaching does not only demand from us the courage to transgress but to also cultivate practices of truth-telling. Teaching must keep us honest. The following are four principles developed by Vijay Prashad in his article “On Commitment: Consideration on Political Activism on a Shocked Planet.” It offers a wonderful teaching strategy for anti-racism and for keeping the teaching/learning experience truthful:

1. Celebrate differences but also put each cultural world into the other. Never allow anyone to become complacent about his or her culture.
2. Always seek the grounds of solidarity or interconnection, and then seek barriers that need to be overcome. We have tensions we should talk about and push before our adversaries exploit them.

³⁶⁹ Peter Crafts Hodgson, *Gods Wisdom: toward a Theology of Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 78.

³⁷⁰ Moacir Gadotti, *Pedagogy of Praxis: a Dialectical Philosophy of Education*, trans. John Milton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), ix-xvii.

3. Solidarity should be based on a scrupulous attention to interests of different pan-ethnic formations in the rat race of bureaucratic multiculturalism.
4. Always put the spotlight on White supremacy.³⁷¹

³⁷¹ Paul O. Myhre, “Angle of Vision from a Companion/Ally in Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World,” in *Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World*, ed. Eleazar Fernandez (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 232.

CHAPTER FOUR. DE-IMPERIALIZING GOD-TALK: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW IMAGINATIVE CONSTRUCTION

“At a time when Jews expect a miracle and Greeks seek enlightenment, we speak about God’s Anointed crucified! This is an offense to Jews, nonsense to the nations; but to those who have heard God’s call, both Jews and Greeks, the Anointed represents God’s power and God’s wisdom; because the folly of God is wiser than humans are and the weakness of God is stronger than humans are.”³⁷²

~ 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

Introduction

Though colonialism as the brutal subjugation of people for the purposes of exploitation and conquest is considered to be over by many accounts, imperialism as the exercise of power through economic and indirect political influence is clearly not.³⁷³ The cultural legacy of Western imperialism can be observed in just about every form of discourse and imaginary construction – including theology. Cuban American theologian Fernando Segovia points out how “the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism, constitutes an omnipresent, inescapable and overwhelming reality,”³⁷⁴ especially in communities where the grips of Euro-American imperialism has inserted itself and taken hold of the collective imaginary. Engaging in theological discourse is basically an attempt to understand human life and the human condition, not in the abstract, but in a way that is

³⁷² A scholarly translation found in Arthur J. Dewey et al., *The Authentic Letters of Paul: a New Reading of Paul’s Rhetoric and Meaning* (Salem: Polebridge Press, 2010).

³⁷³ Jorge Rieger, “Liberating God-talk: Postcolonialism and the Challenge of the Margins,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 206.

³⁷⁴ Fernando F. Segovia, “Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic,” in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 55-56.

able to “grasp human existence in relationship to its ultimate foundation, to the ultimate resource that sustains it, in short, to God.”³⁷⁵ It would be an exercise in futility, then, to do theology in a way that ignores the systematic subordination of a singular conceptual framework or cultural identity over particular notions of human existence. If we proceed to do theology that way, then it becomes nothing more than an oppressive, abstract activity with no bearing on our concrete human lives.

Some would argue that theology is primarily anthropology, that before we begin to hypothesize about the divinity, we should first pay attention to our notions and understandings of the human. Gordon Kaufman says it best:

Though we certainly cannot attain understanding of the meaning and uses of the symbol “God” without simultaneously working out a conception of certain features of human existence, and though different interpretations of the human condition, and different views of human nature, will have diverse implications for what or who we understand God to be, the primary business of theology – that which distinguishes it from other disciplines – is not working out an understanding of humanity but rather of that supreme focus for human service and devotion, God. And a theological understanding of humanity must ultimately be secondary to and derivative from what we conclude to be God.³⁷⁶

It would seem that our interpretation of human nature and our conception of God are equally vital in how we arrive at an understanding of both. Kaufman recognizes that the symbol “God,” what many view as a supreme and omnipotent being who possesses

³⁷⁵ Gordon D. Kaufman, “Theology as Imaginative Construction,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50, no. 1 (March 1982): 73-79.

³⁷⁶ Kaufman, “Theology as Imaginative Construction,” 73-79.

masculine traits and intervenes upon the world to be entirely based on a specific worldview and interpretation. Thus, the theological enterprise, he argues, must consist of thorough analysis, criticism, and reconstruction of the peculiar image/symbol that are used to understand God.³⁷⁷ In other words, theology as a purely imaginative construction that at times may require re-conceptualization and re-imagination.

Kaufman declares that “our God-talk, and everything associated with it (prayer, worship, meditations, obedience), belongs to a specific worldview, a specific interpretation of human existence, created by the imagination in one particular historical stream of human culture to provide orientation in life for those living in that culture.”³⁷⁸ But when a single historical stream of human culture colonizes our theological imagination and makes it where our conception of God is absolutized by a particular metaphysical commitment and mythological interpretation, then our theology becomes anemic and idolatrous. Anemic because it lacks vitality to continue the indefinite task of always attempting to find new ways of articulating the ineffable, and idolatrous because it freezes theology into one single meaning – what Augustine meant when he said: *Si comprehendis, non est Deus* – “If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God.”³⁷⁹ God is just a mere symbol that cannot fully contain what it is ultimately pointing to.

De-imperializing God

Catherine Keller warns us that any theology, whether in the form of “scholastic sophistication or in popular religion, is perpetually tempted to mistake the infinite for the

³⁷⁷ Kaufman, “Theology as Imaginative Construction,” 73-79.

³⁷⁸ Kaufman, “Theology as Imaginative Construction,” 73-79.

³⁷⁹ Augustine, Sermon 52, c. 6, n. 16, quoted in Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 18.

finite names and images in which we clothe it.”³⁸⁰ And by doing that, she asserts, we fall into idolatry. There is no doubt that empire made its way into theology, the *theo-logos* was courtesy of the Greeks. The Platonic categories effected what became a syncretism between a colonized Judaism with a colonizing Hellenism.³⁸¹ Christian theology became more about arguments and persuasive propositional logic instead of witnessing, more about dogmatically formulated statements of unchanging truth than grounded in historical situations. In the words of the late James Cone, “Christian theology cannot afford to be an abstract, dispassionate discourse on the nature of God in relation to humankind; such an analysis has no ethical implications for the contemporary form of oppression in our society. Theology must take the risk of faith, knowing that it stands on the edge of condemnation by the forces of evil.”³⁸² It is precisely as Cone describes it that Christian theology should be done. Not as an abstract and dispassionate discourse with no bearing on the concrete human experience, and not as an idolatrous enterprise where our conceptions of God that are worked out in finite and creaturely language become absolute and rigid with no possibility for new forms of expressions.

God: Absolute or Relative?

Before we begin to iron out the details and propose what a de-imperialized God-talk should look like, it would be wise to shed light on the binary gravitational pull that locks theology into either a religious absolutism or a secular relativism. Catherine Keller, perhaps one of the most insightful theologians of our time, addressed this contentious

³⁸⁰ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 18.

³⁸¹ Catherine Keller, “The Love of Postcolonialism: Theology in the Interstices of Empire,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 222.

³⁸² Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 18.

problem in her book, *On Mystery*. She begins her analysis by pointing out that most of us would prefer to stay away from binary alternatives,³⁸³ a category that we have Greek philosophy to thank for. But unfortunately, these polarities of right and left, red vs. blue, conservative vs. liberals, us vs. them could very well be the result of a firmly embedded binary oriented epistemic and metaphysical understandings of reality that we have all fallen prey to. On the one hand, conservative Christians are concerned that the loss of absolute truth would “lead to a loss of meaning and purpose of life, which leads to emptiness and chaos for individuals and societies.”³⁸⁴ On the other hand, those in the secularist camp denounce the damaging and undeniable violence that religious absolutes have produced throughout history. Both sides make valid arguments; however, as Keller points out, “there doesn’t seem to be a firm middle ground in this argument, or at least none that has much appeal.”³⁸⁵ What Keller suggests is not a midway point to pacify both sides, as if that were even a viable option, but instead she offers a third way.

This third way is not a compromise between both sides of the theological spectrum, but rather something “emerging” as Keller calls it, something on the way.³⁸⁶ Not a perpetual stasis but a process that is always moving, always on the go. Keller and others involved in process thought and post-metaphysical movements cast doubt on the timelessness and infallible quality of truth. The truth that John Caputo refers to as truth with a capital T – described as an overarching, timeless, absolute position that must reign supreme with absolutely no challenges or doubts. But also truth when it is handled by a relaxed attitude of “playing it loose.” Playing it too loose, according to Caputo falls into

³⁸³ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 2.

³⁸⁴ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 2.

³⁸⁵ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 2.

³⁸⁶ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 2.

relativism, the idea that there is no such thing as truth, just a multitude of competing truths that depend upon “language, culture, gender, religion, needs, tastes, etc., and one is as good as another.”³⁸⁷ Neither a rigid form of exclusive truth-claims nor an anything goes relativistic option. Keller argues that “when people of faith step out of the mystery and make totalizing claims for our truth and our beliefs, we perpetuate an antagonistic polarity that actually paralyzes faith rather than fostering its living process. Relativity dissolves into the indifferent relativism, and truth freezes into a deified absolute.”³⁸⁸ Ultimately, each side sees themselves reflected in the other, both holding tight to their overbearing logic and monolithic “truth.”

The reason truth is a matter worth bringing up again in this work is because the truth question is linked to the God question.³⁸⁹ As Keller states: “There are, of course truths about anything and everything. But in the vicinity of religion, and in particular of Christianity, truth has also served as code for “God” and whatever God reveals.”³⁹⁰ Even if we are to understand God as absolute, then “that understanding does not make, or need not make, any human language (however inspired, however truthful, however revealed) itself absolute.”³⁹¹ Therein lies the problem that needs to be overcome in theology. Our creedal formulas and dogmatic statements, though meaningfully condensed form of theological articulation, is precisely that – human articulations. As Keller explains, creeds were forged under the pressure of the Christian emperors in order to help bring unity to the “young Church Triumphant.”³⁹² The images and metaphors contained in these creeds

³⁸⁷ Caputo, *Truth*, 6.

³⁸⁸ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 4.

³⁸⁹ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 4.

³⁹⁰ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 4.

³⁹¹ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 4.

³⁹² Keller, *On the Mystery*, 7

are but characterizations of a God who ultimately escape our conceptualizations and propositional logic. Kaufman explains that to refer to God as the creator of all things “visible and invisible,” presupposes a dualistic mythology and metaphysics. The purpose of that creedal statement is really all about everything finding its creative source in God.³⁹³

All of our concepts and constructions of God are not God. In fact, we can attribute all the finite and creaturely characteristics we want to God, but in the end, we ultimately fall short. Now this does not mean that we just pack up and abandon the theological task altogether, refuse to say anything more about that which draws us more and more into the depth of its mystery. Meister Eckhart, one of the greatest mystics of all time, prayed to God to rid him of God, to make him free of his delusions of God.³⁹⁴ The God that Eckhart is praying to be freed from is the God of our construction, a God as John Caputo writes, is “cut to fit the size and images and concepts, propositions and arguments, not just the God of philosophers but also the God of the theologians, of anything and everything we think we can say of God.”³⁹⁵ But as Caputo reminds us, doing away with God does not mean that we are done with God altogether, to throw up our hands and walk away frustrated and saddened by the prospect that we are bound to always miss the mark. Instead he considers it an opportunity for a “breakthrough into the depth of God,” a God who is beyond our concept of God, a divinity that surpasses our notions of the divine, an understanding of God that no longer fits the imperial caricatures of Supreme Being.³⁹⁶

³⁹³ Kaufman, “Theology as Imaginative Construction,” 73-79.

³⁹⁴ Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, trans., *Meister Eckhart: the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 200.

³⁹⁵ John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: a Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem: Polebridge Press, 2016), 12-13.

³⁹⁶ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 13.

What we should recognize, however, is that we live in an era we can call post-modern - “of high-speed travel and communication that confronts us with an endless array of cultural and religious difference.”³⁹⁷ This plurality may send some running back to the secure and familiar ways of absolutism, withdrawing to what Keller describes as an attitude of *nulla salvas extra ecclesiam* – “No salvation outside of the church,” or prompts others to what she calls the global market place of options.³⁹⁸ At any rate, the “many” should not be considered a market place of options from which we get to choose from, a way to view the vast religions of the world as an open market for our consumption – picking what works best for us and choosing according to our taste. Rather the many “become manifold, folded together, held in relationship, where the third way starts to unfold.”³⁹⁹ The third way holds pluralism not as a threat or a hindering roadblock in the work of theological reflection, but instead it offers an element of relationality that rescues pluralism from relativism, and where the different voices in theology, regardless of tradition or sectarian affiliation, finds unity in creative and harmonious cohesion, a tapestry of discourse that attempts to say something meaningful about the mystery.

Theologia Viatorum

Theology is not to be equated with faith or belief, but, instead it is motivated by our faith convictions, it gathers all of our beliefs into an ever evolving perspective of its interactive process.⁴⁰⁰ Since we are beings in relation to one another, inadvertently affecting or being affected by everything we come into contact with, then life cannot be

³⁹⁷ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 21.

³⁹⁸ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 21.

³⁹⁹ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 21.

⁴⁰⁰ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 10.

viewed as anything other than as a series of processes of becoming. “As living beings we are interdependently bonded together. As humans we have our own distinctive capacity for communication with other members of the community. They deserve our attention – that we hear their voices, respond to their expressions of beauty, and interact with them creatively within the universal dynamics of existence.”⁴⁰¹ If we just stop for a moment to think about how this capacity to affect and be affected constitutes this universal dynamics of existence, then not only should our theology be understood as a process that like every living, breathing organism is open-ended and subject to becoming, but also as a discourse that harbors an ethical imperative.

Karl Barth describes theology as a limiting and fractured system that can never fully capture its intended object. He writes: “All theology is *theologia viatorum*... It is broken thought and utterance to the extent that it can progress only in isolated thoughts and statements directed from different angles to the one object. It can never form a system, comprehending and as it were ‘seizing’ the object.”⁴⁰² Any absolutist position in matters of faith would disagree with Barth’s assessment. In fact, if theology is to be understood as a process that is always on the move and open to new possibilities and re-interpretations, then for those moderns who delight in certitudes and irrefutable facts this may become problematic. Although Barth had his share of run-ins and even parted ways with the liberal theology of his time, he still wouldn’t merit inclusion among those considered to be postmodern thinkers. The closest thing in the history of theology that has challenged the absolute conceptions of God is the apophatic tradition that dates all the

⁴⁰¹ Thomas Berry, “The Primordial Imperative,” in *Theology for Earth Community: a Field Guide*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 3.

⁴⁰² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection with Introduction by Helmut Gollwitzer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 82.

way back to the fusion between Jewish tradition and Platonic philosophy. We see this in the writings of Philo of Alexandria and in the works of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. Their approach towards understanding the divine is done through a language of negation that speaks of what God is not. This tradition is often, though not always, allied with mysticism, which views God as beyond the realm of our finite grasp.⁴⁰³

According to Catherine Keller, “no theology has earlier or better embraced the truth of our radically relational interdependence than has the movement called process theology.”⁴⁰⁴ Instead of viewing the encroaching multiplicities of the world as a hostile invader for Christian faith, it embraces this difference as a bottomless source of wisdom.⁴⁰⁵ As John Cobb and David Griffin write, process thought “gives primacy to interdependence over independence as an ideal. Of course it portrays interdependence not simply as an ideal but as an ontologically given characteristic.”⁴⁰⁶ This offers a stark contrast to the ontotheological categories that privileges Being as the “sense of what really and truly is, what is enduringly and permanently present, as opposed to all that is fleeting and apparent. Rhetorically and conceptually associated with sun, light, and the gleaming manifestation, the essence of Greek wisdom is to ascend to the element of Being and to avoid the black holes and dark corners of non-Being or the shifting sands of becoming.”⁴⁰⁷ Imagine a theology that privileges difference over sameness, becoming over essence, interdependence over independence, absence over presence, lack over

⁴⁰³ J. A. van Belzen and Antoon Geels, eds., *Mysticism: a Variety of Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Rodopi, 2003), 84-87.

⁴⁰⁴ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 22.

⁴⁰⁵ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 22.

⁴⁰⁶ John B. Cobb and David Ray. Griffin, *Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 21.

⁴⁰⁷ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 47.

substance, weakness over strength, ambiguity over certitude, the particular over the universal, movement over stasis, a theology reborn of a new language world.

Overturning Strong Theology

The approach taken here is not to endorse one specific way of doing theology over all the others, which would create yet another hegemony. Our aim here is to imagine God otherwise, to conceive of God as something other than a sovereign power, a punitive judge, a divine ruler, and all other notions of God that result from what Caputo calls a strong theology, which turns God into an idol, a graven image, an instrument of institutional power, a top-down authoritarianism, which causes confessional and identitarian divisiveness.⁴⁰⁸ Strong theology is founded on a kind of understanding of the world as ontologically hard-wired with a rigid inner structure that makes it highly stable and resistant to alteration and change.⁴⁰⁹ It is grounded in an enduringly, abiding “ousiological” arrangement, or a primordial essence that is tightly anchored down and unaffected by finite contingencies. Strong theology is the result of how “Christian men talked and wrote themselves into a position where they spoke and wrote the rhetoric of empire.”⁴¹⁰ The evidence can be seen in the androcentric metaphors and images that saturate our creedal formulas and church doctrines. It is also displayed in the power discourse that infuses our religious images; depicting God as almighty, omnipotent, sovereign lord with a hypermasculinity that supports the established order, top-down political arrangements, and the status quo.

⁴⁰⁸ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 35. .

⁴⁰⁹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 151.

⁴¹⁰ Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 10.

The time has come, as Caputo suggests, “to remodel and re-imagine theology in accord with a more up-to-date sense of cosmological direction.”⁴¹¹ Our God-talk must undergo a total overhaul so that we engage in new and reinvigorated ways to speak about the mystery that we have reduced to the name God. The old theological language is our most enslaving language, and a reversal of this dominant language can lead to a liberation.⁴¹² God-talk will now find adequate expression within a comprehensive reality that is marked by absolute transformation and dislodged from all stabilizing order and identities.⁴¹³ We established earlier that truth has served as code for God in the Christian tradition; therefore, notions of both truth and God are heavily endowed with qualities of immutability, permanence, and immunity to all forms of contingencies. God is portrayed as far removed and detached from time, beyond creation, and beyond materiality.⁴¹⁴

Apocalypticism

Theistic affirmations about what God must be in order to be God are generally characterized by notions of perfection, absoluteness, and timelessness. This of course is supported by the philosophical categories that have prevailed throughout Western civilization. History has undergone a series apocalyptic events, understood in terms of noteworthy epochal transitions that have given rise to new perspectival challenges and understandings. Classical theology would have us think of anything apocalyptic as exclusively reserved for end-times, perpetuating a theology of conquest rather than unfolding moments in the present. Thomas Altizer views it differently:

⁴¹¹ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 7.

⁴¹² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 140.

⁴¹³ Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, xx.

⁴¹⁴ Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: a Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 2.

Indeed, the very advent of modernity can be understood to be an apocalyptic event, an advent ushering in a wholly new world as the consequence of the ending of an old world. Nowhere was such a new world more fully present than in thinking itself, a truly new thinking not only embodied in a new science and a new philosophy, but in a new reflexivity or introspection in the interiority of self-consciousness.... Cartesian philosophy could establish itself only by ending scholastic philosophy, and with that ending a new philosophy was truly born, and one implicitly if not explicitly claiming for itself a radically new world. That world can be understood as a new apocalyptic world, one which becomes manifestly apocalyptic in the French Revolution and German Idealism, and then one realizing truly universal expressions in Marxism and in that uniquely modern or postmodern nihilism which was so decisively inaugurated by Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God.⁴¹⁵

Disruptive and transformative events, particularly as they increasingly extend globally in their reach, constitute our actual historical development.⁴¹⁶ These apocalyptic events (unveiling and unfolding moments) as such, "have fissured and transformed not only our common history but ourselves, our core identities, and not only our core identities but that which we knew and identified as God."⁴¹⁷ The language of the old world, important

⁴¹⁵ Thomas J.J. Altizer, "Apocalypticism and Modern Thinking," *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 2, no. 2 (1997): pp. par.1-27; Thomas J.J. Altizer, "Modern Thought and Apocalypticism." In *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, ed. Stephen Stein, vol. 3 (New York: Continuum, 1998)

⁴¹⁶ Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, xx.

⁴¹⁷ Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, xx.

insofar as we come to a deeper sense of how we are located in history, language, and tradition,⁴¹⁸ is epochal and the result of a series apocalyptic moments.

Our God-talk should now reflect a new epochal moment which is the result from what ended the old world and gave rise to a new one. From these apocalyptic events that have afforded us new forms of introspection and reflexivity of self-consciousness, we now dare to speak about, of, or to God in ways that are creative, imaginative, and free from the monolithic designs that restricted our divine speech and delegitimized alternative options. Altizer forcefully asserts that it is “no longer possible to speak of God in a classical theological language, or any form thereof, and this means that God can no longer be conceived as transcendent or immanent, either as ‘above’ or ‘below,’ in the ‘heights’ or in the depths.”⁴¹⁹ A form of God speech that is now characterized by anti-imperial symbols and metaphors, and extricated from stable arrangements and singular identities. Apocalyptic moments are unfolding events that bring about new insight and fresh perspective. This does not mean, however, that the new epochal moment that ushered in new and creative opportunities for world- transfiguration will then anchor itself down and resist any potential apocalyptic events that would alter and re-invent the world once again. We must instead be expectant, in suspense of what will come, always looking forward towards the advent of a new epochal birth, of a new world unfolding, and of the arrival of an unannounced, unnamed anonymous God.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁸ James Brandt, “Historical Theology,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 369.

⁴¹⁹ Thomas J.J. Altizer, “Satan as the Messiah of Nature,” in *The Whirlwind in Culture: Frontiers in Theology*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Bloomington: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989), 129.

⁴²⁰ Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, xxi.

Transcendence/Immanence

When transcendence is obliterated, immanence no longer has a dichotomous counterpart, thus requiring a categorically new way to think about God. According to Mayra Rivera, “whether the term transcendence is explicitly invoked or not, the Western imaginary retains the versions of the disembodied controlling power that theism commonly associates with transcendence.”⁴²¹ She views traditional notions of transcendence as creating a metaphysical rift between the created order and God – a dualistic framework that gives rise to oppositional perspectives regarding gender.⁴²² This work also considers the category of race as conditioned and supported by these antagonistic binaries. Rivera points out “that our images of the divine Other shape our constructions of human otherness.”⁴²³ Subject to patriarchal definitions, women are understood as a negative of the male subject, a defective or imperfect being, and as such becomes objectified and relegated to the realm of the immanent.⁴²⁴ Being objectified reduces women to a category that is less than, beneath the privileged status that men enjoy with divine being, and “overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (conscience) which is essential and sovereign.”⁴²⁵ Furthermore, this way of constructing our image of the divine Other plays a very significant role in how racial categories have been arranged and made subordinate to the one, essentialized and sovereign white male that represents what is beyond the limits of imperfection, what is associated with the world of materiality.

⁴²¹ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 5.

⁴²² Rivera, *The touch of Transcendence*, 6.

⁴²³ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 2.

⁴²⁴ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 6.

⁴²⁵ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 6.

What is whiteness? A rhetorical question posed by James Perkinson in his attempt to respond to how theology has been complicit in fostering notions of white supremacy. Perkinson argues that Christian theology and its particular discursive potency has leveraged racial trauma in the United States.⁴²⁶ His work echoes Rivera insofar as dichotomous frameworks advanced by Western metaphysics, particularly in how we construct opposite polarities in theology (transcendence/immanence) work towards reducing the other to an inferior status.⁴²⁷ Perkinson writes:

Whiteness is, in fact, a very peculiar kind of opposite – a position, a privilege, a presumption, a pride, a propertied entitlement, a protected comportment, a way of walking, talking and “being” that operates not simply as an equal and inverse form of the thing it differs from, but rather precisely as its supreme judge.

Whiteness here is not so much one term of comparison as the eye that compares it in the first place. And like any eye, the thing it cannot see is itself. It is rather, for itself, a strange form of invisibility.

Whiteness, therefore, considers itself to be an essential and sovereign identity that does not view itself as the inverse of the thing it differs from because it views itself as the embodiment of good, pure, ideal, and emblematic of the divine. Perkinson points out that by the eighteenth century, “the theological coagulation of “white’ and “right,” “light” and

⁴²⁶ James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2.

⁴²⁷ This is contrary to Emmanuel Levinas’ position on transcendence which he aligns with exteriority, the irreducibility of the other that eludes my comprehensive knowledge. Transcendence as privileging the other before me, the other that implores and commands me. The other as ‘expressing’ and ‘revealing’ infinite transcendence. Not the other who is reduced to the immanent because it does not possess the qualities constitute supremacy. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Lévinas Emmanuel, *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2016).

“might,” began to gain ontological voice.”⁴²⁸ In other words, whiteness as comprising the ideal form of humanity that identifies itself with transcendence and not with what can be objectified in the world of immanence. Or understood as “the association of transcendence with separation and independence, which mirrors the ideals of a (white)⁴²⁹ masculinist culture that envisions the becoming of subjectivity as overcoming the constraints of materiality (and the body).”⁴³⁰ All things considered, we can conclude that Christian theology, known for the most part as a form of strong theology, has exerted a colonizing force that aligns God with the colonial system and the colonizers.⁴³¹

Emergence of a Weak Theology

From the ashes of strong theology emerges a new way to engage in God-talk. One that is not beholden to the imperial designs that conceptualize God as a Supreme Being, but instead one that frees God from the constellation of power, might and being that has intoxicated theology for most of Western history.⁴³² What follows will be a contrasting viewpoint that shatters the dominant notions of theology as a discourse of power with a soft, wisper sort of delicate force that overcomes an imperializing metaphysical influence within theology. Or as Caputo puts it, “filtering out the grains of metaphysics

⁴²⁸ Perkinson, *White Theology*, 157.

⁴²⁹ This work considers not only a downtrodden female existence but also the non-white existence that can never aspire to become a full human subject under these metaphysical categories and theological construction. It views “transcendence as independence or separation from matter and flesh that consigns embodiment to a lower realm, which in turn leads to the subordination of women, whose reproductive functions are generally assumed to place them closer to nature.” Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*, 7-8. On the other hand, male whiteness (supremacy) is also supported by the antithetical division between transcendence and immanence, relegating what is not in line with white normative designs to the lesser status of immanence. Christian theology has long been complicit with affirming notions of whiteness. “Whiteness is the hidden offspring of white supremacy, which was itself the visible offspring of Christian supremacy.” See Perkinson, *White Theology*, 154.

⁴³⁰ Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*, 7.

⁴³¹ Rieger, “Liberating God Talk,” 219.

⁴³² Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 65.

that have infiltrated theology in order to return to the lived experience that is obfuscated by metaphysics.”⁴³³ Lived experience as opposed to the abstract metaphysics of Being will occupy a foundational role in the emergence of a weak theology.

The Learning Event

Maria Harris uses the concept of emergence as the fourth movement in her teaching paradigm. She describes the moment of emergence as “something new beginning to be born, that something is connected to what has gone before; but for the present moment, in this learner, in this situation, subject matter is being and has been reformed, indeed reinvented for the future with a life of its own.”⁴³⁴ We must first keep in mind that when Harris speaks of subject matter she is referring to a variety of elements that constitute the entirety of what subject matter should represent in the teaching enterprise. Subject matter is not just simply the system of clues or the “labyrinth of reality” that together speak to human existence and forges a world of meaning, but also the human subject that matters and is relative to the “Subjectivity of subjectivity: the belief that everything and everyone in existence draws that existence from participation in the One Who Is, and that any human subjectivity which exists does so by reason of its own being in, dwelling in, and having been created in the fullness, richness, and depth of the Subjectivity of God.”⁴³⁵ Subject matter is not viewed here as an isolated area of study that only provides theories or conjectures about a single aspect of reality, but a unifying whole that operates as a creative existential dynamic. Subject matter in religious education includes the totality of the symbols, narratives, metaphors, and the human

⁴³³ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 66.

⁴³⁴ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 37.

⁴³⁵ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 33.

experience which all constitutes our religious framework and gives way to our theological constructions.

Harris was on to something when she described emergence as a moment of reformability and reinvention, as something connected to what has gone before but is now moving future bound with a life of its own. In other words, it would seem that what Harris considered to be emergent is not entirely a new life that proceeds with no connection to the past, but instead what results from a process of re-creation – reforming of subject matter.⁴³⁶ Harris’ paradigm of re-creation has some similarities with the postmodern theory of deconstruction. “To be deconstructible means to be reformable or transformable,”⁴³⁷ and thus a destabilization of any construction within space and time. Namely, anything that is constructible is deconstructible – that means anything within the finite realm: laws, institutions, practices, beliefs, traditions, religion, the arts and sciences – the entirety of everything that could be considered subject matter, including the human subject who is too at risk and vulnerable to moments of transformability or conversion (metanoia).

Keep in mind, however, that deconstruction is not something that we do, but something that happens whether we like it or not.⁴³⁸ It happens like an unplanned event, blindsided by what comes out of nowhere. This means that anything that is open to the future, anything subject to future contingencies is exposed to promise and threat.⁴³⁹ Promise in the sense that it has potential for new and fresh possibilities, emerging with an entirely new appearance and luster, while threat is the understanding that there are no

⁴³⁶ See Harris’s paradigm for re-creation in *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 97-115.

⁴³⁷ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 24.

⁴³⁸ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 26.

⁴³⁹ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 26.

guarantees, and that absolutely nothing can shield us from the worst. Harris sees the learning event as unrestrained by time and unforeseeably the emergence of something we have no control over. She writes that “what happens in the moment of emergence may be quite different from what was expected.”⁴⁴⁰ She continues by declaring that “the moment of emergence has an inner requirement: It needs to occur on its own time, and not on a schedule constricted by semester or term, by examination or pressure.”⁴⁴¹ There are no time constraints for the learning event.

Harris exhibits a keen sensibility towards that which she cannot control as an educator. That what might emerge cannot be predicted or manipulated, but instead unforeseeable with an event-like quality that has a life of its own. Her teaching paradigm is an effort to stress the transformative and the re-creative activity that takes place in learning.⁴⁴² This does not mean that the educator takes it upon themselves to effect transformative outcomes, as if they could control what the moment of learning will look like, but it means instead that they can shape curriculum and set the conditions that are necessary to usher in the learning event, the moment with deep transformative possibilities. Caputo writes that “there are deconstructive processes in which we do have a hand, in which we can participate, which means we can try to either promote or prevent the event.” Otherwise stated, we can prepare the necessary conditions, like curriculum, so as to foster the coming of the learning moment (event). In response to an interview that was titled Education as Event, Caputo said the following:

⁴⁴⁰ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 37-38.

⁴⁴¹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 38.

⁴⁴² Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 97.

I do not know if you intended just now to use the word ‘transformation’ instead of ‘formation,’ or even in contrast to formation. If so, I approve. I think that the university must provide the milieu for the event and therefore I would prefer not to say a place of ‘formation.’ It must allow the event to happen, which is why I myself would speak of transformation rather than ‘formation.’ I think ‘form’ and ‘formation’ work against the event. The coming or the incoming of the event – in French, this is *l’invention de l’événement* – is the occasion of a transformation. So instead of ‘forming’ habits (literally havings) we have to do with transforming happenings, with events, and what we seek is a certain readiness for the event, which is paradoxical since the event is what we cannot see coming and hence something for which we cannot be ready. We must make ready for what we cannot be ready.⁴⁴³

Formability is perhaps the most conventional way to describe the process of education. In fact, those who enter Catholic religious orders refer to their studies and training as formation. A process by which a person undergoes boot camp-like experience so as to be ‘formed’ in the spirit of the order. It is important to note, however, that the reason Caputo prefers transformability to formability is because in the conventional sense, formability suggests one singular ‘form’ to be inculcated.⁴⁴⁴ On the other hand, for Maria Harris, form-giving is not a singular form but a process, an ongoing effort that can never predict or determine how or when the moment of learning will emerge.

⁴⁴³ John D. Caputo, “Education as Event: A Conversation with John D. Caputo,” *JOMECE Journal*, no. 10 (December 23, 2016): 5-26, <https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2016.10082>).

⁴⁴⁴ Caputo, “Education as Event: A Conversation with John D. Caputo,” 5-26.

Knowing and Loving

There is no question that theology and education are intimately connected. Thomas Groome considers both of “them to overlap and, in practice function as one.”⁴⁴⁵ Both the theological and the educational task are Christian practices of truth dwelling. Truth is understood here as what is revealed in the act love and loving.⁴⁴⁶ The Bible almost never gives an abstract definition of the nature of God. Except one of the times that it did, it proclaimed that “God is love.”⁴⁴⁷ “Everyone who loves,” we read in the Bible, “is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving knows nothing of God, for God is love.”⁴⁴⁸ Later on we read: “he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him.”⁴⁴⁹ If truth in Christian theology is code for God, then to dwell in truth is to dwell in love because God is love.

Duncan Forrester points out how the notion of knowing and loving are almost tantamount human activities found deeply entrenched in the Biblical narratives. He explains how the Hebrew verb (yada) can be translated as both knowing and loving in the sense of sexual intercourse.⁴⁵⁰ Sex as the expression of the most intimate act between two people who love each other. With regards to the theological endeavor, Terry Veling writes how “love and goodness must always lead the way, presiding over the work of theology.”⁴⁵¹ If this is case, and theology is basically the attempt to understand (know) human existence in relationship to its ultimate referent, namely God, then theology

⁴⁴⁵ Thomas H. Groome, *Will There Be Faith?* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 91.

⁴⁴⁶ Duncan B. Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 14.

⁴⁴⁷ 1 John 4:16.

⁴⁴⁸ Forrester, *Truthful Action*, 14. .

⁴⁴⁹ Forrester, *Truthful Action*, 14.

⁴⁵⁰ Forrester, *Truthful Action*, 14.

⁴⁵¹ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 14.

(knowing God) can be nothing else than an act of love – since God is love. Attempting to know something about God is of course one of the principal aims of the theological task, so then to be ‘unloving’ impedes us from knowing anything about God.

The same can be said about education. Paulo Freire wrote that “education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage.”⁴⁵² By the same token, Parker Palmer invites us to move through our fear of learning and to “practice knowing as a form of love so that we may abandon our illusion of control and enter a partnership with the otherness of the world.”⁴⁵³ Education as an act of love eclipses the common notion of knowing as a mere epistemic function. If education is looked upon as simply the work of mastering content through memorization and rote models of learning, or specifically designed with profitability motives in mind, then it is nothing more than a meaningless and hollow activity. On the other hand, if education is conducted in a manner where knowing and loving as a unitary feature motivates the entire process, then it becomes an experience of truth dwelling.

The Hebrew concept of *yada* which again translates as carnal knowledge (sexual intercourse) and thus conjoins the act of knowing and loving as a beautiful expression of relatedness and intimacy could very well be applied to the performative nature of theology and education. “The relational way of knowing,” Palmer writes, where love takes away fear and co-creation replaces control.”⁴⁵⁴ Both theology and education are acts of knowing and loving, expressions of bodily (carnal) knowing as a unitary

⁴⁵² Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 38.

⁴⁵³ Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 57.

⁴⁵⁴ Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 57.

operative; knowing of the flesh⁴⁵⁵ that looks beyond cognitive or conceptual ways of knowing and makes the body the primary site for knowing. In other words, both theology and education possess an inner sympathy that binds them together and reminds us that all knowing and loving is body-mediated and not something that is external to it. Knowing and loving as the unitary operative within both theology and education acknowledges otherness as irreducible. The notion of knowing and loving as a unitary force that inspires both the theological and the educational task becomes obscured and deprived of oxygen in strong theology. Strong theology flexes its metaphysical muscles with a God-talk that privileges stability, order, presence, sameness, coercive power, absolute certitudes, ahistorical truths, universal applicability - in short, an imperialized theological construction that makes God an identifiably strong and powerful Being with masculine attributes. If Christian theology and education is to be conceived as an act of love, where these two distinct but intimately related fields of inquiry are inhabited by an inseparable knowing and loving activity, then theology must be stripped of all imperial coloring and emerge as a form of God-talk that faithfully reflects the rule of the Kingdom of God, a

⁴⁵⁵ Knowing of the flesh can be understood as analogous to Bonnie Miller-McLemore's maternal feminist epistemology. This work seeks to highlight the intrinsic loving and knowing nature within the practice of theology and education as best expressed in the Hebrew verb *yada*. McLemore proposes a paradigm of motherhood that is gender specific, viscerally evocative, and biologically in situ. She delineates a feminist epistemology that binds the act of knowing with the organic experience of motherhood. "I know by knowing the feelings of the other physically because they are paradoxically both mine and not mine, a continuity in difference rather than polar opposition or an enmeshed symbiosis. I know by an affective connection that moves toward differentiation, not by comparison, contrast, and critique or by idealized oneness or union with the child. I know immediately, tacitly, erotically – the 'lowest and least worthy of all human senses according to Aquinas.'" Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 129. McLemore points how ways of knowing that do not conform with a "Greek man's" episteme is considered inferior. See chapter 5 titled A Maternal Feminist Epistemology – Miller McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 113-136.

kingdom that is not of this world, a kingdom that does not exert a strong power but a weak power of powerlessness – a weak force.

God as a Weak Force

The notion of God as a weak force is a concept developed by a branch of postmodern theology of which John Caputo is a prominent advocate. It is primarily inspired by Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The passage reads:

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength... But God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.⁴⁵⁶

While this passage and other New Testament references lay the groundwork for what has come to be known as weak theology, there are other influences that play a vital role in the framing of Caputo's thought. Notable thinkers across the spectrum of theology and philosophy have contributed significantly to Caputo's theology of the event. The pantheon includes: Jacques Derrida, Paul Tillich, Gianni Vattimo, Martin Heidegger, Edmond Husserl, Soren Kierkegaard, Emmanuel Levinas, Friedrich Nietzsche, and a number of others that have either directly or indirectly shaped postmodern Christianity, of which Caputo is a major figure. It was Jean-Francois Lyotard who is identified as the responsible culprit for defining the postmodern experience. Lyotard understands postmodernity as the "incredulity of meta-narratives,"⁴⁵⁷ suspicion towards overarching

⁴⁵⁶ 1 Cor. 1:25, 27-28

⁴⁵⁷ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii-xxiv.

stories, comprehensive and all-encompassing accounts that provide a “theory of everything.”⁴⁵⁸

This postmodern outlook is particularly “incredulous” of the big stories in religion, especially with regards to God as the Supreme Being who dwells in the most high and who may or may not grant people what they want. What Caputo refers to as an “anthropocentric picture card God, a super-agent who does things or send us into a tizzy when he⁴⁵⁹ mysteriously declines doing things that we think we really need doing.”⁴⁶⁰ Notions of God as a Supreme Being or super-agent is the result of a supernaturalism or the hyper-mythologizing that takes place in religion, particularly in Christianity. It is also the result of imperial designs that have infiltrated the religious imagination, depicting God as powerful king, ruler, judge and conqueror – inverting the *Imago Dei* with *Imago humanitas* – creating God in our image and likeness. Of course all theology is guilty of that, when all it can do is simply employ the use of finite attributes to speak of the ineffable. With all that being said, we must affirm that all theology is historically conditioned, and that it must exercise extreme caution not to trespass the limits of finitude.⁴⁶¹ Nevertheless, theology can open itself up to be reimagined, reinvented, reformed, and framed in a language of possibility rather than in a language of presence, fixity or Being.

A weak rather than strong theology finds a comfortable home in the pedagogy that this work is attempting to advance. In fact, what Harris considers to be the fourth

⁴⁵⁸ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 73.

⁴⁵⁹ Caputo uses the male pronoun deliberately in order to underscore the patriarchal and male dominant language that infuses classical theology (Strong theology).

⁴⁶⁰ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 74.

⁴⁶¹ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 53.

movement in her teaching paradigm, the moment of emergence where the unforeseeable that has a life of its own and from which something new is born has a degree of resonance with the concept of the event. Contrary to the substance (ousia) metaphysics that imbues strong theology, a weak theology, on the other hand, harbors the event within the name. Caputo explains the event in this manner:

Names contain events and give them a kind of temporary shelter by housing them within a relatively stable nominal unity. Events, on the other hand, are uncontainable, and they make names restless with promise and the future, with memory and the past, with the result that names contain what they cannot contain. Names belong to natural languages and are historically constituted or constructed, whereas the events are little unnatural, eerie, ghostly things that haunt names and see to it that they never rest in peace. Names can accumulate historical power and worldly prestige and have very powerful institutions erected in or under their name; getting themselves carved in stone, whereas the voice of events is ever soft and low and is liable to be dismissed, distorted and ignored.⁴⁶²

What Caputo is suggesting by a theology of the event is that which stirs in the name God, the uncontainable and restless force of the event, for lack of a better word.⁴⁶³ The aim

⁴⁶² Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

⁴⁶³ The event is not an objectifiable entity that is subject to the orderly arrangements of Being. The event eludes metaphysics and is therefore what can only be grasped as a phenomenological hermeneutical 'event.' Caputo operates from a postmetaphysical rationality which looks upon the event as a vocative and "provocative force, as an evocative, provocative event, rather than confining its force to the strictures of naming a present entity." Ibid, 9-10; Caputo's postmetaphysical position acknowledges hermeneutics as leading the way. "Finally, we come up against the mystery itself, the unencompassable depth in both things and our (non)selves. And then we are brought up short. That it seems to me is where hermeneutics leads us: not to a conclusion which gives comfort but to a thunderstorm, not to a closure but to a disclosure, an openness toward what cannot be encompassed, where we lose our breath and are stopped in our tracks, at least momentarily, for it always belongs to our condition to remain on the way." Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 214.

here is to pull the proverbial plug on the name of God that is held captive in the ontological order.⁴⁶⁴ Or as Jean-Luc Marion would say, “to free silence from its idolatrous dishonor would require nothing less than to free the word “God” from the Being of beings.”⁴⁶⁵ What the name of God harbors is a force of frailty or weakness, “a shift from the register of strength to that of weakness, from a robust theology of divine power and omnipotent to a thin theology of the weakness of God, from the noise of being to the silence of the unconditional call.”⁴⁶⁶ Employing the notion of the unconditional is where Caputo begins to show his Tillichian cards.

Caputo is enamored by Paul Tillich’s work. In fact, while he does not consider himself to be an expert on Tillich, he does however view Tillich as a nagging ghost who continuously haunts his mind and heart. So much so that he draws comparisons between Tillich’s work and that of his good friend Jacques Derrida. The unconditional occupies a central place in weak theology. Caputo explains that the “real interest in theology is not in God but in the unconditional.”⁴⁶⁷ Tillich is concerned about the “inadequacy of all limiting name,” what would confine God, restrict the divine, and reduce it to the realm of the finite. Tillich expands on this thought:

God is no object for us as subjects. He is always that which precedes this division. But, on the other hand, we speak about him and we act upon him, and we cannot avoid it, because everything which becomes real to us enter the subject-object correlation. Out of this paradoxical situation the half-blasphemous and

⁴⁶⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 10.

⁴⁶⁵ Jean Luc Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 60.

⁴⁶⁶ Marion, *God without Being*, 12.

⁴⁶⁷ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 19.

mythological concept of the “existence of God” has arisen. And so have the abortive attempts to prove the existence of this “object.” To such a concept and to such attempts atheism is the right religious and theological response.⁴⁶⁸

Tillich declares that God is no object to us subject, and that God precedes the division between the subject and object. Tillich explains that in “terms like ultimate, unconditional, infinite, absolute, the difference between subjectivity and objectivity is overcome.”⁴⁶⁹ God is not an object to be grasped or possessed, not a definite being because God is indefinite and indefinable. Or as Caputo would say, “God is not something or someone (neither he nor she nor it) doing something, like causing or making or even choosing to be the ground, nor in a more hands-off way supervising their production from afar and directing it wisely to an end.”⁴⁷⁰ This means ultimately that every word we utter to say something about God is symbolic, since all we can do is draw from finite reality, the only thing with which we are familiar, of which God is the inexhaustible luminous source.⁴⁷¹ Something new is required from theology, a new language, new imagery, and perhaps an alternative “third way” that distances itself from the polarizing debate between theism and atheism. What Tillich is proposing is a deeply “theological atheism, not to be confused with a garden variety atheism which suffers from the same confusion of theism.”⁴⁷² This confusion entails either affirming or negating the existence of a Supreme Being.

⁴⁶⁸ Paul Tillich, *Theology and Culture* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1959), 25.

⁴⁶⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich*, 18.

⁴⁷⁰ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 14-15.

⁴⁷¹ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 14-15.

⁴⁷² Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 11.

According to Caputo, the unconditional is of singular value to theology. By comparing it to Jacques Derrida's notion of the "undeconstructable," Caputo has this to say about how Tillich understood the unconditional. "For Tillich the unconditional is so elementary a notion that he predicts it should show up everywhere – everywhere, that is, where we are thinking deeply or where we are making or doing or going about things in search of their depth dimension."⁴⁷³ We can derive from this account of the unconditional that both Tillich and Caputo are not too concerned about the distinctions between theology and philosophy, the religious and the secular, or faith and reason.⁴⁷⁴ No, instead Caputo like Tillich and Derrida recognize that these distinctions "draw conditional lines in the unconditional."⁴⁷⁵ The unconditional becomes a way to speak of God, a way that avoids fixing God as an object that we as thinking subjects can identify; thereby missing the depth dimension and falling prey to a form of idolatry.

Caputo places Tillich and Derrida in conversation, or as he explains it, he places "them close enough together so that they give off sparks."⁴⁷⁶ The undeconstructible is the unconditional- "whereas the conditional is what is constructed under the concrete conditions of language, history, and socio-political order."⁴⁷⁷ Whatever we have said, done, and written; whatever we have constructed in order to negotiate the unconditional is inadequate. It never meets the terms of the unconditional. At the very core structure of our human experiences lies the unconditional. But as Caputo explains it, the

⁴⁷³ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 23.

⁴⁷⁴ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 23.

⁴⁷⁵ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 23.

⁴⁷⁶ Celebrating the legacy of Paul Tillich at Union Theological Seminary, John Caputo delivered the keynote address. See Paul Tillich Symposium: John Caputo Lecture (YouTube, May 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cog1v44WNPQ>).

⁴⁷⁷ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 29.

unconditional, on the one hand, is what calls to us, “lays claim to us,” unconditionally. While on the other hand, from our end, a willingness to “harken to the call,” to make an unconditional expenditure without the expectation of a return. For example, welcoming the stranger without setting any ‘conditions’ or terms, unconditional forgiveness without demanding any form of reparation or penance, or love as unconditionality itself. The unconditional sounds like an absurd concept according to the logic of this world. The world operates in a transactional manner, ruled by an economy that requires even exchange. The kingdom of God constitutes the weak force that stirs within the name of God. The kingdom of God thwarts the logic of the world with a “mad economics” of a sacred anarchy, one “where abuse is returned by love, where offense is met with forgiveness... where the strict accounting system in the economy of exchange is thrown into confusion and disarray by unaccountable, impossible gifts.”⁴⁷⁸ The kingdom of God embodies a gift where any form of human calculation and measuring system (economies) is suspended.

While Caputo’s work is extensive and merits an entire treatise of its own, this section only attempts to give a contrasting account of weak theology to the strong theology that has prevailed throughout most of history. It will continue to make the case that in a post-metaphysical era, classical theology no longer offers a viable discourse. Altizer argues that while theology had enormous success, at least in the Western world for almost two millennia, as theological language was considered the most powerful language throughout that period, and even political sovereignty could not be separated from theological language, we know this to be no longer the case.⁴⁷⁹ “Yes, Christendom

⁴⁷⁸ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 234.

⁴⁷⁹ Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 9.

has come to an end,”⁴⁸⁰ Altizer wrote, but does not the theological legacy remain and offer incredible potential to speak about the very depth of human experiences? Those who are suspicious of the grand meta-narratives that dominate our religious imagination seem to think so.

Weak theology is the result of a *kenosis*, “in which the high and mighty God of strong theology is emptied out into the world without remainder.”⁴⁸¹ Weak theology opens up by declaring that the “death of the high and mighty God is the birth of God in the world, whose democratic sense of freedom and equality incarnate the divine life today.”⁴⁸² But where is God? Caputo emphatically asks and then proceeds to offer a response that situates God in the depth or in the abyss not on high. “God has pitched a tent in the world, in the depths of the world, in the arts and sciences, in ethical and political life, where the world is busy making the kingdom of God come true, making the name (of) “God” come true in the sacrament of the world.” Weak theology identifies the event in the New Testament as the kingdom of God, while the forces that conspire against the event is known as the ‘world.’⁴⁸³ Weak theology is ultimately a hermeneutics of the event, of the weak force that embodies the kingdom of God. Caputo describes God’s kingdom as providing a perfect way to concretize or embody the weak force of God, nothing like what you would expect of a worldly kingdom that makes itself known by a display of power and majesty.

The Kingdom of God has been dubbed a “sacred anarchy” by John Caputo, the unruliness of God and a kind of divine madness that unsettles the comfortable lives and

⁴⁸⁰ Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 9.

⁴⁸¹ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 55.

⁴⁸² Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 55.

⁴⁸³ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 13.

established rules of the world.⁴⁸⁴ Since the kingdom of God is the name for the event, what we choose to call that which stirs in the name of God, then theology serves as a hermeneutics of the event - the unfolding of the name God. It becomes the responsibility of the theologian in the ever unfolding and new apocalyptic moments to name the unnamable, to name the event that is sheltered in this historical and finite concept of God. Altizer affirms that “certainly our new condition to be open to such a venture, and most manifestly so in our new emptiness, an emptiness harboring a new abyss, and while that abyss is seemingly unspeakable as such, it could be nameable by the theologian, and by that theologian who has accepted a calling to name God, and to name God in her world.”⁴⁸⁵ The kingdom of God brings about a reversal in the logic of the world, what seems paradoxical and unintelligible, short circuiting everything we regard as orderly and predictable. The kingdom of God embodies the rule of God, a rule considered by the authorities of the world to be a ‘folly,’ absurdity, impossible! So a theology of the event or of the kingdom of God is a theology that must speak to the impossible. What is called for is not a logic, or a *theo-logic* to make calculative and propositional sense of the impossible, but a poetics of the impossible, not a theology but a theopoetics.

A Poetic Sensibility

Theopoetics is not a newly discovered form of discourse that offers a more poetic feel to the theological content, rather it is a “strategy of human signification in the absence of fixed and ultimate meanings accessible to knowledge or faith.”⁴⁸⁶ The event that stirs within the name of God, what appears under the guise of the kingdom of God,

⁴⁸⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 101.

⁴⁸⁵ Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 11.

⁴⁸⁶ David Miller, “Theopoetry or Theopoetics?” *Cross Currents* 60, no. 1 (2010), 14.

what we are always praying for (to come), what constitutes a rule that contradicts and destabilizes the rules of this world, and what embodies God not as an onto-theological construction (Supreme Being), but rather a weak force, requires a language of a different order. As the apocalyptic event begins to unfold by ushering in a new epoch, then a “radical revisioning of our way of seeing and thinking”⁴⁸⁷ must emerge. What is called for is a deep “reflection on poiesis, a formal thinking about the nature of the making of meaning, which subverts the –ology, the nature of the logic, of theology.”⁴⁸⁸ This requires a fresh imaginative construction by way of a poetic sensibility in theological discourse, what digs deep into the Christian imagination instead of holding tight to ossified doctrinal formulations.

Theopoetics overcomes the modern epistemic hegemony of positivism and propositionalism, while also defying the supremacy of method. What Callid-Keefe-Perry refers to as a “methodological movement away from abstraction toward experience, from mathematical propositionalizing to artistic expression, from cold universal statements to profound and personal ones that hold open the space for mystery and unknowing. From theo-logic to theo-poetic.”⁴⁸⁹ When the kingdom of this world assigns the highest value to irrefutable facts and unequivocal certainties, and does everything in its power to dominate the object of their investigation by fostering a heartless discourse that is characterized by cold and calculative methods, the kingdom of God, on the other hand,

⁴⁸⁷ Stanley Hopper, “The Literary Imagination,” In *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoiesis*, ed. R. Melvin. Keiser and Tony Stoneburner (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 207.

⁴⁸⁸ Miller, “Theopoetry or Theopoetics?” 14.

⁴⁸⁹ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 26.

supplies a discourse with a heart, a poetics that gives voice to the symbolic discourse of the rule of God.⁴⁹⁰

Our imaginative capabilities must become disentangled from the web of imperialism, it must free itself from the symbols and metaphors that suffocate the imaginative life. Part of this involves that we recognize that the “imagination is the very precondition of human freedom – that to be free means to be able to surpass the empirical world as it is given here and now in order to project new possibilities of existence.”⁴⁹¹ The ability to move beyond the “givenness” of this world opens up the alternative, a world of otherwise, and the ability to anticipate the things that could be. In order to do this, particularly as it relates to the religious imagination, we must seek a form of God-talk that engages our life experiences in the most meaningful ways. A way that involves more unlearning than learning, a pedagogical paradox whereby in order to learn how to think we must first unlearn everything we have been traditionally taught about thinking.⁴⁹² In other words, we must undergo a total epistemic and imaginative overhaul where we unlearn the dominant symbolic forms and then activate new archetypal images.⁴⁹³

Theopoetics explores the human ability to make (poises) a world in which we may dwell poetically and meaningfully, a way in which we not only talk about the nature of God but also capture experiences of the presence of God. This work is fundamentally concerned with the way theology can be re-constructed, re-imagined, de-imperialized or decolonized, or in the words of Keefe-Perry: “a re-enfleshment of theological discourse is

⁴⁹⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 104.

⁴⁹¹ This reflects a phenomenological exploration of the imagination as an intentional act of consciousness. See Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 6.

⁴⁹² Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 27.

⁴⁹³ Hopper, “*The literary Imagination*,” 218.

called for and that a turn to the flesh (Yada) will simultaneously bring with it a turn to the poetic rather than the prosaic, to a surplus of meaning rather than a linguistic mechanicalism, and to the Christian imagination rather than ossified doctrine.”⁴⁹⁴

Theopoetics unlocks a radical freedom where alternatives to metaphysical theological constructions, imperialized forms of God-talk that fosters strong, patriarchal, and Eurocentric archetypal images is overcome by poetic sensibilities that speak to depth dimension of human experience. “The speedy death of metaphysics,” argues Silas Krabbe, “tears down metaphysical idols that have delineated the parameters of acceptable discourse, and this death has had the resurrectional ramification of opening wide doors to the truth arena.”⁴⁹⁵ It is therefore that theopoetics offers a new imaginative discourse, it offers hope to the bleak dreamscape that paralyzes our imaginative impulses and inform our notions of reality.

⁴⁹⁴ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 6.

⁴⁹⁵ Silas C Krabbe, *A Beautiful Bricolage: Theopoetics as God-Talk for Our Time* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 25.

CHAPTER FIVE. THE WORLD AWAITS RECREATION: RELEASE AS A KENOTIC EXPERIENCE

*“If God is definitely to enter into us, he must in some way hollow us out, empty us, so as to make room for himself. And if we are to be assimilated into him, he must first break down the molecules of our being so as to recast and remold us.”*⁴⁹⁶

~Pierre Teilhard De Chardin

Introduction

We have now arrived at the final moment in Maria Harris’ teaching paradigm. She calls it the moment of release. Her description of release may at first give the impression that it is merely just a wrap-up, the end of the road, or just simply the culmination of the teaching endeavor, but instead it is actually a moment of new beginning, of gift, an endless path of re-creation. In Harris’ own words, “release, although considered the last moment, is not the culminating moment in the teaching process.”⁴⁹⁷ Instead she describes it as the cessation of movement, rest, or emptiness.⁴⁹⁸ This stage of her teaching paradigm can rightly be compared to resting in the Jewish Sabbath, “where the cessation of movement re-creates the world.”⁴⁹⁹ Or in the words of Abraham Heschel: “Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to the holiness of time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the

⁴⁹⁶ Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 130.

⁴⁹⁷ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 39.

⁴⁹⁸ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 38.

⁴⁹⁹ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 39.

world of creation to the creation of the world.”⁵⁰⁰ Words such as stillness, letting go, humility, rest, emptiness, simplicity, and recreation give shape to Harris’ concept of release.

One of the most evocative images that Harris uses to delineate her moment of release is the Christological concept of kenosis. She likens the experience of release to the full emptiness of Jesus of Nazareth, who emptied himself by becoming obedient unto his death.⁵⁰¹ The Christological doctrine originates in a single Greek word that Paul employed in his letter to the Christian community in the city of Philippi. This passage became the exegetical cornerstone for the theology of kenosis. What followed from a period of Christological controversy during the Nicene Council took yet another turn when the church struggled to reconcile the divinity and true humanity of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Those who recognized the full divinity of Jesus were able to overcome the inevitable Christological dilemma by finding recourse in the kenosis theory. In becoming human the Logos “emptied itself” to some degree. This “emptying” theory later on acquired various interpretations insofar as the church attempted to make sense of whether Jesus divested himself of divine powers temporarily, or did he just pretend to relinquish divine power by giving priority to his humanity. Sarah Coakley provides a useful taxonomy for these interpretations:

Is the Christological blueprint of Philippians 2 a matter of (1) temporarily relinquishing divine powers which are Christ’s by right (as cosmic redeemer); or (2) pretending to relinquish divine powers whilst actually retaining them (as

⁵⁰⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: a Spiritual Anthology*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 36.

⁵⁰¹ A loose translation of Philippians 2: 8.

gnostic redeemer); or (3) choosing never to have certain (false or worldly) forms of power – forms sometimes wrongly construed as “divine”; or (4) revealing “divine” power to be intrinsically “humble” rather than “grasping”?⁵⁰²

Out of the four interpretative theories enumerated by Coakley, the fourth one will find thematic resonance with the way in which this work conceives divine power as a weak force. Furthermore, it will help elucidate how the moment of release is understood as the commissioning of the kenotic self.

The Kenotic Self

Jeffrey Keuss writes that “kenosis at its heart is a call upon the Christian to see the fulfillment of one’s life, framed by the concerns of the kingdom of God as empowered by the Holy Spirit, not in accumulation but in relinquishment... it is not what we have gained, but what we have forsaken that should be the theological key with which we sing and they will know we are Christians by our love.”⁵⁰³ The kingdom of God is radically defined in terms of relinquishment and renunciation; therefore, the kingdom of God does not fare very well within the prevailing culture of consumerism and capital gain, perhaps even antithetical to the American Dream. When the world we live in operates under a logic of profitability and transactional exchange, where fulfillment is understood in terms of accumulation of wealth and power, then the turn towards kenotic living is regarded as nonsensical and illogical. The point is that kenosis is not just a theological theory about the nature of Jesus as the second person of the Trinity, or the attempt to dissect his humanity from his divinity, but the very character of Christian identity. In other words,

⁵⁰² Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 11.

⁵⁰³ Jefferey F Keuss, *Freedom of the Self: Kenosis, Cultural Identity, and Mission at the Crossroads* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 18.

the turn to the kenotic self serves as a theological method which situates Christology as the very locus of the Christian faith experience.⁵⁰⁴

The turn towards the kenotic self “must involve the refusal to have certain false forms of power – in particular, the power of domination.”⁵⁰⁵ This of course has deep ethical implications insofar as we not only consider how the call to the kenotic self is a commission to speak truth to the powers that enjoy unprecedented affluence and power while hundreds of millions languish in crushing poverty, hunger, and oppression, but also against the dominance that contributes to the accelerated degradation of the environment.⁵⁰⁶ This is what it means to be commissioned or “released” in the world today. Echoing Segundo Galilea’s words, “this is a sinful situation; hence it is the duty of Christians in conscience, and of the church in its pastoral activity, to commit themselves to efforts to overcome this situation.”⁵⁰⁷ The moment of release is an experience of emptiness as Harris described. Not only with respect to the role of the teacher who stands back and allows the learning experience to take on a life of its own, but an emptiness framed by the concerns of the kingdom of God – concerns not regarding possession but release.

The kenotic self is a term used by Jeffrey Keuss in order to lay out what he deems a “model for authentic personhood in our time and in the age to come.”⁵⁰⁸ This notion of the kenotic self drives at the very heart of Christian identity and personhood. Keuss

⁵⁰⁴ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 17.

⁵⁰⁵ Molly Farneth, “‘The Power to Empty Oneself’: Hegel, Kenosis, and Intellectual Virtue,” *Political Theology* 18, no. 2 (March 2017): 157-171.

⁵⁰⁶ Hessel, *Theology for Earth Community*, 3.

⁵⁰⁷ Segundo Galilea, “Liberation Theology and New Tasks Facing Christians,” in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, ed. Rosino Gibellini, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1974), 167.

⁵⁰⁸ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 2.

undertakes the task of doing a rigorous exegetical study of Philippians 2. In it he describes how Paul urged the community of Philippi to “have the same mindset” with each other in Christ, yet he also implores them in verses 3-5 to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility” by placing the other before yourself – “upon/within yourself,” “making the things of others personal.”⁵⁰⁹ Keuss interprets this call to make things personal not as a mere attempt to reconcile what divides us in either ideology or in power structures, or to create some kind new utopian system where the old system is replaced by the new, but rather it is a radical call “to literally move into the lives of others and find habitation there, and conversely to create an expansive space of hospitality within our hearts and homes to allow and encourage others to be part of our family.”⁵¹⁰ To create an expansive space of hospitality goes beyond the mere practice of acknowledging others, of fostering attitudes of tolerance and civility, but instead it requires a spirit of cohabitation and existence within each other’s space and orbit – not from outside or from a safe distance.

Hospitality or Hostility?

Aside from the beautiful alliteration between these two words, hospitality and hostility share a common origin. Richard Kearney explains that the word *hostis* is a double term that etymologically gives rise to both the words hospitality and hostility.⁵¹¹ He proceeds to explain that “the positive sense of host relates to one who receives the guest as an Other (stranger or foreigner) in a reciprocal gesture. But this positive sense is

⁵⁰⁹ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 18-19.

⁵¹⁰ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 19.

⁵¹¹ Richard Kearney, “Guest or Enemy? Welcoming the Stranger,” ABC Religion & Ethics (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, June 20, 2012), <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/guest-or-enemy-welcoming-the-stranger/10100458>.

overcome in the development of anonymous states and regimes.”⁵¹² In other words, the transition from ancient forms of community life into the modern nation-state models did away with the older habits that supported stronger bonds between people and fostered a deeper sense of community life. Kearney writes:

The notion of *hostis* involved someone in an equal, reciprocal relationship demanding trust, a laying down of a one's weapons, a conversion of hostility into hospitality. It was only later when interpersonal or intercommunal relations of trust were replaced by abstract relations between impersonal states that *hostis* assumed the connotations of enemy. Henceforth, hospitality was intrinsically linked to the possibility of hostility and so became a drama of choice and decision.⁵¹³

To speak of hospitality in our day in age would seem absurd to most. On the other hand hostility surely brings to mind those who support walls, deportation, rounding people up, extreme vetting, the closing and securing of borders, and placing a ban on certain people from entering the country.

Hostility and suspicion seem to dominate our geopolitical relations and the way many countries are conducting foreign policy across the world. The fear of the other, towards those we consider strangers, aliens and foreigners have created a certain unease and anxiety among the global citizenry. A tendency to distrust and safeguard our interest by maintaining considerable distance from those we assume are trying to harm us or take what belongs to us has provoked a resurgence of the most extreme forms of xenophobic

⁵¹² Kearney, “Guest or Enemy? Welcoming the Stranger.”

⁵¹³ Kearney, “Guest or Enemy? Welcoming the Stranger.”

and protectionist ideologies. Even in our colloquial language we find more and more references about being on guard, watching our back, and being suspicious of anyone that we do not know.

Kearney proposes that “when faced with the stranger, do we open the door or close it? Do we reach for a weapon or extend our hand? This is one of the inaugural dramas of human civilization.”⁵¹⁴ Undoubtedly we can presume that hospitality by today’s standard is judged as a risky and foolish practice, a naïve attempt to discover the good in the other when in fact the other may be conspiring against you. However, in the Judeo-Christian tradition hospitality demands a sense of readiness. Whether guest or host, hospitality requires that we are ready to welcome, ready to enter the other’s world, ready to become vulnerable in the face of the other. To engage in the genuine practice of hospitality we must learn to surrender and let go of our firmly held assumptions while allowing the experience of the encounter to change and transform us. Amy Oden puts it succinctly:

Hospitality shifts the frame of reference from self to other to relationship. This shift invariably leads to repentance, for one sees the degree to which one’s own view has become the only view. The sense one has of being at home and of familiarity with the way things are is shaken up by the reframing of reference to the other, and then to relationship. One can then not be ‘at home’ in quite the same way. When we realize how we have inflated our own frame of reference and

⁵¹⁴ Richard Kearney, “Hospitality: Possible or Impossible?” *Hospitality & Society* 5, no. 2 (2015): 173-184.

imposed it on all of reality, we know we have committed the sin of idolatry, of taking our own particular part and making it the whole.⁵¹⁵

The genuine act of hospitality will undoubtedly produce transformative outcomes resulting from this radical encounter. The host and guest engage in dynamic reciprocity establishing a relationship where the host perceives her role as both a giver of resource and a recipient of God's grace.⁵¹⁶ Kearney writes that "the inevitable asymmetry of relationship between host and guest does not prevent due honor and respect. Hospitality requires that the host recognize both the need and the full humanity of the stranger."⁵¹⁷ Recognition of the Other's full humanity involves an absolute and unconditional reception, what most would argue is downright absurd and foolish. Thus this radicalized form of human relationship demands absolute trust, a radical exposure of the self to the other.

The source of the kenotic self, claims Keuss, is the "forging of identity through deep and abiding responsibility for others."⁵¹⁸ Hospitality when understood in this light affirms what most would acknowledge as utter madness, flipping the entire logic of the world flat on its back and rendering the kenotic identity as unrealistic and irrational. What Keuss describes as "embracing identity formation in the shape and depth of the kenotic self that Christ affirms is a move of double humiliation: it is a release of that which I have seen God as being and doing in and for the world, in relation to my culturally formed identity, coupled with a move beyond self and into binding intimacy

⁵¹⁵ Amy Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: a Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 15.

⁵¹⁶ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, 26.

⁵¹⁷ Kearney, "Guest or Enemy? Welcoming the Stranger."

⁵¹⁸ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 75.

(John 15) that sacrifices systems, institutions, and power for the sake of deep and abiding relationships.”⁵¹⁹ Identity formation into the kenotic self requires a response of total abdication of self into Christ (morphe theou), the “forming form of God” for the other and the world.⁵²⁰ This is what Paul meant by “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”⁵²¹ This mind is a kenotic mind, a kenotic consciousness that rejects all notions of self-sufficiency, the tendency to care for oneself while discounting the other as secondary and even last.

The turn to the kenotic self involves a radical abandonment by which we are able to say that “it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”⁵²² In other words, it is not an egoistic I who lives for myself with no need for others, but I for thou, you before me, you above me, you in front of me.⁵²³ The kenotic self is defined by a deep responsibility for the other, “a generosity without recompense, a love unconcerned with reciprocity, duty performed without the salary”⁵²⁴ and to radically welcome without any terms or preconditions.

Re-creating the World

Harris’ entire paradigmatic approach is predicated on the belief that learning comprises a transformative and re-creative experience, “designed in such a way that teachers do not become involved in ghettoizing or domesticating their own lives and the lives of those they teach.”⁵²⁵ Teaching is not the work of keeping things at bay, of

⁵¹⁹ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 21-22.

⁵²⁰ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 21-22.

⁵²¹ Phil. 2:5.

⁵²² Gal. 2:20.

⁵²³ Veling, *For You Alone*, 64.

⁵²⁴ Veling, *For You Alone*, 64.

⁵²⁵ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 97.

maintaining a cautious distance from that which threatens to unravel or undo the existing conditions, but instead in the teaching and learning encounter, we must be prepared to let go of everything that we once held on to with a tight grip, not wanting to let go (release) because it represents a sense of stability and order. This does not imply that what we once considered to offer the best possible explanations or solutions was not enough. Nor does it mean that the methods and systems that we once held in high esteem never possessed value. In fact, we can rightly say that all the things that we once considered to provide the best possible answers met their purpose at the time. Harris talks about moments of mourning in education, where both teachers and learners are called to “die into life.”⁵²⁶ She explains this as “discarding what is no longer viable and no longer appropriate, and turning toward purging, enlarging, reforming and re-creating it.”⁵²⁷ For there to be any kind of mourning, something must first die. Mourning as a sort of the kenotic experience of letting go, of releasing. Harris employs the metaphor of mourning within her pedagogical design in order to illustrate the death/life, life/death re-creative flow of the teaching endeavor. She views this re-creative process as analogues to experiencing death and life – dying to some of our established ways of doing things, dying to some of our long held beliefs about the way things should be and ordered, while then opening ourselves up to the birth of something new. Harris’ pedagogical design is meant to become a *habitus*, not a rigid step by step formula with a projected end, but instead it is an ongoing movement that flows along a re-creative and transformative path.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁶ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 108.

⁵²⁷ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 109.

⁵²⁸ Wendi Sargeant, *Christian Education and the Emerging Church* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 131.

Creatio Continua

The concept of re-creation finds a home within a post-metaphysical understanding of reality, one that privileges change and fluidity, flux and ambiguity, instead of a fixed conceptual system that renders reality predictable and stable. Ruth Page is a Scottish theologian who wrote a masterful treatise that challenges traditional Christian theology and metaphysics by proposing an alternative reading of reality as influenced by modern science and a critical understanding of history. She writes:

The forms of order (physical, biological, social, personal order and so forth) with which we are acquainted and which therefore give our world stability and security are not themselves secure, but are always vulnerable to changing circumstances or reinterpretation. Such threats are encountered at every level from small personal disturbances to a settled way of life, through the extinction of species from change or slaughter, to the danger that Earth itself may not continue to exist if vital conditions alter significantly. Modern awareness of accelerating change and the fragility of any existing order may have contributed to the current decline in metaphysical thinking.⁵²⁹

Page goes on to say that at the very root of metaphysics, from the ancients all the way down to the German Idealist tradition, there has been a dual conviction that views nature as a unity and the function of the mind as responsible for embracing its totality.⁵³⁰

However, Page argues that the human encounters with contingency, diversity, and change challenges these notions of unity and the likelihood that the mind is even capable of

⁵²⁹ Ruth Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 10.

⁵³⁰ Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, 10.

appropriating this singular unity, since every act of contemplation flows out a particular point of view.

The idea of change and contingency as the motivating force in reality can perturb metaphysicians of the transcendent order like Plato, for example, “for whom such a phenomena as change clearly indicated imperfection and led him to locate his ‘reality’ outside the world of experience.”⁵³¹ The sole purpose of traditional metaphysics was to offer a tidy and organized depiction of reality, a neat classification of existence that gives us a sense of ease in thinking that deep down all reality is grounded in an ordered unity. Page writes that “reality is popularly perceived as what is sufficiently ordered to be taken on trust; it is the way things are, what we are used to and has proven reliable. Surprises, upsets and innovations are often experienced as unreal until they are assimilated into daily life.”⁵³² It is true that when unforeseeable events shatter the horizon of the expected, we initially react by either explaining it away or integrating it into the structured and ordered world that we are familiar with. In other words, we justify these unexpected occurrences as somehow reflecting the will of the ordered universe. There is no denying that every interpretation is an imposition of order; the different ways in which human beings exercise their innate ability to interpret the world signals an attempt to make sense and impose a certain orderability upon the phenomenon of our experience.

We humans are considered creatures of habit, or said otherwise, we connect positive feelings with familiarity. As the saying goes: “familiarity breeds contempt.” We are likely to hear at times people say that any form of change makes them nervous or

⁵³¹ Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, 11.

⁵³² Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, 19.

uncomfortable; that any change in their daily habits or routines makes them feel out of sorts. We find solace in knowing that things generally operate in an orderly fashion. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we somehow presume that reality is by some means driven by a kind of inherent logic or established order. However, things do not always appear to be that way. The old conceptual systems that once rendered accounts of order and fixed finality as intrinsic elements of reality no longer carry much weight. Page explains this idea:

The difference is particularly clear in what was once called the Order of Nature, which in the eighteenth century was held to be regular, dependable and a model to wayward humanity. The popularity at that time of the argument for God's existence from the design displayed in Nature witnesses to this belief. In the twentieth century, however, conceptions of the Order of Nature have given way to those of ecological balance among an open group of species in relation, whose continuance depends on equilibrium being maintained among its component variables. In a similar way, notions of personal balance in our psychological disposition have superseded the conception of an ordered character with a fixed list of virtues. Indeed in this case Ambiguity has already entered deeply into modern thinking to the point where the ancient ideal of an ordered character seems too rigid *parti pris* to be open to experience and life.⁵³³

The point being made here is that the old systems that once described the world as naturally ordered and fixed in ontological categories no longer hold up. Every living

⁵³³ Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, 22.

organism is susceptible to experiences of change. Whether from natural processes or from external influences, all reality is exposed to transformative and re-creative processes. In the words of Harris, we must learn to die into life, die to the ways that are no longer life-giving and emerge into new life-giving experiences. Harris declares that the “lost procedures, patterns, forms, and systems echoes the planet itself, waiting to see what we humans will do. The rest of creation joins us, groans and travails, as with the great mythical and religious figures we descend into hell, make the passage down into grief and darkness on our way to light.”⁵³⁴ Order is a temporal balance and not an immutable state.⁵³⁵ Nothing is immune to the re-creative force; neither humans nor any other form of life can bypass the threat of change and volatility.

Harris’ entire paradigmatic approach to teaching constitutes the moment of re-creation. There is no single movement within her paradigm that provides the re-creative moment, but rather all five phases work towards effecting this moment. Harris explains that the five steps in her teaching paradigm “are not like steps on a staircase progressing upwards,” but instead they are like steps in a dance, where movement is both backward and forward, around and through, and where turns, returns, rhythm, and movement are essential.”⁵³⁶ This beautiful characterization of her pedagogical model challenges the value assigned to method and strengthens the notion of creative breakthrough. Harris’ pedagogical movements function like a dance rather than a step by step procedure, which means her “five step movement possesses an “organic pattern in the sense that each step

⁵³⁴ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 110.

⁵³⁵ Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, 32.

⁵³⁶ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 25.

emerges out of the proceeding one.”⁵³⁷ It should be noted that since this model is not necessarily structured in a linear fashion, and that because each movement operates in a rather fluid and open ended way, it will eventually start right back again from the beginning. The term re-creation signifies a self-evident process, it presumes that what has already been created bears the potential for newness and re-ordering. The human creative act is not *ex nihilo*, but rather uses the matter at hand – the human subject matter - it contemplates it, engages it, gives it form, allows it to emerge, and then sets it loose.

Go Out into the World

The image of release will be used to illustrate the kenotic subject’s responsibility to re-create the world. Jesus commissioned his followers to go out and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe everything that he had commanded them. These words sound not as a commission to convert the world, since it appears that Jesus had no real intention to establish a new religion, but a commission to re-create the world. The moment of release in Harris’ pedagogical model is not a total abandonment of the learner, in which we just dust off our hands and think to ourselves, job well done, or now you’re on your own, or just figure it out for yourself from here on end. Instead, Harris’ moment of release is better understood as a moment of commissioning, when the proverbial rubber hits the road, when all that went into educating for Christian discipleship must be unleashed upon the world. As John Lounibos writes: “the faithful disciple of Christ is already initiated into the whole paschal mystery of Christ and day by day is called to cooperate and participate in self-transcending activities, further deepened by God’s grace

⁵³⁷ Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*, 25.

and sponsored by the law of love.”⁵³⁸ Self-transcending activities is what Jesus commanded his followers to do in the world. Jesus’ entire life was never devoid of teaching and learning moments, even his last moments with the disciples was no exception. Releasing his disciples to the world was both a commission to disciple others by way of “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”⁵³⁹ In some translations of this passage the word “observe” is replaced by obey. Exegetical studies have revealed that the verb *terein* could have several implications: one of them being observation; the other ones are guardianship, cognition, and obedience. In Philippians 2 the author writes that Jesus “humbled himself, becoming *obedient* to death, even death on a cross.”⁵⁴⁰ The concept of kenosis originating in this piece of Pauline literature combines the image of emptying out with the act of obedience. Obedience possesses a kenotic-like quality which adheres to a commitment of self-abnegation and becoming fully obedient to the rule of love.

Jesus’ command to observe or obey everything that he has taught is a mandate to live out a kenotic existence. In other words, to forfeit the power that the world offers in exchange for a power of powerlessness, which constitutes the kingdom of God, a kingdom, as Jesus proclaimed, that is not of this world. When Pilate said to Jesus, “Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have the power to crucify you.” Jesus said in reply, “you have no power over me if it not been given to you from above.”⁵⁴¹ What does this power from above mean? Most would interpret this power to

⁵³⁸ John B Lounibos, *Self-Emptying of Christ and the Christian: Three Essays On Kenosis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 83.

⁵³⁹ Matt. 28:20. NRSV

⁵⁴⁰ Phil. 2: 8. NRSV

⁵⁴¹ John 19: 10-11. NRSV

look like a massive demonstration of omnipotent force, with full divine strength that could potentially obliterate anyone who stands in Jesus' way. However, the power that Jesus exhibited did not appear to conform to Pilate's worldly understanding of power. Jesus exercised a kenotic demonstration of powerlessness, a weak force that totally reverses the worldly expectations of power – a self-emptying activity that confounded everyone who had different expectations of Jesus. It is said that Jesus' will was aligned to the will of the Father, which means that divine will is expressed not in forms of self-interest or lust of power, but in self-transcendent activities, in a self-emptying existence.

God's power is understood as empowerment of other beings instead of power over them.⁵⁴² Divine power is not self-absorbing or self-accumulating but self-releasing. "Someone touched me," exclaimed Jesus, "for I noticed that power had gone out from me."⁵⁴³ As this Bible passage illustrates, kenotic power flows outward instead of inward, making divine power a movement of self-emptying and release rather than the act withholding. Divine power does not show itself in a large scale demonstration of might and strong force, but rather in the obedient, forgiving, and in loving gesture of the kenotic act. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."⁵⁴⁴ Not the kind of Power one would expect from a king.

The task of re-creating the world is constituted in and through the praxis of discipleship. The moment of release sets loose the kenotic force upon the world, commissioning the kenotic self to the demands of the other.⁵⁴⁵ Unleashing or releasing

⁵⁴² Ian Barbour, "God's Power: A Process View," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Charlton Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 2.

⁵⁴³ Lk 8: 46 NRSV

⁵⁴⁴ Lk 23: 34 NRSV

⁵⁴⁵ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 99.

the kenotic force upon the world is a summons to re-create the world. In the words of Jeffrey Keuss, “we have to let go of ourselves, let go of our expectations and plans for mission in order to be compelled by the true mission of God’s radical love for the world.”⁵⁴⁶ This radical love constitutes the source from which the world is re-created. Sacrificial, self-limiting, and self-giving action on behalf of the world is the hallmark of love; those who live out this kenotic existence participate directly in the work of re-creation, which affirms that “participating in divine creativity, is self-limiting, vulnerable, self-emptying, and self-giving – that is, supremely Love in creative action.”⁵⁴⁷ In being released “we may finally find that which we have always sought for – the embrace of God in the embrace by and with the world that God loves with complete abandon.”⁵⁴⁸ Love as an act of self-emptying and self-giving is inherent attribute of divine nature and expressed within the whole process of creation and re-creation.⁵⁴⁹

Christian faith is incarnational; namely, it is not otherworldly in the sense that it has no bearing on the matters of this world, but to the contrary, it is incarnational insofar that by God becoming flesh, God became irreversibly committed to the world and human history⁵⁵⁰ Jürgen Moltmann writes that the “Christian experience of God springs from perception of the presence of God in Jesus Christ and his history.”⁵⁵¹ The identification of God with as a self-limiting form that embodies a human servant reveals God’s true nature

⁵⁴⁶ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 152.

⁵⁴⁷ Arthur Peacocke, “The Cost of New Life,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Charlton Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 41-42.

⁵⁴⁸ Keuss, *Freedom of the Self*, 153.

⁵⁴⁹ Peacocke, “The Cost of New Life,” 41.

⁵⁵⁰ Gutiérrez Gustavo, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 109.

⁵⁵¹ Jürgen Moltmann, “God’s Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Charlton Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 138.

as a self-emptying weak force who creates out of love. Becoming agents of re-creation means that we must view ourselves and others as the *imago Dei*, answering the kenotic call to relinquish all concerns pertaining to the self while framing our concerns for the kingdom of God.

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