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Acknowledgments

The editors are grateful to the many people who make Cult/ure possible. As a student-run, peer-edited journal, ours is necessarily a collective effort, and we sincerely appreciate the support we receive from all corners of the community.

We rely on the financial support of several institutional funders. We are grateful for the generous support and continued encouragement of Susan Lloyd McGarry and the Center for the Study of World Religions, Michael Looft and Life Together, Will Joyner and the Office of Communications and Dr. Leonard van der Kuijp and the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies.

We offer especial thanks to Will Joyner who has been a wise and helpful mentor to us as editors and publishers new to the field. He has been an indispensable source of knowledge about the publishing process, and his proactive advocacy of the journal inspires us.

This year was the first year we have hosted a faculty panel in conjunction with our launch, and we are honored by the participation of Dr. Stephanie Paulsell and Dr. Michael Jackson.

This journal is a community effort among students and we are grateful to the students who worked so diligently as editors to give careful and critical feedback to authors, and to the authors who committed themselves to the often-grueling process of second and third revisions.

Finally, we appreciate the artful efforts of our graphic designer, Emily Roose, for her elegant and scrupulous work.
Editors’ Introduction

Cult/ure began as a showcase for the best work being done by Harvard graduate students in the field of religion. Our founding editors hoped the journal would provide a forum for aspiring scholars of religion to publish essays pertaining to issues of religion and culture, broadly construed. Our third volume maintains this mission, but over the last three years it has become obvious that the journal is more than a showcase. It is also the visible product of a process of sharing, editing and revising that we believe importantly contributes to the vitality of our intellectual community. More and more it seems to us that it is this process that constitutes the journal’s most important function.

Earlier this year, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published a report about improving doctoral programs across disciplines in American universities. The report’s writers discovered that the keystone of a quality program was its intellectual community. The quality of this community, according to the writers of the report, is foundational to every other marker of quality in a doctoral program. They write:

Intellectual community affects how people wrestle with ideas; how teaching is valued; how students learn to engage with senior colleagues; how failure is treated; how people work together; how independence and creativity are encouraged; how the department and its members stay connected to the field.

An important factor in creating this type of intellectual community is the opportunity for students to present their original work and have it taken seriously. Here at HDS, there are many opportunities outside of the classroom for the community to gather and discuss current topics in religious studies, but it is rare that students are asked to act as scholars in their fields. Most of the best work a student does is kept behind closed doors, and the audience is limited to a sole professor.
Cult/ure offers a space where the audience is much broader, where the conversations can enter the larger intellectual community of HDS. At Cult/ure, we treat authors and peer editors as scholars. Applying to the journal requires a student to take her best essays out of storage and polish and shape them for a public audience. It requires submitting her work to the anonymous critiques of a peer reviewer and working closely with a peer editor to attend, often for the first time, to issues of style and format. To do this work, students must cease being passive critics and commentators and become active contributors to their field. The articles we publish are excellent works of scholarship, but of equal importance is the role they play in helping their authors make the transition from being students to being contributing scholars.

The Carnegie Foundation report mentioned above is directed primarily toward faculty, but recognizes that these changes may also come from students. “Faculty and students (who need not always wait for faculty) must look for and seize opportunities, putting in place whatever activities, strategies and structures are most conducive to community in their setting.” This year’s issue of Cult/ure represents one effort on the part of students to create more spaces for intellectual sharing that take student ideas seriously and open up both ideas and writing to the wider HDS audience. Our hope going forward is that the journal in the years to come can step more fully into its role as a catalyst for intellectual sharing within the university among students and between students and faculty.

Another important contributing factor to intellectual community, and guiding ethic among the editors of Cult/ure, is tolerance for productive mistakes. Original thought needs breathing room in order to emerge, and the most daring scholars always risk error. Harvard Professor Harvey Cox, reflecting on what he calls the “audacity” of his first major work, The Secular City, has said:

You look back at these things you wrote in your misspent youth and you have a couple of thoughts. How could I have been such an exaggerator? How could I have been so hyperbolic? And then you think, well, at a certain stage in life maybe you ought to be a little hyperbolic, you ought to take some risks, you want to over-generalize and say some things that are going to invoke some interest.

Beginning scholars choose their topics because they have enthusiasm for them, and they may often begin with audacious ideas about how to make sense of the field. Coursework should refine their thinking without squelching their fervor. Following his comments above, Cox asked, “How do we keep the critical flame alive while our thought processes are still being refined and criticized?”
We believe that one way to do this is to treat students’ ideas seriously and leave space for shaky yet spirited scholarship, trusting that like Cox, these students will have long careers in which, as Cox puts it, “to become more careful.”

In this spirit, we have chosen bold, exploratory essays for this year’s issue. None of our writers had the time available to a doctoral student or faculty member to conduct their research, and so their essays understandably lack the depth of knowledge that articles written by more advanced scholars have. They benefit, however, from an adventurous, curious spirit and the daring to take on bold theses.

Stella R. Dubish visited the Chinmaya Mission in Andover, Massachusetts, in order to write her anthropological essay, “Culture and Mission at the Chinmaya Maruti: How One Religious Center Negotiates Its Dual Identity.” Her essay offers both a view inside the world of this fast-growing center and keen reflections on the fascinating reclamation and redefinition of “missionary” work by some Hindus in the pluralist American context.

Kelly Jo Fulkerson considers the status of female suicide bombers, making an argument that contrasts feminist and nationalist interests and shows the conflicted identity of women who too often are pushed to this ultimate sacrifice for their nation precisely because of restraints created by the patriarchal culture to which they belong.

Max Perry Mueller, in his essay, “Prophets, Protests and Politicians: Exploring the Political Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Billy Graham Through an Analysis of Christianity and Crisis and Christianity Today,” digs through the archives of two religious magazines of twentieth-century America to trace their theological disagreements and different relationships with the powers-that-be in American politics. His exploration charts two very different Protestant responses to the turbulent decades of the late twentieth century.

Spinning his analysis from the short but loaded pericope of Matthew 19:12, Jeremie Brian Giacoia considers the meaning of eunuch in an ancient context, reclaiming what he argues is an original definition from generations of interpreters who shied away from seeing the word “eunuch” as pertaining to gender. His exegesis makes this often-overlooked passage seem newly relevant to modern conversations about gender.

Matt C. Paulson carefully glosses the neglected scriptures of Zoroastrianism to show evidence of systematic thought about the dualism of reality. He compares and contrasts the argumentation he finds there with the more familiar metaphysics of Plato and the patristic Fathers, showing both their common origins and important differences.
In “How To Be Alone: Ministry Between Solitude and Community,” Rebecca Benefiel Bijur argues against even her own instincts for a ministry that values time alone as well as time together or in service for one another. Recognizing herself in Stanley Hauerwas’ pointed description of the pastor as a “quivering mass of availability,” Bijur draws from resources as diverse as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Chogyam Trungpa in order to argue for a type of ministry grounded in self-care and fulfilled in care for others.

Some of our authors wrote their papers in library carrels, circling around particular ancient texts; others used contemporary theory to make new sense of phenomena in the popular media; still others made local religious communities their texts, venturing outside the library and drawing form personal experience to do their research. Their topics range from the ancient to the current, and concern affairs as personal as the inner self and as global as terrorism. Despite these differences, the essays are connected by the zealousness of their curiosity and the rigorousness of their authors’ scholarship. Together, they represent a hint of the contributions young scholars of religious studies, engaged with the past but equipped with modern modes of inquiry, are posed to make in their respective fields.
The Chinmaya Maruti temple in Andover, Massachusetts, fulfills dual roles through its location at the junction of cultural life and religious life. On the one hand, it provides space and activities to perpetuate traditional Indian culture and foster community among immigrant Indian families; on the other, it openly proclaims a message of spiritual development capable of application in any life, regardless of cultural orientation.1

As I worked with this community over a period of several months in 2006 and 2007, I was continually intrigued by its proactive and welcoming but not overbearing approach to “missionary” work. Thus, this paper begins with a discussion of mission and missionary in this Hindu context. Next, I discuss the history of the Chinmaya movement and its founder in order to reveal the historical and political world in which this movement arose and which it continues to address. Finally, I offer portraits of four members of the Chinmaya Maruti to demonstrate the many levels at which the center is capable of operating. The temple understands itself as both a cultural center serving a particular commu-
nity and also as a disseminator of a philosophical worldview that can benefit anyone, regardless of cultural background. This dual orientation creates a space that is obviously missionary in its desire to share ideas; however, membership in Chinmaya Maruti may take a variety of forms: while its mission for some members may include cultural enrichment, for others, cultural traditions are a subsidiary or irrelevant concern.

Is Hinduism Missionary?

The term “missionary” often bears a negative connotation due to its historical connection to European imperialism and colonialism. However, the Chinmaya Mission does not shy away from referring to itself as just that—a “mission”—or from referring to its most revered teachers as “missionaries.” Therefore, I have developed a working definition of “missionary” which is based less on the historical usage of the word (normally applied to Western or Christian movements) and more on my personal experience and research of current religious movements. First, a missionary movement has an obvious message, vision or purpose with religious goals either explicitly or implicitly stated. Second, a missionary movement possesses a program for dissemination of its message, usually involving educational programs or centers, trained missionaries, teachers or clergy, and distribution of books, pamphlets and other media. Finally, missionary movements allow a possibility for conversion. Conversion is a loaded word with negative ties to Christian missionary movements in recent centuries or to religion spread “by the sword” in pre-modern Islamic and Christian expansions. For the purpose of this discussion, the term “conversion” indicates an adoption of a religious worldview to which one did not hitherto adhere, and which may result in a change of thought patterns and lifestyle.

Hinduism has been characterized by adherents and by scholars as a non-missionary religion. Such categorization of Hindu traditions was encouraged by Orientalist scholars like F. Max Müller, who did not observe the tendency in Hindu traditions to engage in proselytization, which was common in Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. The famous presentation of the Hindu religion given by Swami Vivekenanda at the Chicago Parliament of World Religions in 1893 further reinforced the impression of Hinduism as a non-missionary religion; he described Hinduism as a universal religion that could accommodate a plurality of spiritual paths. Swami Vivekenanda’s landmark visit was many American’s first encounter with Hinduism and his characterization of the faith remains central to many Westerners’ understanding of Hinduism.
Now, a century-and-a-half after Müller’s allegation that “the non-missionary religions were dying or dead,” the phenomenon of Hindu revitalization and expansion stands as a challenge to his grim claim. Nevertheless, academic works that survey Hinduism and textbooks on world religions tend to overlook or downplay this ubiquitous feature of contemporary Hinduism. For example, Gavin Flood’s book, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, mentions missionary work only in the context of Christian missionary activity in colonized India. While John Esposito’s textbook, *World Religions Today*, does make mention of “organized Hinduisms” and reviews the impact of the Ramakrishna Mission, Denise Carmody and T.L. Brink’s world religions textbook, *Ways to the Center*, makes no mention of modern Hindu movements, let alone Hindu missionary activity.

C.V. Mathew, in his book on modern Hindu movements, mentions several explanations why Hindu traditions are not typically considered missionary. First, he cites the influence of figures like Swami Vivekenanda, who represents a “modern” and “liberal” form of Hinduism that diverges from “orthodox” or “traditional” Hinduism. Second, Mathew references the widespread impression of Hinduism as an ethnic religion, connected to India and to one’s birth within an Indian family. Third, the terms mission and missionary carry negative connotations of imperialism and colonialism, and therefore are avoided by contemporary evangelical movements.

These factors mask the fact that Hindu missionary movements exist and flourish. Mathew states rather boldly that “an ideology of mission is present in Hinduism and this has always been an integral part of its historical development. [...] In the modern period, Hinduism has become all the more zealous and aggressive in its mission on a global scale.” Numerous movements exist to support Mathew’s claim, in India and elsewhere. These movements have, in their various ways, updated and reinterpreted Hinduism for the modern individual. Among them are the Ramakrishna Mission, the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the Hare Krishna Movement, Transcendental Meditation movement, the Brahma Kumaris movement, the Divine Light Mission, Sri Ram Chandra Mission, Swami Narayan Hindu Mission, and finally, the focus of this study, the Chinmaya Mission.

The Chinmaya Mission is a contemporary Hindu movement. Through one of its centers, the Chinmaya Maruti temple, it offers both a locus for cultural preservation and a place from which missionary outreach is meant to originate. The movement provides a support system for maintaining traditional Indian religious and cultural expressions.
At the same time, it offers answers to life questions that are universally applicable and holds that its method and teachings can be valid for anyone, regardless of their cultural upbringing. While it does not discount the validity of other religious traditions and does not actively seek converts, the Chinmaya Mission, by my definition, is missionary.

The Foundation

On an average Sunday morning visit to the Chinmaya Maruti in Andover, Massachusetts, one would first witness an aarti, or worship service, performed before the center's presiding deity, Lord Hanuman, and a small collection of other deities. Two brahmin priests, a father and son with dhotis wrapped around their waists and cloth draped across their bare chests, wave incense and fire before the images, chanting Sanskrit verses. Fruit, rice, clarified butter, juice and cloth are offered before the deities as the gathering of children and adults sing traditional prayers in Sanskrit. After these prayers, the priests move to the large portrait of Swami Chinmayananda and perform similar offerings before the guru, as the congregation sings a prayer in his honor. After brief announcements and birthday wishes, the children, usually numbering about fifty, disperse to their classrooms while the adults gather in front of a large television to view and discuss a video-taped lecture by Swami Chinmayananda.

The center's activities revolve around the person of Swami Chinmayananda, and any account of the center's philosophy and programs must begin with its charismatic founder. Swami Chinmayananda's personal and educational experiences shaped his approach to his religious tradition, which in turn influenced his reinterpretation of Vedanta and Hindu religious life. He insisted that religious teachings be clear and logical and that they meet the demands of rational inquiry and science. This approach appealed especially to educated and modernized Indians in the latter half of the 20th century, and continues to appeal to contemporary religious seekers in India and around the world.

Born Balakrishnan Menon in the southern Indian state of Kerala in 1916, Swami Chinmayananda took vows of renunciation in 1949, joining a long line of sannyasins, or renunciates, in the Advaita Vedanta tradition founded by theologian-philosopher, Adi Shankaracarya in the eighth century CE. Formerly a journalist and activist with a degree in English literature, Swami Chinmayananda became an eloquent spiritual teacher, and traveled around India and eventually around the world from the 1950's until his death in 1993. The Chinmaya Mission was established in 1953, independent of Swami Chinmayananda's initiative. He eventually came to lead the organization, which is
today a loosely structured network of more than three hundred centers, ashrams, schools, hospitals and temples around the world; there are currently thirty-six centers in the United States.\textsuperscript{16}

Swami Chinmayananda’s vision was to make the wisdom of Vedanta available to people living and working in the modern world. Vedanta is a particular school of Indian philosophic thought based on the teachings of the Vedas, the ancient Hindu Scriptures, and especially the material in the last part of the Vedas, the Upanishads. In very basic terms, much Vedantic teaching, writing, and activity has emphasized that the primary purpose of the individual should be to discern the true nature of the world and his relationship to it. Swami Chinmayananda was a follower of a sub-school of Vedanta philosophy called Advaita Vedanta, which holds that the ultimately real is Brahman, that Brahman is the source and essence of the entire created world, and that atman, the individual self, is not different from Brahman. Though sometimes called “God,” Brahman is not a God or God, but is the underlying, pervasive essence of all that exists. According to Advaita Vedanta, the world which humans experience and notions of the self are illusions that obscure the true nature of Brahman, or Ultimate Reality.

Swami Chinmayananda asserted that Vedanta is a completely scientific and systematic means of ascertaining the nature of reality. He considered this important to impress upon the minds of Hindus who had been alienated themselves from their religion because of claims that it was superstitious or irrelevant in the modern age of science and secularism. Swami Chinmayananda fleshed out this perspective on Vedanta by using examples from common sense evaluation of experience, scientific theory, and his “Om Chart”, which is a hierarchical chart of the three worlds of human experience and how they relate to the Ultimate Reality.\textsuperscript{17}

The impulse to spread the message of Vedanta took the form of jnana yagnas, “knowledge-worship”, which began as a one-hundred-day long series of lectures on the Kena Upanisad in Poona, India. The lectures were accompanied by exercises for physical and emotional discipline, and the program was called the Gangotri Plan by the Swami, because it had been formulated during a period of his meditation on the Ganges River. According to Swami Chinmayananda, the goal of the plan, and the essence of Vedanta, is for people to realize that, “man—at the peak of his achievement—is God himself.”\textsuperscript{18}

With Swami Chinmayananda at its head, the Chinmaya Mission grew steadily and by 1964, the mission had established a network of at least one-hundred centers around India, developed a sophisticated children’s education plan and children’s conferences, held conferences for women, founded a
Vedanta university, expanded the Swami’s program of *jnana yagna* seminars in Indian cities and organized the publication and distribution of lectures and commentaries.¹⁹

**Moving to America**

Swami Chinmayananda made his first trip out of India in 1964, during a world tour that included Thailand, Malaysia, Mauritius, South Africa, Western Europe, the West Indies and North America. In the United States, he often addressed gatherings of students at universities. On these initial trips, Western students of Vedanta greatly outnumbered South Asian followers.²⁰

Following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which dispensed with a racially determined quota system, the South Asian population in the United States grew. Families who were either part of the Chinmaya Mission in India or learned about it in America through nascent centers began to organize into more extensive networks. The Chinmaya Mission West, as it is now called, includes thirty-three centers across the continental United States, of which the Chinmaya Maruti in Andover, Massachusetts, is one.

Indian immigrants, like all immigrants, must cope with the feeling of isolation from other Americans, with whom they might have little more than occupation in common. They must also deal with separation from family, friends and native languages, foods and cultural practices. The alienation from one’s cultural heritage that Swami Chinmayananda identified and addressed in the 1950s is exaggerated by the physical distance between immigrants in America and their homes in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Centers like the Chinmaya Maruti, as well as temple complexes like the Sri Lakshmi Temple in Ashland, Massachusetts, and various South Asian networks formed around language or state of origin, including Bengali, Tamil, Telegu, serve as crucial loci for immigrant communities as they attempt to preserve a connection with their cultural and personal history and transmit their heritage to the next generation.

Swami Chinmayananda’s program reconnects individuals with their spiritual heritage through a combination of ritual performance and philosophical meditation. It provides a venue for many immigrant Hindus to affirm their identities as Hindus or Indians and to foster their own spiritual growth in a way that keeps them connected to the everyday world. Swami Chinmayananda’s emphasis on the practical application of Vedanta cannot be exaggerated in this respect. While the Chinmaya Mission utilizes cultural mediums to transmit its message, its leadership and members believe that the core message of
the movement transcends cultural boundaries. Chinmaya Maruti of Andover, as a religious center serving a mostly immigrant community, negotiates these two areas of identity—cultural and religious.

My curiosity about the ways in which the center negotiates these aspects of its identity led me to four people: Shashi Dwarakanath, Brahmacarini Bhamati Chaitanya, Dilip Mathur and Sandra Washburn. Shashi was first attracted to the Chinmaya Mission because of its children’s programs, but after a spiritual transformation, she has studied and incorporated the teachings of the center into her own life. Bhamati Chaitanya is the official spiritual director of the center, trained to coordinate the activities of the center and lead classes on spirituality, sacred texts, and yoga. Dilip Mathur is an active member of the center who finds the spiritual-philosophical teachings of Vedanta critical for his own development and the development of others; he is often the spokesperson for the center’s outreach activities. Finally, Sandra is an American woman whose interest in the practice of yoga led her to the center. Sandra does not engage with the center on the cultural level, but finds its teachings enriching and applicable to her spiritual development. Each of these individuals has been drawn to the center for different reasons and their experiences highlight the most important aspects of the Chinmaya Mission’s endeavors. When their separate stories are considered in parallel, the Chinmaya Maruti’s dual role as both a cultural and a religious center emerges.

**Shashi: The Mother, Teacher and Devotee**

Shashi Dwarakanath is the director of children’s education at the Chinmaya Maruti and, along with her husband, is one of the founding members of the center. Shashi and her husband moved to Boston from Bangalore, India, in the 1980s. Their initial interest in the Chinmaya Mission was on behalf of their children – they wanted their son and daughter to be aware of their cultural and religious heritage. Toward this end, Shashi’s husband enrolled their children in a summer camp organized by the Chinmaya Mission. Despite her initial reluctance to become involved with “spiritual things,” Shashi eventually borrowed teaching materials from the mission and started a class for her children. In an attempt to spark their interest and keep their attention, Shashi invited other children from Hindu families to her classes. The classes became so popular that soon Shashi was holding two sessions per week. Shashi now organizes classes and programs for approximately 250 children. She currently teaches two *bala vihar*, or children’s meeting, classes on Sunday, one in Andover and
one in Framingham. She also hosts music lessons on Sundays and a teachers’
class in Nashua on Fridays.\textsuperscript{21}

Shashi attributes her spiritual transformation to Swami Chinmayananda’s
two visits to the Boston area in 1989 and 1992; she considers Swami Chin-
mayananda to be her first guru, or spiritual mentor. She describes being in his
presence as one of the most peaceful experiences she has ever had. She hosted
him in her home in 1992 and keeps the room where he stayed almost exactly
as it was on his last visit. Shashi credits the Swami’s presence and teaching with
the development of an inner strength which she has drawn from to continue
children’s education classes, training of teachers and her own personal spiritual
growth.

Shashi’s personal journey of the last twenty years is representative of those
of many adults in the Chinmaya network. My discussions with other women
in the community have suggested that many families are first attracted to the
Chinmaya Maruti because of the comprehensive children’s education program,
which offers classes for children in pre-school up through elementary, middle
school, high school and young adult age groups. The program starts with sim-
ple stories from Hindu mythology in order, as Shashi says, to provide a context
for teaching and create an affection for God. From there, instruction progresses
to the explanation of rituals in the Hindu tradition. For example, children learn
what the meaning of the greeting “Namaste” is, why they prostrate themselves
before certain people, and why they wave fire before the images of God. By the
seventh grade, students learn to translate the meaning of these rituals into life
values that they can apply when making personal decisions. From this stage
onward, increasing introspection and inner awareness is cultivated. The classes
incorporate crafts, songs and take-home activities in the lower grades, and yoga,
community service and Scripture interpretation in the higher grades. Many
Hindu parents of children growing up in America, where the opportunities to
learn about Hindu culture and religion are few, are delighted with the program
of the Chinmaya Mission.

Some parents simply drop their children at the center on Sunday mornings
and return after a few hours to collect them from their classes. However, as par-
ents observe their children’s new religious knowledge and as they become more
aware of the Center’s programs for adults, they often begin to attend satsang, a
meeting, and eventually become involved in the center’s activities. Almost every
adult I have interviewed has told me that they had little or no knowledge about
their own religion, and that the Chinmaya Maruti has provided an unexpected
source of spiritual illumination and emotional support.
Bhamati-ji: The Missionary

In 2004, the Center in Andover was assigned a specially trained leader. By this time, the community of Hindu families in the greater Boston area had grown tremendously. As ties with more developed Chinmaya centers in Texas and California solidified, the Chinmaya Mission of Boston was able to rent property, then later buy property, build its current facility, and finally acquire a full-time director to administer to the needs of the community.

Brahmacarini Bhamati Chaitanya, or Bhamati-ji, as she is respectfully called by members of the community, is the brahmacarini, or spiritual student-teacher, of the Chinmaya Maruti. After I attended a quiet session of yoga led by Bhamati-ji one Saturday morning, she described to me the rigorous training she undertook in order to become a full-time leader of the Chinmaya Mission. She studied at the Sandeepany Sadhanalaya near Bombay, India, a university designed and founded by Swami Chinmayananda for the purpose of training missionaries of Vedanta. Once they have completed their training, the male brahmacarins and female brahmacarini are dispatched to assignments in schools, villages and hospitals around India, or, as in the case of Bhamati-ji, to a specific Chinmaya center. Bhamati-ji’s training consisted of intensive study of the Sanskrit language, the Upanishads and other Hindu texts, combined with daily services at the on-site temple and routine chores and exercise. Students of the university are required to limit communication with their family and friends, and must remain within the compound at all times, except in the case of a special religious event or an emergency. Bhamati-ji says that, although the training was very difficult, her experience at Sandeepany Sadhanalaya was the best period of her life.

The missionary spirit of the Chinmaya movement is epitomized by the establishment of the Sandeepany Sadhanalaya in Bombay and its sister schools in three other cities. Regarding the purpose of these universities, Swami Chinmayananda proclaimed, “The message of the Upanishads is to be interpreted, taught and broadcast – carried from door to door.” Furthermore, Chidananda and Rukmani record, in their history of the Chinmaya movement, that the university was open to students of any background, since “the spread of knowledge was not be confined to the geographic frontiers of India but was intended to embrace the whole world.” At its founding in 1963, Swami Chinmayananda envisioned the school as a location where approximately one hundred students could be trained for service, then sent out to train more students. Originally, Swami Chinmayananda intended for the school to close down after it had trained the first batch of students. However, Chinmaya-trained workers
were, and still are, in demand around the world. The Sandeepany Sadhanalaya at Bombay has continued classes since 1963, graduating a total of 385 students as of 2000.25

Despite this strong drive to propagate the Chinmaya message, Bhamati-ji is insistent that proselytization is not a goal of the Chinmaya Mission. It is this reluctance to talk in the language of conversion that sets Hindu movements like the Chinmaya Mission apart from Christian missionary work. When I asked Bhamati-ji about the possibility of someone from non-Indian descent converting to the Hindu faith, she explained that the aim of the mission is neither to encourage nor discourage conversion. “If you feel comfortable in this place, that’s good,” she said. The important thing is that the individual learn her true nature and the true nature of the world. Bhamati-ji and many members of the Chinmaya community believe, as the Upanishads state, that there is only a single Truth, but many paths exist by which to reach it. Bhamati-ji explained to me that, in her view, the teachings of Jesus, Muhammad, and the Indian sages are essentially one and the same. The appearance of difference is merely an illusion. As I left, she walked out into the hall with me and pointed to the Chinmaya pledge posted on the wall. At the bottom of the poster are the words, “Om Tat Sat,” which Bhamiti-ji translated for me as, “That thou art.” This short sentence is intended to sum up the core teaching of Vedanta, which is that all things in the world and all people are manifestations of one Ultimate Reality.

Dilip: The Scientist-Philosopher

These abstract teachings about the nature of the world, the self, and Ultimate Reality attract members like Dilip Mathur, who has been involved with the mission for almost two decades. Dilip finds that the teachings of Vedanta provide an accurate explanation for the world in which we find ourselves: it is an illusion. Over coffee at Dilip’s home in Lexington, Massachusetts, he described to me the illusory nature of the coffee mugs before us. “It is no more than the product of our minds,” he told me. The world, as we experience it, is simply a manifestation of one Ultimate Reality. In essence, all things are this Ultimate Reality. This includes every individual. The Upanishads also state, “Atman is Brahma.” The individual self is the Ultimate Reality. Dilip finds this and other Vedanta teachings to be compatible with the findings of modern science.26

The rational and scientific nature of Vedanta was always emphasized by Swami Chinmayananda in order to make its concepts more relevant to a growing class of Indian engineers, scientists and doctors, as well as to Western students who were comfortable with this medium of instruction. He wished
to eradicate the view that the Hindu religion was no more than a haphazard collection of rituals and superstitions. For Dilip, the rituals practiced in the temple are not nearly as relevant to him as the lectures and discussions on self-awareness. While he appreciates the symbolism in the ritual offerings and prayers to God, he finds the real substance of the center’s message to be in its attendance to the everyday concerns of individuals. He describes the Chinmaya program as a “yoga of the mind,” in which one’s thoughts are directed inward, toward the source of Ultimate Reality. He considers Vedanta a scientific and philosophical path that allows one to methodically remove the barriers of illusion and eventually come to enlightenment and bliss.

These truths, Dilip believes, are applicable in any cultural context. For this reason, he has tried to carry the teachings of Vedanta beyond the doors of the temple and has attempted to attract non-Indian seekers to the center. With his encouragement, the center recently held an open house in an effort to assert its presence in the Andover community and to introduce itself to new individuals and families who had not yet visited the center. Dilip is currently contemplating ways to engage the center with the wider Andover and Greater Boston communities. One way he thinks this might be accomplished is by making the center’s facilities available to groups who want to hire a space for functions. He says that if people can become comfortable with the space and realize how beautiful and welcoming it is, they will be open to the teachings of the center. Dilip also hopes to work with college-age students, who he views as especially open to new experiences and ideas. He recognizes a distinction between religious dialogue and religious transformation and he does not hold that people should be exposed to Vedanta merely for the sake of increased awareness, tolerance or dialogue. More than simply wishing to expose outsiders to a “different” religion in their midst, Dilip wants outsiders to see that Vedanta has something life-changing to offer them.

Sandra: The Convert?

Sandra Washburn is a white, American-born woman who discovered the Chinmaya Maruti on her own. Sandra’s interest in yoga has led her along an ongoing journey of spiritual fulfillment. About six years ago, Sandra changed career fields and began to make more time in her life for yoga. She studies BKS Iyanger Yoga with Patricia Walden in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is looking forward to becoming a yoga instructor herself. Seven years ago, as Sandra increased her practice of yoga, she became increasingly curious about its religious origins. She studied numerous texts on the subject, including the
classic *Yogasutra* of Patanjali. On a visit to a local Indian market three years ago, Sandra saw a newsletter for the Chinmaya Maruti in Andover. She began to visit the center, found the *satsang* discussions interesting and was encouraged by the kindness of members like Dilip. When I asked Sandra how much of the Vedanta teachings she incorporates into her lifestyle, she said, “Everything.” Like Dilip, she finds Advaita Vedanta philosophy to be the most accurate and morally positive account of reality.

Other than one or two spouses of Indians, Sandra is the only non-Indian frequenter of the center. She realizes that she appears out of place in this environment, but she feels the experience is worthwhile. During our conversation at a café in Newburyport, Massachusetts, Sandra’s hometown, I asked her how she might categorize herself religiously. She was pleased by this question and admitted that she had been considering it ever since a talk that we both attended at the center in November, entitled, “Who is a Hindu?” Sandra says that, as she listened to the discussion, she realized that all the beliefs used to describe a Hindu applied to her. With growing confidence, Sandra finally told me that yes, she is a Hindu. She feels most comfortable in this religious tradition and feels that it describes her beliefs and faith most accurately.

It seems natural to categorize someone like Sandra as a convert to Hinduism, or at least to Vedanta. After all, she does not fit in any other religious category and all her beliefs fall into line with the teachings of Swami Chinmayananda and the center. In fact, she probably has more knowledge of the texts and teachings associated with Vedanta than many of the Indian attendees at the center. The situation is more complex than that, however, because the Chinmaya Mission is adamant that its goal is not to seek converts. The assertion that conversion is irrelevant is rooted both in precedents set by Swami Chinmayananda and by the implications of the core philosophy of Vedanta.

Swami Chinmayananda did not think that conversion was appropriate or desirable. Commenting on his approach to interested Western students, Patchen writes that, “In his talks in the West, he emphasized that all truth is one. Christians were not to become Hindus, but by study of Hindu philosophy they would become better Christians.” For such an audience, the Swami’s emphasis was philosophical rather than religious. In Vedanta, the direction of spiritual fulfillment is not outward, toward an identified or named God, but within, to the divine nature in oneself. On the ultimate level, there is no need to profess belief in a system or a particular God. Cultural, even religious, identity ceases to be a factor at the highest levels of self-awareness and enlightenment.

Nevertheless, this form of Hinduism is one that many Westerners have found to be a comfortable fit, one with which they are happy to identify. While
Sandra is the only regular American attendee at the Chinmaya Maruti, the reception she has found suggests that the members of the Chinmaya Maruti have no objections to outsiders staking out an identity there. Furthermore, the Chinmaya Mission has trained and been led by many Western devotees (German Swamini Shivapriyananda, American Acarya Vilasini and Canadian Brahmacharini Robyn are all currently serving at posts in North America). While Swami Chinmayananda discouraged conversion in name, he believed that even many who considered themselves to be “Hindu” needed to re-convert to the true religion. His mission was to bring the message of self-unfoldment to everyone. This is reflected in the current vision statement of the Chinmaya Mission: “The purpose of the Chinmaya Mission is to provide individuals, from any background, the wisdom of Vedanta and practical means for spiritual growth and happiness, enabling them to become positive contributors to the society.”

Conclusions

With its clear and culturally adjustable message, its educational programs for children and adults, and its trained missionaries, the Chinmaya project is a missionary endeavor. It stops short of seeking conversion, however, and this might be the feature that makes it accessible to both Indians and non-Indians seeking spiritual fulfillment. There is no need to commit oneself to a doctrinal belief system. The only commitment one makes is an openness to learn the path of Vedanta. This requirement applies equally to those within the Indian cultural tradition and those outside it.

It is true that the spiritual truths of the Chinmaya Mission are conveyed through cultural mediums such as art, imagery, food, clothing, language and other symbols of distinctly Indian identity and that the cultural factor is especially important to immigrant families separated from familiar surroundings. However, at least at the Chinmaya Maruti, it becomes immediately clear that these cultural trappings are not necessary in order for one to come to an understanding of the teachings of Vedanta.

My visits to Chinmaya Maruti and my conversations with its attendees have provided two insights into the functions of this religious center. The center recognizes that almost all its members are of South Asian descent and its leaders tailor their programs to attract and address the specific issues of this largely immigrant population. It is a home-base for the Indian community in the Andover area, providing a safe location that recalls temples of India, with its marble floors, gilded trim and flower-adorned deities. It provides a network
for members of a distinct ethnic community to share similar experiences and advice on living in America.

At the same time, the teachings of Vedanta at the Chinmaya Maruti move beyond the cultural apparatus, into an abstract world of the inner soul. Members of the community who have found fulfillment in this path believe that it is appropriate, even imperative, for people outside the Indian culture to know about and be able to apply Vedanta to their lives. For this reason, the center adopts a welcoming and explanatory stance toward strangers, like me. The followers of Vedanta at the Chinmaya Maruti are trained to understand and teach inner development in a medium that can be applied to anyone from any background and in any walk of life. By creating a space where both culture and mission are supported, but not necessitated by one another, the Chinmaya Maruti achieves a balance between its two distinct roles.

Notes

1 I wish to thank Professor Diana Eck, who provided an introduction to the Chinmaya Maruti, suggested resources for research and supported this project through its conclusion. I am also sincerely grateful to the several friends and advisors who have read and commented upon this paper.


3 A good overview of the various contexts and meanings of conversion can be found in a collection of articles edited by Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant, *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies* (New York: Cassell, 1999).


6 Sharma, 5.


10 Mathew, 3.

11 Ibid, 4.

12 Ibid.

13 This is evident from its mission statement, posted in the Chinmaya Maruti temple, on its website and on the Chinmaya Mission website: “To provide individuals, from any background, the wisdom of Vedanta and the practical means for spiritual growth and happiness, enabling them to become positive contributors to society.”

14 It is important to iterate that the Chinmaya Mission is just one among many Hindu traditions, communities and movements, and that the Chinmaya temple profiled here is just one of the Chinmaya Mission’s many centers around the world.


16 Chinmaya Mission West Website.


18 Patchen, 188, 191, & 194-198.


21 Dwarakanath, personal interview.


23 Patchen, 260.

24 In 1978, twenty-five of the seventy students were of Western backgrounds. One of the acharyas, head teachers, of the Sandeepany Sadhanalaya was American Swamini Saradapriyananda. Chidananda and Ramani, 47 & 50.

25 This is the latest published statistic, found in *Call of the Conch*, 50.

26 Dilip has requested that I add clarification on the points above. I quote him directly to do so: “The idea that ‘our world is an illusion’ needs clarification. It is an ‘illusion’ only from the standpoint of a higher unitive state of experience (which we can evolve to) ––just like from the waking state of experience the dream state is an illusion. Vedanta requires us to live a life of service, values, spiritual knowledge, and engagement ...not to dismiss the importance of this life as a ‘mere illusion’... so we can evolve to a yet higher realization of our divine potential and identity.
“That our world is a projection of our mind is in a way a separate point and scientifically true....we only know the world through the instrument of our mind, the experience of the coffee cup is in my mind and projected by it. That there is something there that both you and I commonly experience as a coffee cup is not disputed. The significance of this point is that since our world is experienced by our mind, we can refine and elevate our experience, make it joyful, by training and purifying our mind - hence Vedanta as yoga of the mind. Ultimately we can purify our mind to a point where we transcend it, and arrive at a state of unitive consciousness, and from that state, yes, this world is illusion.” (Personal correspondence. March 30, 2007)

27 Dilip Mathur, personal interview, 18 December 2006.

28 The traits were described and elaborated upon by Swami Tejomananda, in a taped lecture, as belief in 1) dharma, 2) the authority of the Vedas, 3) karma and rebirth, 4) the existence of God and the avatars (incarnations of God), and 5) the four stages of life.

29 Sandra Washburn, personal interview, 28 December 2006.

30 Patchen, 286.

31 Chinmaya Mission West Website.

32 Ibid.
Somewhere between Citizenship and Womanhood: Female Suicide Bombing and Just War Theory

Kelly Jo Fulkerson

“Soldiers don’t want to shoot their mother or their wife. There’s this engrained sexism in men that their going to hesitate a second before they kill a woman. Women have been able to exploit that stereotype and have become very dangerous and lethal fighters.”—Amy Caiazza, director of Institute for Women’s Policy Research

Introduction

“…that does not mean that violence and power are the same. The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All.”—Hannah Arendt, On Violence

The first documented female suicide bombing took place on April 9, 1985 in Lebanon. Since that date, female suicide bombers have been employed by various organizations to target both military personal and civilians. As Yoram Schweitzer notes in Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?, these women have received intense media coverage and have become frequent objects of political and feminist analysis. Opinions about the motivations for female suicide bombing vacillate between those who interpret women as political bodies with complete agency to those who see women as victims of systemic oppression. Take, for example, the following excerpt from a National
Geographic interview with Lisa Ling, a journalist who traveled to Chechnya and the West Bank investigating female suicide bombing:

What did you learn of the women behind these terrible bombings? What we found in talking to the [bombers’] families and people in the community – and I want to limit this to women whose stories we looked into – all of them had traumatic personal stories and issues. Those things, combined with the horrors of living under occupation could have provoked them to act.²

Ling goes on to discuss Wafa Idris, a Palestinian suicide bomber who witnessed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and, after being married at a young age, discovered that she was infertile. Throughout the interview, Ling asserts that female suicide bombing does not result directly from nationalism or patriotism, but rather constitutes a response to “traumatic personal stories and issues,” such as those Wafa had faced.

While Ling’s analysis of suicide bombing represents a common approach among feminist scholars, there are other opinions. Political scientists commonly argue that female suicide bombers become tactical instruments for terrorist organizations that rely on both the lack of suspicion of female violence and the large amount of media attention a female suicide bomber will draw. Other sources posit that women have a strong sense of national, political and sometimes religious connection to their acts of suicide; in fact, several political groups, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Chechan Shahidkas, have female members who plan tactical suicide attacks.

This paper will examine these two approaches by first analyzing female suicide bombing under Just War Theory and then moving into an analysis of the relationship between women and nationalist movements. This analysis will explore the question of how female suicide bombings can and should be understood in relation to suicide bombings executed by men. By synthesizing these definitions of terrorism with the gendered implications implicit in these actions, this paper will explore Arendt’s statement that violence and power are not synonymous for women.

**Women and Islam: Suicide Bombing or Martyrdom?**

“She knew immediately that I was American, and without any hesitation, she looked up at me and said, in surprisingly good English, ‘You American women talk constantly of equality. Well, you can take a lesson from us Palestinian women. We die in equal numbers to the men.’”³ –Journalist Barbara Victor
In “The ‘Just War’ Debate, Islamic Style: Suicide Bombers,” John Kelsay assumes that suicide bombing is an act of war, and so should be evaluated using ethical guidelines about war. He writes, “martyrdom operations are tactics by which Palestinians attempt to engage an enemy militarily. As such, they must be evaluated in terms of the criteria of the just war tradition, or, in Muslim terms, of the Shari’a provisions governing armed conflict.” He interprets martyrdom operations, or suicide bombings, as strategic, tactical movements that should be recognized as valid military strategy by both the international community and by Islamic law. Sohail H. Hashmi affirms this position:

Above all, Islamic law requires that Muslims refrain from materially or morally assisting murderers and terrorists masquerading as mujahideen. Because many Muslims sympathize with the insurgents’ goal of driving the United States out of Iraq, they tacitly accept the atrocities these insurgents are committing. Kidnapping, torture or beheading, and the random killing of civilians through suicide bombings are not the work of the mujahideen. They are the acts of criminals and should be firmly denounced.

Hashmi argues that it is the responsibility of Muslims to maintain peace and judge insurgents under both international and Islamic law. He cites one well-known hadith, “the highest form of jihad is speaking truth to the tyrant,” to argue that holding figures like Sadaam Hussein under Islamic law encourages other victimized people to rebel against tyranny without the “atrocities these insurgents are committing.” Kelsay writes that “from the standpoint of both the just war tradition and the canons of the Shari’a, the conduct of war must be governed by two concerns: discrimination between civilian and military targets, and proportionality in means...Both must be honored if they are to stand in the legacy of Eleazar.” Kelsay explains that Eleazar, a martyr noted in 1 Maccabees, “gave his life to save his people and to win for himself an everlasting name.” In this way, Kelsay explains that if suicide attacks fulfill the Just War principles of discrimination between civilian and military targets and of proportionality, then the attacks can be viewed as martyr bombings, rather than suicide bombings.

If the practice of suicide bombing itself is controversial, the use of women as suicide bombers is even more so. According to statistics, thirty-four percent of suicide bombing attacks since 1985 have been carried out by women. The growing number of women on Islamist suicide missions is significant because “it flies in the face of deeply held religious beliefs that Muslim women should not be warriors. Yet since at least 2000, there has been a steady progression
of suicide attacks carried out by women in far-flung zones of conflict, including Chechnya, Uzbekistan and Egypt.” Sheik Ahmad Yassin, former spiritual leader of Hamas has been one of the most outspoken opponents of allowing women to engage in such actions. One of his arguments is that there are so many males demanding to participate in martyrdom operations that allowing women to become martyrs would preclude some men’s opportunity. To justify this double standard, he further asserts that “the woman has uniqueness, Islam sets some restrictions for her, and if she goes out to wage jihad and fight, she must be accompanied by a male chaperone.”

It is, however, this social standard of women as “unique” from men that has made women more tactically appealing to many military and political groups. Mia Bloom explains that “strategically women are able to gain access to areas where men had greater difficulty because the other side assumed that the women were second class citizens in their own society — dumb, illiterate, perhaps, and incapable of planning an operation.” She opens her article “Mother, Daughter, Sister, Bombers” by telling the story of Dhanu, a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Bloom writes that “she [Dhanu] wore thick glasses that obscured her face and clutched a sandalwood garland; the bulge beneath her orange sawar kameez (a traditional Hindu dress) bespoke her apparent pregnancy.” She indicates that this disguise of a false pregnancy is very common among female suicide bombers, so much that police in Turkey issue warnings about approaching pregnant Kurdish women. According to a British security report: “The terrorists know there are sensitivities about making intimate body searches of women, particularly of Muslim women, and thus you can see why some groups might be planning to use a female suicide bomber. Hiding explosives in an intimate part of the body means even less chance of detection.” Rosemarie Skaine cites similar figures as she notes organizations like LTTE, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party who have also employed false pregnancies as a method of suicide bombing. Terrorism researcher Debra D. Zedalis indicates four reasons that female suicide bombers are “weapons of choice:”

1. Tactical advantage: stealthier attack, element of surprise, hesitancy to search women, female stereotype (e.g. nonviolent)
2. Increased number of combatants
3. Increased publicity (greater publicity = larger number of recruits)
4. Psychological effects.
Women have the capacity to be “dangerous and lethal fighters” because of the social beliefs surrounding women in society. If female suicide bombers are distinct from men in terms of their tactical and social position, how should these “second class citizens” be evaluated under Just War Theory and definitions of terrorism?

Examining Definitions of Terrorism

“There are no suicide bombers. There are freedom fighters.” – Leila Khaled

“Leila Khaled, as a known and self-confessed terrorist who has never changed her views, is an affront to all decent-minded citizens.” – Neville Nagler, general director: Board of Deputies of British Jews

Louise Richardson cites seven requirements for labeling an act “terrorist.” Each of her points is useful to our exploration of acts of female terrorism. One is that the action must have a political motive, otherwise it is an act of violence: “Terrorism simply means deliberately and violently targeting civilians for political purposes. It has several crucial characteristics. First, a terrorist act is politically inspired. If not, then it is simply a crime.” Further, she indicates that terrorism must include violence or the threat of violence; “cyberterrorism,” or attacking IT systems, for example, do not warrant the label terrorist. While suicide bombings do fit into her second criterion of “including violence or the threat of violence,” people have argued over the political nature of the attacks of these women. Some cite gendered and/or religious coercion or demands as motivation for these attacks. Mia Bloom, for instance, writes of Riashi, the first female suicide bomber employed by Hamas, who “hoped her organs would be scattered in the air and her soul would reach paradise.” Other women use these attacks with both political and gendered motivations. Egyptian journalist Samiya Sa’ad Al Din from Al Akhbar notes: “Palestinian women have torn their gender classification out of their birth certificates, declaring that sacrifice for the Palestinian homeland would not be for men alone […] they will not settle for being the mothers of martyrs.” There is no question that these women have political motivations and some level of political agency, but there is a question of how to understand the difference in political action, and violence, as separate in men and women.

It can be argued that women, for example, are not fully liberated in any political movement. Therefore, approaching female acts of political violence requires recognizing the social position of women. This point leads to Rich-
ardson’s third criterion: terrorism does not exist to defeat an enemy, but rather to send a message. Skaine cites some female jihadists who write:

> We stand shoulder to shoulder with our men, supporting them, helping them, backing them up. We educate our sons and prepare ourselves. We will stand covered by our veils and wrapped in our robes, weapons in hand, our children in our laps, with the Koran and the Sunna of the Prophet of Allah directing and guiding us. The blood of our husbands and children are the sacrifice by means of which we draw closer to Allah.”

This passage fulfills Richardson’s third requirement in that the women making these statements are not seeking to defeat anyone, but rather to send a message of support for their countries and men as well as a message of religious faithfulness. The women’s references to Islam indicate a counter-Western type of national and religious allegiance that is framed by the familial. For these women, then, politics, religion and family intertwine. As Coomaraswamy writes, women are often viewed as holding the “honor” of the country, and by using their own bodies as political agents, women are symbolically demonstrating the political power of their nationality. Furthermore, the destruction of the individual body represents a tendency towards the individual responsibility for social problems, rather than a collective effort toward social change.

This symbolism carries into her fourth criterion that “the act and the victim usually have symbolic significance.” She discusses, for example, Bin Laden’s reference to the Twin Towers as symbols of America’s military and economic power. Just as the act itself has symbolic violence, so too does the body of the woman, which is being sacrificed by her for nationalist and religious purposes. The public space of the victims of many suicide bombings holds significance in conveying the message of the woman, or organization.

These organizations appear in her fifth criterion as she writes, “terrorism is the act of sub-state groups, not states.” She explains that this argument is controversial in that some states do employ terrorist action as instruments of foreign policy. She cites Iran, Iraq, Syria and Libya as states which have sponsored terrorist acts in order to avoid overtly attacking larger states. She writes, however, that, “if we want to have any analytical clarity in understanding behavior of terrorist groups, we must understand them as sub-state actors rather than states.” Suicide bombers, whether female or male, fall under this category as they are individual actors usually working for a non-state group with the larger motivation of a political or religious motivation. Sixth, she explains that the victims of the terrorist violence are not the same as the intended audience of
the violence. This point is particularly poignant in analyzing female suicide bombers because, just as the message of violence is not intended for victims, so the benefits or purpose of such violence is not intended for the terrorist actor.

The problem here is that suicide bombers historically have chosen indiscriminate civilian targets. If a suicide bomber did target a military base, he or she could still be evaluated as a civilian casualty under just war theory criteria. But Richardson maintains that “the final and most important defining characteristic of terrorism is the deliberate targeting of civilians.” She explains that the targeting of civilians is the distinction between political violence and guerrilla warfare. Counter-arguments have been made, such as Bin Laden’s argument that all tax-paying Americans are implicated in all political and military movement in their country. Barry Posen writes that “[bin Laden] blames the United States for the continued suffering of the people of Iraq and for the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.” There is a disagreement here between Kelsay’s assertion that suicide bombings could be evaluated under just war theory criteria and Richardson’s allegation that terrorist acts inherently target non-civilians. From Bin Laden’s perspective, all tax-paying Americans could be deemed as military agents, but, under just war theory, there is a distinction between civilian and military populations.

### Women as Violent Citizens

Female suicide bombing violates the principles of proportionality and *jus in belli* of Just War Theory and qualifies, using Richardson’s definitions, as terrorism. Yet, I argue that these measurements are too simple in the case of female suicide bombers, and that issues of gender must be considered in order to understand these actions. The striking nature of suicide bombing is in its appearance of male orientation and domination. Women, for example, do not have a historic precedent of reverting to organized, military violence for political purposes to benefit only women. Women’s liberation movements have existed in many societies, yet these movements have not, generally, taken the form of using mass violence or violent organizing. Women have, however, entered into military services for political purposes that benefit society.

When a woman takes up arms, then, her actions are up for examination through the lens of both gender and violent agency. What does it mean when one who is historically oppressed takes up the tools of the oppressor – particularly to benefit the oppressor? More definitively, why do women organize militarily along political lines, but not along gendered lines? To begin, there is an asymmetric relationship between the use of force and the benefit of the
oppressed versus the oppressor. If the oppressed adopts the tools of the oppressor, say in military action, both the oppressed and the oppressor may benefit. When the oppressor takes action, it is negligible whether or not the oppressed will benefit. As Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. said of the Vietnam War in his “Beyond Vietnam” address delivered at Riverside Church in 1967:

So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.  

King here notes the irony in that minorities (“Negro”) and the majorities (“white boys”) “kill and die together for a nation,” while that nation benefits only the majority. The minorities then are forced to internalize nationalism for they very nation that makes them minorities. Similarly, when women take up arms, they are defending a society or nationalism that is structured against them.

In the case of the black Americans fighting in the Vietnam War and in the case of female suicide bombing, there is an “endless division of the self against the self” or the “consequence of the invocation” to identify with, and even help, the very entity that denies the fullness of their personhood. Skaine indicates that while there is no singular profile for female suicide bombers, Yoni Fighel, a researcher for the International Center for Terrorism, expresses that one unifying characteristic is that each of the women had “baggage.” Skaine writes that “Fighel indicates the ‘baggage’ concept through the life of 29-year-old Hanadi Jaradat [...who] may have been facing questions about why she was single. Her status in Palestinian society combined with her emotional predisposition made her ‘easy prey’ for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) ‘sharks.’” Jaradat, in this version of her story, dies to preserve the very society which has pushed her to become “easy prey” or particularly vulnerable to such violence. Her “baggage” is a direct result of being a woman in Palestinian society.

Similarly, in Frances S. Hasso’s “Discursive and Political Deployments by/ of the 2002 Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers/Martyrs,” she explains that “in this case [of suicide bombing], women gain some of the attributes of Arab masculinity conventionally deemed positive – bravery, courage, and willingness to sacrifice their lives to maintain honour and dignity.” When women take up arms or engage in political violence, they are seen as becoming more masculine
because they are entering a traditionally masculine realm. This transition from the feminine to the masculine allows these acts of political violence to be recognized by men and society as viable political statements. Women are forced to speak the language of male violence in order to gain political standing.

The problem with this scenario is the very division of the self against the self that, in order to hold political position, women must deny their femininity to be recognized as political actors. By denying their femininity, not only are they keeping political violence in a masculine realm, they are also supporting the very society that has given them the “baggage” of being female. Jaradat’s position as a woman in Palestinian society has caused a division of self, one as a woman and the other as a citizen. We can find other examples of this division of the woman and the citizen. Skaine, for example, writes that

as Palestinian women give their lives [...] “their quest for equality will be futile, for feminism and nationalism don’t go hand in hand in the Arab world.” Shemin reminds us that since the beginning of Palestine’s struggle for independence, its women have been told that women’s rights are subordinate to Palestinian rights. When women participated in the 1987 intifada with the idea that national liberation meant social liberation, women did not realize their ideal.34

Women are told that their rights are “subordinate” to the rights of the state. Palestinian women are expected to sacrifice their sense of self to the benefit of the state. However, as King asked in his sermon: is justice really exercised when some citizens are not allowed access to the full-benefit of citizenship?

**Women in War**

“Importantly, the ‘invisibility’ of women both within terrorist organizations and particularly their assumed invisibility within many of the societies that experience terrorism, makes women an attractive actor for these organizations.” –Karla Cunningham35

Frances Hasso explains that female suicide attacks undermine a “gendered culture of danger,”36 or the idea that men approach danger while women shy away. Such discourses often posit women as the “symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honor, who embody the nation that men live and die for.”37 As women have traditionally occupied the private, or domestic, sphere, female suicide bombers cross such boundaries by forcing themselves and their bodies into the public sphere. The female body has a long-standing history of receiving symbolic violence during war time. Women often take on the role of cultural
repositories in times of nationalist unrest because of their social ties to the
home. Generally, though, this violence is enacted upon the bodies of women by
men in an effort to destroy not only the women, but also the national integrity
of the enemy. Anthropologist Radhika Coomaraswamy writes that

the act of rape or sexual violence during ethnic and nationalist con-
flict is not an isolated, aberrational act. It is extremely purposive and
aimed at not only destroying an individual woman but the communi-
ty’s sense of ethnic purity which many believe is vested in the “honour”
of women.38

Many analysts thus argue that female suicide bombers engage in acts of ter-
rorism in order to restore familial or national honor. Journalist Barbara Victor,
for example, “determined that the first four female Palestinian suicide bombers
were in situations where the act of martyrdom was seen as their sole chance to
reclaim the ‘family honor’ that had been lost by their own actions or the actions
of other family members.”39

Women who engage in high-risk political activity not only shatter the gen-
der dichotomy of the man as the defender and the woman as the defended,
but also are, in a sense, making reclamation of the body as a political actor,
rather than as a political object. There are two strands working in these sce-
narios. In Victor’s analysis we realize how deeply these women have internal-
ized the sense of national or familial honor that they are obligated to carry as
members of the domestic sphere. As the chastity of women is often linked to
familial honor, so these women too are sacrificing their bodies for the sake of
a socially prescribed honor. Returning to Sa’ad Al Din’s portrayal, for example,
we see women who deny their status as Palestinian women in order to affirm
their status as Palestinian citizens. Both scenarios, however, indicate the ways
in which women cannot be fully women or fully citizen without a sacrifice of
their bodies. In Victor’s analysis women’s bodies are bound by laws of chastity
that determine the worth of each woman; in Sa’ad Al Din’s description, women
are rebelling against their lack of political voice.

Conclusion

“Patriarchy is parallel to the power of the state.”40—Anna M. Aganthelou

In concluding, two points must be drawn together: first, under Richardson’s
criteria, suicide bombing has been established as an act of terror and so can-
not be evaluated by Just War criteria as a viable political means. Second, it
has been established that political violence has a long-standing history of being linked to patriarchy as women have never militarily organized against female oppression, but have organized in conjunction with other political conflicts. Moreover, returning to Arendt’s statement, I have illustrated that these women are violent, but not necessarily powerful. The actions of women engaged in suicide bombings should be recognized as acts of terror, but they should be understood with a different sympathy than male suicide bombers. As Leonard Verancini writes of suicide bombers, “The Palestinians who annihilate themselves in order to kill would appear to face a condition in which their suicidal choice has become ontologically – and not only strategically – the only one available.”

Women, especially, represent this outer limit of society as they are between both the power of the state and patriarchy which, according to those like Aganthelou, are synonymous.

Notes

5 Quoted in Sohail H. Hashmi, “An Islamic Solution,” Foreign Policy, May/June 2005, 68.
6 A hadith is a saying attributed to the prophet about Muslim practice.
7 Ibid., 68.
8 Ibid., 68
9 Kelsay, 25.
10 Kelsay, 22
12 “Sisterhood of Stealth,” 19.
14 Ibid., 58.
15 Ibid., 55.
16 Ibid., 57.
17 Skaine, 25.
18 Ibid., 61
19 Amy Caizza, quoted in Victor, 12.
20 Skaine, 58
22 Bloom, 60.
23 Ibid., 58.
24 Skaine, 19.
25 Richardson, 4.
26 Ibid., 4.
27 Ibid., 5.
28 Ibid., 6.
30 Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam” (speech, Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967).
32 Skaine, 27.
33 Hasso, 36.
34 Skaine, 32.
35 Ibid., 62
36 Hasso, 28.
37 Ibid., 28.
39 Bloom, 58.

41 Hasso, 44.
Prophets, Protests and Politicians: Exploring the Political Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Billy Graham through an analysis of Christianity and Crisis and Christianity Today

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Introduction

On February 10, 1941, Christianity and Crisis, a new, biweekly journal dedicated to the “exposition of...Christian faith in its relation to world events” began publication in New York City. The brainchild of theologian and political philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr, the new publication was both an outgrowth of and reaction to the politics of the Christian Century, the most important Protestant publication in America to which Niebuhr had been one of the most important contributors. Niebuhr, who had been calling for American intervention against Nazi Germany since the mid-1930s, had become disillusioned with the pacifist and isolationist position that the majority of America’s leading Protestants, including Christian Century publisher C.C. Morrison, had adopted following the destructive effects of the First World War. In 1940, when Morrison and other pacifists reacted “with a sense of outrage” to Niebuhr’s anti-pacifist book Christianity and Power Politics, Niebuhr concluded that he needed to break with the Christian Century and cre-
ate a new journal of Christian opinion that he hoped would “unite Christian interventionists of all political stripe.” The goal of the journal was to reform liberal Christianity so that a forceful response to Germany’s aggression would be taken to be both a political and a Christian imperative.¹

Niebuhr’s nascent project, which Niebuhr biographer Richard Fox describes as both directly modeled after and directly challenging Morrison’s Christian Century – “the likeness of a blood relative, but the animus of a rebellious child” – would grow quickly to become the most important outlet for Niebuhr’s brand of Christian Realism.² As the title implies, Christianity and Crisis aimed for the 50 years of its existence to follow the guiding principle that led Niebuhr to oppose his former pacifist friends: to understand human social relations as inherently self-interested and, as such, to criticize any powerful social group, be it friend or foe, when it fails to use its power to fight injustice or when it uses its power to create injustice.

On October 15, 1956, the first edition of another Protestant biweekly called Christianity Today was published in Washington, DC. Like Niebuhr’s Christianity and Crisis, Christianity Today was designed both to match the style and the content of the more liberal Christian Century and to challenge its hegemonic hold on popular Protestant news. The founder of the new publication, evangelist Billy Graham, envisioned that Christianity Today “would give theological respectability to evangelicals,” a group whose numbers were growing exponentially (due in great part to Billy Graham’s leadership) but who had drawn the ire of mainline liberal Protestants as well as fundamentalists.³ Graham hoped that Christianity Today would be the voice for his “third way” of American Christianity by providing a common voice, a “rallying point” for evangelicals who felt scorned by mainline Protestant publications like Christian Century, while also allowing evangelicals to distance themselves in the general American public opinion from more hard-line fundamentalists.⁴ As Graham described the theological tone of Christianity Today, rather than use “the stick of denunciation and criticism…we would attempt to lead and love rather than vilify, criticize, and beat. Fundamentalism has failed miserably with the big stick approach; now it is time to take the big love approach.”⁵ Using an intellectual yet accessible style, and written and edited by the elite of the evangelical movement, Christianity Today would become evangelical Christianity’s public voice, planting, as Graham said, “the evangelical flag in the middle of the road, taking a conservative theological position but a definite liberal approach to social problems.”⁶ Today Christianity Today’s secure place as the most widely read Protestant publication in America shows that Graham’s goal to create an
This paper will present a comparative analysis of how Niebuhr’s *Christianity and Crisis* and Graham’s *Christianity Today* narrated and reacted to major events in American history between the mid-1950s and the early-1970s. In doing so, the goal will be to analyze three interrelated questions: first, based on what theological positions did Niebuhr and Graham formulate their political theologies? Second, specifically related to the political use both non-violent and violent force, how did Niebuhr and Graham apply their political theologies to the crises that American society faced during the mid 20th century? Finally, what kind of relationship did Niebuhr and Graham believe prophetically-oriented religious leaders should have with American politicians, specifically American presidents? By studying the positions that Niebuhr and Graham and their respective publications took on the events surrounding the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the Johnson and Nixon Presidencies, we will see that Niebuhr and Graham understood the political world and their role within it in decidedly different ways. Niebuhr’s political theology of Christian Realism led him to view all social groups, especially governments, as organized not by moral codes but by systems of power. Therefore, Niebuhr believed that force is the only effective tool to correct systematic injustice, even as Niebuhr also insisted that the employment of force must be carefully monitored. In terms of his relationship with politicians, a Christian leader must align his loyalties to the cause of justice itself and not to the cause of any political regime so that he can petition governments to use force to fight injustices but also be free to turn around and protest governments if their use of force itself creates injustices. Based on his theology of “new evangelism,” Graham’s political theology led him to believe that for essentially Christian societies like America, true societal change cannot come by forcing groups to submit to externally determined codes, but rather, for moral and practical reasons, societal change must start with a change of heart in individuals. Graham believed, however, that force must be used when Christian societies confront non-Christian societies, especially communist societies whose atheism makes them irredeemable and a threat to democratic (Christian) culture. Furthermore, Graham believed that, through close, even intimate relationships with politicians, a Christian leader should promote religious conversion as the only means to solve domestic problems while simultaneously supporting Christian societies’ efforts abroad to confront evil with force.
Political Theology

Before analyzing how Niebuhr and Graham applied their different political theologies to the challenges that mid-20th century America faced, it is worth analyzing how Niebuhr and Graham understood Christianity’s role in the political sphere. While both Niebuhr and Graham saw Christianity and politics as intrinsically connected, how the two men understood this connection led them to develop rather different political theologies that, in turn, led to drastically different views on the use of force and how religious leaders should interact with politicians.

Like other liberal Christians in America, Niebuhr understood the great destruction of the First World War as the result of the progressive utopianism championed by liberal Protestants mixed with competing nationalisms. Yet Niebuhr, a proponent of Christian neo-orthodoxy and a devout anglophile who had experienced firsthand Nazi bombing raids on Britain – German warplanes bombed Edinburgh while Niebuhr was presenting his series of the Gifford Lectures – refused to subscribe to the pacifist trend that dominated liberal Protestantism following World War I. He did not believe that justice – the quintessential Christian goal of domestic and international life – could be accomplished simply by following and promoting Jesus’ love ethic as the pacifists held. As he wrote in his introductory editorial in *Christianity and Crisis*: “The profoundest insights of the Christian faith cannot be expressed by the simple counsel that men ought to be more loving, and that if they become so the problem both of war and of international organization would solve itself.” Liberal Christianity failed to recognize that societal relations are not determined based on God’s love but instead on the relative proportionality of power. Therefore, it is not a lack of moral understanding that creates injustice but imbalances within power relations. It is Christianity’s duty to point out injustices as well as to suggest solutions to social dilemmas, while understanding that the realities of human existence most often dictate the deliberate and careful use of coercion, force and even war to reform inequalities of power and in order to achieve social justice.

In his application of Christian Realism to American democracy, a system, according to Niebuhr, whose greatest virtue is its “openness” which “permits and even encourages criticism of itself in the light of universal standards,” Niebuhr saw the role of a critical, prophetic Christian voice as playing an essential role in the democratic process. As groups that operate based on power and not on morality, governments and the politicians who run them are not to be considered as benign ends in themselves, but as tools to be manipulated to
further justice. This position allows the Christian prophet to remain loyal to the pursuit of justice, not to any specific party, politician or even nation, thus providing the prophet with the independence and flexibility to support a government whose actions are just in one area or at one time and to call to task the same government whose actions are unjust in another area or at another time. Such a position enabled Niebuhr to call for America to use force to confront Nazi Germany’s tyranny and aggression while also cautioning America to “overcome the impulse to domination and imperialism toward which America will be tempted by its place as a world economic and military power.”

This same dexterity also allowed Niebuhr to call for the use of force in support of the civil rights movement and to condemn the use of force in Vietnam.

Unlike Reinhold Niebuhr, whose life’s work was the formulation and application of a Christian political theology to political and social events, Billy Graham has never aspired to be a political philosopher. Graham’s explicit mission has been to evangelize not only the American nation but the entire world, working to convert as many individual humans to his brand of evangelical Protestant Christianity, which focuses on personal piety and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As he wrote in his 1997 autobiography, *Just As I Am*, “an evangelist is called to do one thing, and one thing only: to proclaim the Gospel. Becoming involved in strictly political issues or partisan politics inevitably dilutes the evangelist’s impact and compromises his message.”

Because of this and a myriad of other statements in which Graham has claimed that he is not “political” – he claims, for example, to have never openly endorsed a Presidential candidate for the United States Presidency – is it fair to analyze Graham as a political theologian? The resounding answer is yes. As an advisor to generations of American and international politicians and a close confidant to several U.S. Presidents, Graham has been one of the most influential political figures of the past 50 years. It is through his revivals and his relationships with presidents from L.B. Johnson to George W. Bush that Graham has become, as Graham biographer William Martin describes it, “an icon not just of American Christianity but of America itself.”

Graham’s political theology is a direct extension of his brand of evangelical Christianity, which he calls “new evangelism.” For Graham, the most important event in an individual’s life is his conversion to evangelical Christianity and acceptance of Jesus Christ as his spiritual guide, moral example and personal savior. This event is not only crucial for the life of the individual but for the health of the society in which he lives. Graham believes that because conversion requires individuals to reorient their lives away from following sinful, selfish egotism and toward lives devoted to following the dictates of a just
and loving God, God will work through the lives of His faithful to solve both individual problems – like spiritual blindness, fear and addiction – and societal problems – like poverty, racism and crime. Therefore, the path toward solving injustice starts with the conversion of individuals away from sin and towards the salvation of the cross. As Graham said in 1974, “We must remake the unjust structures that have taken advantage of the powerless and broken the hearts of the poor and dispossessed…[Yet while] we all admit that we need some sweeping social reforms—and in true repentance we must determine to do something about it—our greatest need is a change in the heart.”

Graham has spent a career working to apply this political theology to American politics. Because he sees the root cause of societal ills as the turn away from God’s moral law to humanity’s moral permissiveness, it is only through “revival and repentance” that America can solve its fundamental problems. Graham believes that his revivals, like those he has held during the last 60 years throughout the country and the world, have helped to fight injustice and build more moral societies by filling them with devotees to Christ. Converting the millions, however, has not been the only approach that Graham has taken to change the moral nature of American politics. His well-documented friendships with generations of presidents have been another part of his mission. Graham’s close relationships with American Presidents have earned him the title “Pastor to the Presidents.” This title has been employed more for the sake of irony than praise by both advocates for separation of church and state and religious leaders from the right and the left who think he has been, in the words of Pat Robertson, “used for political-image building,” that is, used to put the stamp of Christian respectability on suspect politicians and policies. Yet Graham sincerely believed that if he could encourage presidents to cultivate their own faith in God, they would govern morally and set an example for moral living for the entire nation. As Graham told reporters a few weeks after Nixon won reelection in 1972, the President would be “putting a lot more emphasis on moral and spiritual affairs” during his second term because Nixon realized that, based on his own conversations with Graham, “the greatest problem we’re facing is moral permissiveness and decadence.”

Finally one of the most important examples of Graham’s effort to “inject evangelical Christianity into the veins of the body politic” is Christianity Today itself. For example, the choice not to publish Christianity Today in Minneapolis where the Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA) had its headquarters but in downtown Washington, DC, was part of the magazine’s explicit mission to influence national policy. As Graham recalls it in William Martin’s biography of Graham entitled, A Prophet With Honor: “I felt a magazine coming from
Washington would carry with it an unusual authority. We also wanted our editor to mingle with congressmen, senators, and government leaders so he could speak with firsthand knowledge of the issues of the day.” From its location at the locus of American political power and based on the political theology of its founder – that “the basic solution to the world crisis is theological” – Christianity Today would be the evangelical Christian voice commenting on national and world affairs, a voice that would be heard in Washington and emanate to the rest of the world. Therefore, despite Graham’s pledges to “stay out of politics,” through Christianity Today, through his constant presence in the White House and even through his revivals, Billy Graham has spent decades applying his political theology of “new evangelism” to the American political sphere.

Civil Rights – Force at Home

Throughout the 1960s, both Christianity and Crisis and Christianity Today frequently covered and commented on the civil rights movement. Both publications framed the struggle in similar terms: one group of people, Southern blacks, struggling to rid themselves of the injustices inflicted upon them by another group of people, Southern whites. Both publications saw it as a Christian imperative to enter into this struggle, to fight the injustice of segregation so that all Americans could live in dignity and equality, which was their birthright as American citizens and as children of God. Yet the two publications differed markedly on how they supported the movement. Christianity and Crisis believed its duty was to support Southern blacks who protested illegal segregation with non-violent protest, to support governmental actions that either coerced or physically forced Southern communities to obey federal law and integrate, and to support the passage of powerful federal laws to guarantee civil and voting rights. Christianity Today, on the other hand, believed that integration could not be successfully or justly forced upon the South through federal legislation, through protest – lawful or unlawful – or through the presence of federal troops. In fact, Christianity Today insisted that any use of governmental or religious power in support of one group of people against another group was both against Constitutional and Biblical principles. The only way integration would justly come about, Christianity Today insisted, would be through a widespread sincere conversion among southern whites to the view that integration was a moral imperative.

Reinhold Niebuhr and Christianity and Crisis were early and vocal supporters of the civil rights movement. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Christianity and Crisis often dedicated entire issues to covering civil rights,
providing a media space where many prominent Northern Protestant pastors could vocalize their support for the movement and report back on their own personal experiences of marching in protests.\textsuperscript{26} Based on Niebuhr’s political theology of Christian Realism, \textit{Christianity and Crisis} understood the civil rights struggle not as the sin of bigoted individuals who refused to think and act morally towards their fellow humans and fellow citizens, but the sin of society, which over time had constructed cultural and legal systems of injustice that empowered white Southerners and oppressed black Southerners. In 1957, Niebuhr wrote, “our nation will have to wrestle with this problem [of racial injustice] for many generations, for it deals not with defiant individuals but the mores of whole communities who regard the ‘southern way of life’ as more precious and authoritative than the general standards of a humane civilization.”\textsuperscript{27} Yet Niebuhr was sure to point out that it was not just white Southerners who created and supported the power structures in which segregation was maintained. Northern white Christians, Americans whose faith should make them especially sensitive to the sufferings of Southern blacks, had failed to apply the Christian standards of equality to the Southern black Americans. In 1961, in the days after white mobs attacked Freedom Riders in Montgomery, Alabama, Niebuhr took to task white Northern Protestant Churches for their failure to act in the face of such “savagery:”

> The question is simply whether we are prepared to treat our fellow man with the respect that his innate dignity as a human being requires and deserves. That the church should have failed to meet this primary test of its moral vitality is a fact of grave concern. Could it be that the Protestant church in America has sunk to the insignificant status of a white middle-class conventicle, where man’s pride is nurtured rather than disciplined?\textsuperscript{28}

While Niebuhr criticized white churches for their complacency in the face of injustice, he praised the black churches and their practice of peaceful but forceful public protest, for showing the rest of America the fight for the rights of black Americans was essentially a fight for the rights of all Americans. He also admired the leadership of Martin Luther King in the Montgomery boycott, “which combined in rare measure militant conviction with group self-restraint, even in the face of severe intimidation, [and] has inspired comparable efforts all over the South. Negro churches are becoming again rallying points, not for religion of escapistism, but the intramundane witness to human rights.”\textsuperscript{29} Niebuhr believed that it would be King-led protests that would show the power of forceful but non-violent protest of private citizens to combat the systematic
Niebuhr consistently supported King’s policy of using non-violent protest and resistance to bring attention to the injustice that legalized segregation created. Yet when peaceful and lawful attempts at integration were met with violence at the hands of “rabid racists” in police uniforms, Niebuhr believed that the federal government could and should use military force to prevent local and state governments from impeding integration. In 1962, when the Mississippi state government blocked James Meredith, an African-American, from enrolling in the University of Mississippi, Niebuhr wrote in an editorial entitled, “The Intractability of Racial Prejudice”, that while “moral and political standards of the national community were bound to affect, to leaven and to redeem the standards of the local community” it was only “an artful build-up of actual force” that coerced Mississippi Governor “Barnett to the point of obedience to the law... Evidently force could accomplish the end that conscience and tradition failed to achieve.” While it was neither a Christian respect for fellow man nor respect for the federal law that enabled integration at the University of Mississippi, Niebuhr was confident that integration once won by force would usher in the acceptance of integration by custom: he wrote, while “education under a bayonet is not a good education, once the ice has been broken normal human relations will be established.”

Yet even with the legal force of Brown v. Board of Education and the military force behind it to integrate public institutions of learning, it took civil rights movement efforts in Birmingham and later in Selma to bring to light how successful segregation was at systematically robbing black citizens of other Constitutional rights beyond access to equal educational opportunities. Christianity and Crisis followed closely the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) campaign in Birmingham to protest segregated businesses, publishing as its lead editorial in the May 26, 1963 edition a three-page excerpt of King’s Letter from the Birmingham Jail. Two years later the movement focused its efforts in Selma, Alabama where many Christianity and Crisis contributors joined SCLC’s march for voting rights. In April of 1965, Christianity and Crisis contributor Wayne Cowan was one of the white clergymen who had answered King’s call to: “Come on down!” to Selma after the “nation’s conscience [was] outraged, by the police dogs, fire hoses and cattle prods” that state police had used to turn away marchers. In marching, Cowan wanted to prove that “the war against the willful denial of full rights to all our citizens is not finished, but a decisive battle has been fought – and the forces of darkness have suffered another stinging defeat” and thus the casualties of this just struggle, including
James Reeb and Jimmy Lee Jackson, had “not died in vain.” With Birmingham and Selma as backdrops, Christianity and Crisis was among the early supporters of the 1964 civil rights and 1965 voting rights legislation that would outlaw discrimination in all private commercial ventures and guarantee voting rights for all Americans. Niebuhr hoped that the civil rights legislation would “put the legislative capstone on the emancipation of the race” and Cowan believed that the voting rights act would serve notice “that time is running out for die-hard Southern reactionaries.”

Despite such strong endorsements for the civil and voting rights legislation, Niebuhr was sure to point out to the Christianity and Crisis readership that for American Protestants the enactment of such legislation should be seen as not a victory but a failure for those American Christians who believed that the Christian faith alone would end systematic racial injustice in America: “We Protestants might begin the new chapter in our national life by contritely confessing that evangelical Christianity has failed to contribute significantly to the solution of the gravest social issue and evil that our nation has confronted since slavery.”

Niebuhr insisted that just as mainstream Protestant Christianity had proven unable and unwilling to adequately confront the injustice of Nazi Germany, American evangelical Christianity had shown its ineptitude at confronting injustices, this time within its own borders. The civil rights movement had proven for Niebuhr and Christianity and Crisis that social change could only come about through forceful opposition to social structures and not through a mere change in individuals’ hearts. The following section will show that it is this exact position – endorsement of social change via change of individual hearts – that epitomized Graham’s response to the civil rights movement.

In the mid-1950s, many white American Protestants had great hopes that Billy Graham would lead the Christian call for change on the issue of segregation. Even within the pages of Christianity and Crisis, John C. Bennett declared “there is no other Christian leader in America who can do so much as Billy Graham to open the eyes of believing Christians to the implications of their faith in this area.” Yet quickly it became clear that Graham would not, as Bennett and even Niebuhr himself had hoped, make an unequivocal “prophetic statement about the racial problem” that went beyond simply calling for a change of heart. Instead, Graham would follow his fundamental political operating principle – while “all men are created equal under God...[and] any denial of this is a contradiction of holy law,” policies that advocated force instead of a willful change of heart to solve the “race issue” would be rejected.
Christianity Today considered the use of force to bring about integration as both impractical and immoral. In terms of practicality, forceful coercion, whether in the form of private protest, legislative mandate, or armed governmental intervention, would only produce temporary changes in Southern society. A spiritual reorientation, Christianity Today insisted, was the only way to bring about permanent reconciliation on the race question, as segregation would return as soon as the protestors dispersed or the National Guard disengaged. Yet more importantly, as theologian Earle Ellis wrote in a 1957 Christianity Today editorial, forced integration was both civilly and religiously immoral. “In the name of equality [integration by force] destroys the liberty of individuals and groups to live and develop in associations of their own preference; in the name of unity it points with undeviating insistence toward authoritarianism and conformity, eschewing the inherent sin root.” Furthermore, Ellis maintained, any force used in favor of one group against another denies the Biblical law that “God is no respecter of persons;” that is, God treats all individuals and groups equally. Ellis was uncompromising in his denunciation of forced integration, ending his article by suggesting that policies that forced the South into accepting integration might be a step not towards true Christian equality but towards an authoritarian police-state: “The road signs to 'integration' look more like Huxley's Brave New World than the New Testament's Kingdom of God.”

Integration by “change of heart” and not “change by force” would be Christianity Today's consistent policy on the “race question” throughout the 1960s. This policy would mean that Christianity Today responded to civil rights era events in markedly different ways than Christianity and Crisis. For example, while the two journals did agree that the racial discrimination that kept James Meredith from matriculating at the University of Mississippi was a threat to justice for all Americans, Christianity Today rejected the use of force to guarantee James Meredith's integration. As a 1962 editorial suggested, “who will say race relations are better in Mississippi as a consequence of Federal force, or that bitterness has not been added to prejudice? Nobody has demonstrated that tear gas and bayonets can force men to love each other, especially when those involved are unpersuaded that force is being employed on the side of justice.” As the civil rights struggle escalated in intensity and in violence, Christianity Today did undergo a softening of tone towards integration as a movement. In the spring of 1963, the editorial board was “disgusted” by the “arrest and jailing of seven-year-old girls” in Birmingham, Alabama and the use of “water pressure strong enough to strip bark from trees” against humans who wanted “simple rights as eating in a cafeteria, attending school.” The board even went as far as
to write that in Birmingham, Americans saw “how thin is the veneer of their everyday decency, how dark the hatred and how raw the violence in the deeper chasms of the human soul.” Still, *Christianity Today* refused to abandon the fundamental principle that true social change can only come about through a change in individual hearts. The editorial’s concluding message was to push for a redoubled effort to follow Christ; Birmingham afforded the nation “a time, to weep, to repent, to remember – ’inasmuch as ye have done it unto these ye have done it unto me.’”

For *Christianity and Crisis* the violent resistance to the mostly peaceful civil rights movement, like that witnessed at Birmingham and Selma, meant that the federal government needed to create wide sweeping legislation to guarantee full civil and voting rights for all Americans. Yet ironically, *Christianity Today* took the escalation of violent opposition to integration – like the violence seen at Selma and in the murder of Medger Evers – as a sign of the eventual end of segregation and the turning of the tide in favor of equal rights. As such, *Christianity Today* became more adamant in its refusal to support a legislative response to the civil rights’ struggle. In fact, *Christianity Today* suggested that legislation that forced private business owners to desegregate was not only unnecessary but also would move the country towards communism. A 1963 *Christianity Today* editorial stated: “The outstanding distinction between a government of free men and a socialistic or communistic state is the fact that free men can own and control property, whereas statism denies property rights.” The editorial concluded that instead of a legal response to violence, Christian Americans should put forth a religious one: “What the Negro needs now is not more laws…but more room in the white man’s heart. That need is ‘as old as the Scriptures.’”

Thus unlike *Christianity and Crisis*, which whole-heartedly supported both the civil and voting rights legislation, *Christianity Today* refused to endorse either bill, remaining true to Graham’s political theological position that true social change can only come through spiritual conversion.

Not only did *Christianity Today* feel governmental coercion aimed at forcing Southern compliance to federal law was an inappropriate use of force, the journal took, at most, an ambivalent position on the appropriateness of civil rights movement marches. For example, a March 1965 editorial deplored the violence of the state police at Selma, which seemed like “an episode out of Nazi Germany rather than the news from an American city” and applauded the white clergymen who risked their lives in support of marchers. Yet a month later, *Christianity Today* warned civil rights leaders to make sure their marches do not become unwitting platforms for counter culture or communist activities.
Legitimacy of public assembly and public protest against glaring social injustice are not the only issues involved in mass demonstrations. Communist sympathizers exploit these activities to undermine confidence in free-world governments. Selma was not without such entanglement; the syndicated Washington columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak reported that “there is not doubt whatever that SNCC is substantially infiltrated by beatnik left-wing revolutionaries and – worst of all – by Communists.” Political agitators exploit mobocracy to overthrow constitutional governments rather than to achieve political reforms by judicial processes.\(^47\)

*Christianity Today* believed that citizens had the right to protest against segregation but not if such actions produced opportunities for the dissemination of communist propaganda. As such, *Christianity Today* believed that any actions that forced the South to desegregate, whether this force be protest marches, political legislation, or police presence, were not only morally and practically inappropriate but could threaten American democracy. *Christianity Today* maintained that the only way to end segregation was to promote a cooperative and willful change of heart. And the most effective method way to bring about such change was the preaching of the Gospel.

**Vietnam – Force Abroad**

In the early stages of the Vietnam conflict, Graham and Niebuhr agreed that America was justified in its use of force to fight the spread of communism. Niebuhr and Graham believed that Korea had demonstrated the importance of American resistance to Russian or Chinese sponsored military aggression in Asia. Early in the conflict, however, Niebuhr cautioned that, as he put it in 1963, if “no moral content is put into the struggle” then Vietnam would become a battle ground between two imperial police states, “one no better than the other.”\(^48\) As the war continued and the level of violence escalated, Niebuhr began to see that America’s involvement in the conflict was not, as the Johnson administration had framed it, a divinely mandated fight against tyrannical injustice, but instead no more than an extension of American imperialist aggression. Therefore, Niebuhr and *Christianity and Crisis* became vocal opponents to the war; unlike World War II and the civil rights movement, in which America used force to combat serious injustices, America was not employing force in Vietnam to fight injustice but simply to further its own self-interests. Graham, on the other hand, insisted that America’s actions were not self-interested but, in fact, full of the “moral content” that Niebuhr believed it was lacking. At issue in Vietnam was not two imperialistic civilizations fighting for control of one
geographical territory but a battle of two diametrically opposed worldviews, the democratic and God-fearing West and the authoritarian and Godless Soviet Bloc. To defend the democratic sovereignty of Vietnam, military force was not only acceptable but essential. While Niebuhr believed it was wrong for the American government to claim God’s providence in this fight, Graham insisted that as long as Americans stayed true to the anti-communist cause and to God Himself, America would be sure to follow a just and victorious course.

In 1964, Niebuhr and Christianity and Crisis endorsed President Johnson in his reelection bid. Niebuhr’s acceptance of Johnson’s promise to “seek no wider war in Vietnam” and his fears that the “primitivism” of a Goldwater administration would threaten the gains in civil rights and other social policies made under Johnson meant that Niebuhr saw the incumbent as the best hope for justice. Yet in its endorsement, Christianity and Crisis made it clear that it did not seek to ally itself permanently with Johnson; there would be no knight-ing of a “Christian political party” or “Christian candidate.” Thus when Johnson broke his promise on Vietnam and escalated America’s involvement in the conflict within months of his reelection, Christianity and Crisis did not hesitate to condemn the Johnson's administration’s policy. Even before Johnson’s second inauguration, Niebuhr took Johnson to task for not only failing to hold to his campaign promise but also for misleading the public about why he was doing so. Niebuhr wrote, “We cannot criticize the Administration for failing to solve an impossible problem. We can, of course, be critical of its failure to explain its insolvency with candor.” The “reality” of the war was not a fight of good versus evil, “to defend a nation’s liberty against Communist aggression” as the administration pretended. Instead the truth of the matter was that the conflict was a battle between imperialistic powers, one communist and the other democratic.

In March 1966, Christianity and Crisis continued its denunciation of Johnson’s Vietnam efforts with its lead editorial entitled, “We Protest the National Policy in Vietnam,” calling the domino theory – that if Vietnam were to fall to the communists, the rest of Asia would follow – nothing more than a myth. Perhaps more importantly, Christianity and Crisis used the editorial as an opportunity to establish and defend the need for critical religious voices in the democratic process, voices that would maintain allegiance to the cause of justice, instead the cause of a government.

Scripture warns that ‘where there is no vision the people perish.’ The failure of vision in our time is a blindness to realities no less than to ideals. The threat of this moment is a preoccupation with the enemy that destroys our society’s power to understand itself or its foes. In such a time the greatest service to the society comes from those voices…that
Niebuhr and *Christianity and Crisis* would count themselves among America’s prophetic voices that would not allow the government’s unjust policy to go uncontested. Niebuhr was able to take such a stance because his political theology dictated that his role as a politically engaged religious leader was to constantly hold any and all governmental officials accountable to the standard of justice, even those he formally supported.

Billy Graham and *Christianity Today* understood America’s involvement in Vietnam in a fundamentally different way than Niebuhr and *Christianity and Crisis*. Graham saw the world as having two great worldviews, “the Christian” and “the communist,” which were not, as Niebuhr had suggested, equally capable of creating social injustice. According to Graham, the fight in Vietnam was the current installment of an epic battle between the Christian ethic, “with its demands and disciplines,” and the “morally corrupt” communist ethic, whose ultimate goal is to exile God’s law from the world and replace it with totalitarian materialism. Thus, Graham saw communism as a graver threat to justice than American racial segregation because while American Christians could be convinced of the evils of segregation through an appeal to their Christian morality, atheist communists, whether in Vietnam or Russia, had no morality and therefore were incapable of justice.

Based on this understanding, Graham promoted a two-front battle against communism. First, because he saw communism as inherently morally bankrupt and therefore incapable of Christian redemption, it must be stopped with the force of a just military power. As *Christianity Today* wrote in an editorial in 1965: “America is still the greatest bastion of freedom, and it holds the greatest military power in world history. This power must be used responsibly when principle, freedom, and truth are at stake.” In 1965, *Christianity Today* applauded Johnson for “speaking to the American people as a brave soldier” about the Vietnam issue. Johnson’s war escalations were not based on some “ulterior motives,” insisted *Christianity Today*. The US “wants no territory;” military escalations were simply the result of an agreement to protect the democratic South Vietnam against communist aggression from North Vietnam. The second front on which Graham and *Christianity Today* waged war against communism was at home. While America’s armies used military force to stop communist aggression abroad, Graham saw it as his duty to support the administration against homegrown dissent. While *Christianity Today* acknowledged the American right to dissent in a 1965 editorial entitled, “Halting Red
Aggression in Viet Nam,” it hoped that the “good soldier” Johnson would not “yield to opponents of a sound policy in Viet Nam” or another “Munich will ensue,” meaning capitulation in Vietnam would lead to the eventual loss of the whole of South Asia to the communists. Later, as opposition to the war grew more fervent, Christianity Today’s criticism of dissenters intensified. In a 1970 editorial entitled “Radicals on a Rampage,” Christianity Today considered anti-war protestors and a “wave of bombings” from suspected communist “left-wing radicals” as equal threats to American democracy:

It makes no difference whether bombings and insurrections bear a ‘made in Moscow’ or a ‘made in Cuba’ label. It also makes little difference whether one can point to a planned conspiracy with juridical precision. The indisputable fact is that the Western democracies are under siege, and that the sources of much of the impetus for violence, insurrection, and revolution are plain.  

With such statements, Christianity Today showed that it considered any challenge to American Vietnam policy, violent or otherwise, to be communist in origin and therefore, un-American. Yet Graham’s battle for the home front came not only in the form of denunciations of anti-war protestors. Graham saw it as his personal duty to fight the injustice posed by radical anti-communists by conducting missions that he hoped would lead to spiritual rebirth. As Graham warned in 1970, “unless we have revival and repentance in North America and Western Europe, we will experience God’s Wrath.”

Vietnam thus provides an important contrast to the civil rights movement in regard to how Niebuhr and Graham understood the use of force. While Niebuhr supported coercion as the only effective way to end systematic segregation in America, Graham maintained that a conversion of the heart of individual Southerners – and not protest, legislation or armed intervention – was the only moral and practical course of action to combat segregation. In Vietnam, however, it was Niebuhr who called the use of force unjust because he understood the conflict not as a fight against inherently evil communism but as a campaign to support American imperialistic aims. Graham on the other hand supported the American war effort as a necessary and just fight waged by a Christian nation to stop the spread of Godless communism in Asia.

Presidential Politics: Prophetic Critic or Presidential Pastor

As the leading political theologians of their day, both Niebuhr and Graham had influential and sometimes intimate relationships with presidential administrations. For example, the Truman administration asked Niebuhr to consult
on national security to help form a response to the growth of communism in Asia. For decades, Niebuhr maintained a close friendship with long-time Minnesota Senator and Johnson’s Vice-President, Hubert Humphrey. As personal friend and advisor to several presidents, most notably Richard Nixon, Graham’s place in White House is legendary; no private citizen has had more contact with more presidents than Graham. Yet despite similar personal and professional relationships with a series of presidential administrations, Niebuhr and Graham understood their roles in presidential politics in significantly different terms. Based on his political theology of Christian Realism, Niebuhr believed that his loyalty had to remain with the cause of justice above the cause of politicians, even those who were personal friends or professional associates. Niebuhr understood that the political world was limited in what it can do to further justice; politicians function not according to morals but according to power and are thus susceptible to its corrupting force. Therefore, Niebuhr and Christianity and Crisis strove to be radically independent voices of religious protest, leveling unmitigated criticisms on any and all powers, civil and religious, when these powers were not furthering justice. Graham and Christianity Today on the other hand, believed sincerely in the power of conversion as a force to right injustice. As such, Graham became an intimate confidant and supporter of presidents, especially Richard Nixon, insisting that a change in their hearts would be reflected in moral and just policies.

As noted previously, Niebuhr and Christianity and Crisis endorsed President Johnson for the 1964 election, believing the incumbent to be America’s best hope for a just solution to segregation and for a just and speedy conclusion to Vietnam conflict. When Johnson escalated America’s involvement in Vietnam early in 1965, Niebuhr did not hesitate to condemn the administration for breaking its campaign promise. Niebuhr’s increasingly strident criticism created some awkward situations for the Johnson administration, as the administration could not easily defend itself without attacking one of its most important former supporters. In particular, Vice President Hubert Humphrey’s political skills were tested in February 1966 when he was the keynote speaker at a colloquium held at Assembly Hall at Riverside Church to honor Niebuhr for his contributions to Christianity and Crisis and to American Protestantism. In the interim between the invitation to Humphrey to speak at the colloquium and the actual event, Niebuhr and his colleagues at Christianity and Crisis had gone from endorsing Johnson’s reelection bid to denouncing the administration as misleading the public and mismanaging the war. Before giving his own address, Humphrey had to listen to Hans Morgenthau and John C. Bennett praise Niebuhr and deliver an attack on the administration’s policy in Vietnam.
When his turn did come, Humphrey glowingly praised Niebuhr, calling him “one of the world’s most profound political philosophers, scholars, theologians and prophets.” Humphrey avoided addressing the Vietnam question directly and instead focused on Niebuhr’s importance as a critical religious voice who rendered honest judgment on what he saw: “He has been both a reformer and a prophet, but he has not been a crusader. He has steadfastly warned against the nostrum peddler and the salesman of simple solutions and the fixer, all of whom promise easy answers at bargain prices.” The fact that Niebuhr and his colleagues, who certainly knew that Humphrey was due to give the speech at the colloquium, nevertheless gave their unmitigated attack on the administration’s Vietnam policy, demonstrates that Niebuhr held nothing higher than his duty to call America to justice as he saw it – even if to do so ran the risk of alienating his long-time friend. Such an act indicates that Niebuhr believed he could best fulfill his role in politics by being an unconditional advocate for justice and not by acting as a booster for specific politicians.

While Niebuhr demonstrated his own independence from presidential politics with his criticism of the Johnson administration, he also criticized other religious leaders whose relationships with presidents he believed were too intimate. In an August 1969 Christianity and Crisis edition, Niebuhr wrote a scathing editorial entitled, “The King’s Chapel and the King’s Court” in which he attacked Nixon’s decision to hold religious services in the East Room of the White House and Graham’s decision to be the services’ first, most frequent, and most important officiant. For Niebuhr, the services were the most public sign of what he called the “Nixon-Graham doctrine.” According to Niebuhr, such a doctrine threatened the “wall of separation of church and state” on two levels. First, through the intimate relationship between America’s head of state and America’s most recognizable Christian leader, the doctrine sought to replace the American Constitutional tradition of “radical religious protest – which subjects all historical reality (including economic, social and radical injustice) to the ‘word of the Lord,’ i.e., absolute standards of justice...[with]...conventional religion – which throws the aura of sanctity on contemporary public policy, whether morally inferior or outrageously unjust.” Second, Niebuhr believed:

[The doctrine] assumes that a religious change of heart, such as occurs in an individual conversion, would cure men of all sin. Billy Graham has a favorite text: ‘if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.’ The defect in this confidence in individual conversion is that it obscures the dual and social character of human selves and the individual and social character of their virtues and vices.
According to Niebuhr, because of his relationship with Nixon, Graham had become the “modern equivalent of Amaziah, the king’s chaplain,” a religious man who forgets the inherent fallibility of politics and, in doing so, forgoes his duty to fight for justice in order to win the king’s favor. Niebuhr wrote that what American democracy needed was not an Amaziah, who colludes with the king to maintain the status quo, but an Amos who represents “the prophetic radical aspect of religious life, which insisted on criticizing any defective and unjust social order.” While Graham naively looked to Paul for the biblical justification for his political theology, Niebuhr himself and, as he proudly noted, Martin Luther King, looked to Amos’ stinging critique of the status quo and his clarion call for justice: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”

Niebuhr’s denunciation of the “Nixon-Graham doctrine,” the last important public writing of his career, would not go unnoticed. After The New York Times reported on Niebuhr’s editorial, the paper’s letter to the editor page was the scene of a two-week long debate about the proper relationship between preachers and politicians. As Niebuhr was both publicly praised and denounced, privately Nixon called for an FBI report on Niebuhr to determine his “patriotism” and Graham supporters sent Niebuhr bags full of hate mail.

Yet for Niebuhr the point had to be made that a Christian religious leader should maintain loyalty to the cause of justice and not to the cause of presidents.

Niebuhr’s charge that Graham acted more like a political operative than a prophetic critic was not without evidence. For example, in private conversations before the 1972 election, Graham pledged his complete support to the incumbent president, telling Nixon he would “try to be helpful in every possible way.” The President took Graham up on that pledge. When another Protestant weekly, the Christian Herald, published an editorial against Nixon’s Vietnam policy, Nixon asked Graham to find out who had specifically written the editorial. While Graham reported back to Nixon that it was “liberal thinking” David Poling who had penned the piece, he told the President not to worry about the editorial: “It definitely could not have any kind of impact on American Protestant thinking at the present time. CT is well-known as the most influential Protestant news journal and it consistently takes stands opposite to those of the Christian Herald.” Publicly however, Graham made it clear that, as a registered Democrat and as a pastor who had preached to presidents from both parties, his goal was to be a spiritual and not a political advisor to the presidents he associated with, helping them, first, to be better Christians and,
hopefully, in turn, to be better leaders. *Christianity Today* mimicked Graham’s support of Nixon, even throughout the Watergate scandal, insisting that Nixon’s Christianity would have prevented him from engaging in unjust actions.

Graham himself often came to his own defense against accusations that he was too politically engaged. In 1970, Graham directly answered the suggestion that he was a “chaplain to the establishment” and only preached “those things that tend to support the status quo.” Graham countered that he gave sound and critical advice to politicians that sought his council: “If I told them in public what I tell them in private, they would never listen to me again – in public or in private.” Most importantly, Graham felt that his ministries with presidents provided him the “opportunity of exerting a moral influence on them.” As the greatest beneficiary of Graham’s “moral influence,” Graham saw President Nixon as a great moral leader, a man whose vision was so Christian that he even surpassed Graham himself in his spiritual acumen. In 1971, at a celebration of Graham’s ministry in Charlotte, North Carolina, Nixon himself called Graham “one of the giants of our time” and “truly a man of God.” Graham in turn commended Nixon for his moral sensitivity, recalling a time when he made a suggestion to the President only to have it rejected by Nixon, whom he quoted as saying, “That wouldn’t be morally right.”

It was Graham’s high esteem of Nixon that led *Christianity Today* to remain fiercely loyal to Nixon throughout the Watergate scandal, accepting “at face value the claim of the President that he was not personally involved” and believing the President was among the lone beacons of virtue in a sea “of the permissiveness, corruption, and crime permeating much of American life.” Only after Watergate began to create political casualties did Graham distance himself from Nixon. In an interview that was *Christianity Today’s* cover story in January 1974, Graham declared his political independence: “I am no Nathan…I go to the White House to preach the Gospel and that my preaching visits have absolutely nothing to do with the current political situation. It is quite obvious that I do not agree with everything the Nixon administration says.”

Even after the President resigned and his direct involvement in the scandal became clear, *Christianity Today* laid no blame for Watergate on the President, refusing to call Watergate a “scandal” but merely a “situation” that moved “inexorably to a climax” beyond the President’s control and, one would assume, beyond his responsibility. Instead of being critical of the President, *Christianity Today* reminded its readers of Nixon’s foreign policy successes including his “rapprochement with Red China and the Soviet Union” which changed “the face of the global struggle with communism...The new direction in American foreign policy and the political realignments wrought
more profound changes than have yet been realized by the citizenry; the effects are still to be fully understood.”

Graham’s undying dedication to Nixon provides a stark contrast to Niebuhr’s relationships with presidential administrations. For the most part, Niebuhr chose to remain independent of direct involvement with presidential politics, choosing instead to shout his criticism or praise from outside the gates of power. Even when Niebuhr did venture into more direct contact, he continued his critical posture, chary about political motives and their effects on the cause of justice. For several presidents – none more than Nixon – Graham became a White House insider and on occasion, a White House operative, hoping to influence the most powerful men in the world to enact just and moral policies.

**Conclusion**

If we were to compare Graham’s and Niebuhr’s lasting places in America’s religious and political imagination, there is no doubt that Graham’s legacy outshines that of Niebuhr or for that matter any other twentieth century Protestant leader. For example, *Christianity Today* remains the most widely circulated Protestant news magazine in the English language, read frequently by most evangelical pastors and seminarians as well as many laypeople. Though he officially retired in 2005 after more than 60 years of ministry, Billy Graham is still one of the most admired Protestant leaders in America. Graham remains a campaign stop for many presidential hopefuls of both major parties; winning his support continues to signal to the millions of evangelical American voters that a candidate meets certain Christian moral standards. After fifty years of publication, on the other hand, *Christianity and Crisis* produced its last edition in 1993 citing diminishing subscription revenues and increased cost of production. Outside of liberal seminaries and religious studies and political science graduate programs, Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian whose likeness graced the cover of *Time* magazine in May 1948, is no longer a recognizable figure on the popular American religious or political stage.

Like his favorite prophet Amos, Niebuhr was well aware that his unmitigated criticism of both complacent liberal Protestant leaders and power-hungry politicians would not win him many friends, and in fact lost him more than a few. Yet, as Niebuhr wrote in reference to his fallout with C.C. Morrison over his criticism of Christian pacifism:

“[There is] something more transcendent than friendship...namely the spirit of forgiveness in the ‘body of Christ’ which exists at least for fleeting moments when self-righteous combatants cease to be self-righ-
teous and stand under a common divine judgment and know themselves in need of a common divine mercy.\textsuperscript{74}

If we reject popular staying-power as a valid criterion for evaluating the importance of these two leaders and instead turn to who historically has more effectively promoted the cause of justice, Graham appears as a naïve or unwitting collaborator in the maintenance of the status quo while Niebuhr shines as an exemplar for a politico-religious prophecy. Graham’s undying faith in personal religious conversion to change society might well have slowed advancements in civil rights and American race relations as well as prolonged America’s engagement in Vietnam. Indeed, Graham’s belief in a correlation between a politician’s individual morality and the implementation of just policies has been proven wrong, both under the Nixon administration and, it seems once again, under the current Bush administration. As much as Graham failed to support what history has deemed the just cause, Niebuhr’s early and vocal support of civil rights and denunciation of the Vietnam War, not to mention his support for American intervention in World War II, should be remembered as at least prophetic, if not influential on the course of history itself.

Nevertheless, Niebuhr’s influence might well be welcomingly resurgent as Americans prepare to choose a new president. In a recent \textit{New York Times} interview, presidential hopeful Barack Obama cited Reinhold Niebuhr as one of his favorite philosophers. From his reading of Niebuhr, Obama said:

I take away...the compelling idea that there’s serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away ... the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.\textsuperscript{75}

\textbf{Notes}


2 Ibid., 196.


4 Ibid., 210-11.

5 Ibid., 212.
Both *Christianity and Crisis* and *Christianity Today* were being published and both Niebuhr and Graham were active in the oversight of the publications during the period between 1955 and 1971.

Fox, 191. In 1939, 1900 ministers signed the following declaration of support of the pacifist group, the Fellowship of Reconciliation: “We proclaim to a world which is once again madly preparing for war that the gospel of God as revealed in Jesus Christ leaves us with no other choice but to refuse to sanction or participate in war. . . . We affirm our faith that the mission of the church today is to witness with singleness of heart, at whatever cost, to the power of good to overcome evil, of love to conquer hatred, of the Cross to shatter the sword.””100,” *Time Magazine*, March 20, 1939.
23 *Personalia*, 39.

24 In his biography of Graham, Martin tells how Graham considered moving all of BGEA’s offices to Washington. “He thought it would be impressive to tell his radio listeners to write to ‘Billy Graham, Washington D.C. That’s all the address you need.” Martin, 212-13.


28 Ibid., 1.

29 “Grace Amid Judgment,” 1.


33 Cowan and Tillich, 198.

34 Niebuhr, *The Mounting Racial Crisis; Cowan and Tillich*, 201.


37 Martin, 202.

38 Ibid., 169. Before the passage of Brown v. Board of Education, Graham most often did not fight to integrate his own revivals in southern communities. Preferring instead to follow local custom, Graham believed his duty was to promote a change in individuals who, once converted would live by Jesus’ example and enact social change in their communities. On occasion, Graham did however act in defiance of segregation. In March 1953 at his Chattanooga crusade, Graham himself removed the ropes marking the city government’s mandated segregated sections at the crusade tabernacle.


40 Ibid., 6.

42 Ibid., 25.


45 Despite petitions to do so from Protestant leaders like Niebuhr, Graham never took a position on either the civil rights or voting rights bills. *Christianity Today* only went so far as to print an article entitled “Civil Rights—Pro and Con”, which was a series of quotes presenting opposing positions on the bill held by leading politicians and journalists. “Pro and Con,” *Christianity Today*, April 24, 1964, 47; Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story*, 313.

46 In particular the editorial praised James Reeb, the Unitarian minister from Boston who was killed by a White mob in Selma. Interestingly, while *Christianity and Crisis* made a point of placing Jimmy Lee Jackson, the black man whose shooting death ignited the Selma protest, with Reeb as victims of Southern racist violence, *Christianity Today* does not mention Jackson in its own editorial about Selma. “Flood Tide in Selma,” *Christianity Today*, March 26, 1965, 27.


49 Cowan and Tillich, 67-68.


52 Kucharsky, 56.

53 Ibid., 56.


55 Ibid., 32. The Munich agreement was the October 1938 pact among the European powers regarding the control of the Sudetenland in which France and England agreed to not challenge Nazi Germany’s annexation of Sudentland and de facto control over Czechoslovakia in exchanged for Germany’s promise to seek its territorial expansion. In March 1939, Nazi armies seized the rest of Czechoslovakia, breaking the agreement signed just months before.


57 Kucharsky, 56.


61 Niebuhr quotes Amos 5:21, 23-4, passages that both King and Niebuhr cited as among their favorites. Ibid., 211; Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography, x.


63 Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography, 289.

64 Martin, 392.

65 Ibid., 368.

66 We could of course examine Graham’s cozy relationship with several US presidents, not the least being our current president, George W. Bush. See note 16.


71 Christianity Today is the flagship periodical of Christianity Today International (CTI), which includes twelve publications. CTI claims to reach 2.5 million readers. Paul D. Robbins, “Celebrating 50 Years of God’s Faithfulness,” Christianity Today International (2007).

72 Graham finished seventh on the Gallop's most admired people of the century; Pope John Paul II was eighth. “Greatest of the Century,” Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll, Dec. 20-21, 1999.

73 It is worth noting that Niebuhr’s widow, Ursula, demanded that her late husband’s name be removed from the Christianity and Crisis’ masthead in 1972, citing the journal’s growing “anti-Israel animus.” “Analyzing C &C,” Christian Century, November 17, 1999.

74 Fox, 196.

Discussions of sex, sexuality, and genitalia, particularly in relation to scripture, are often dodged or explained away in an effort to make a passage more palatable. The eunuch saying in Matthew 19:12 is no exception. The pericope “For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” can consternate readers and its interpretation has usually been either avoided or highly contested. From the earliest church Fathers to modern commentators, interpreters have offered explanations that completely sidestep the realities of impotence and castration reflected in the pericope, instead offering substitutions for problematic terms. In stark contrast to this side-stepping, both literal and metaphorical interpretations have been suggested, again from the early church to the present; among these are examples of self-castration as well as exegetical efforts that engage head-on with the complex historical, physical and social realities bound up in the term ‘eunuch.’ A potentially shock-
ing and revelatory statement put on the lips of Jesus, this passage offers an opportunity to explore assumptions about sex, gender, patriarchal households and social hierarchies.

I will begin by establishing some common definitions and will then look at the textual setting of the pericope: its language, context and form. Following this exposition, I will unpack the traditional interpretation of this passage as an exultation of celibacy and the renunciation of marriage. These interpretations will be problematized, taking into account broader themes of renunciation. With both the historical setting and the traditional interpretations in mind, I will then argue that the eunuchs in Matthew 19:12 serve as a metaphor that destabilizes sex and gender in a way that challenges and radically disrupts patriarchal and hetero-normative conceptions of assigned sex and gender roles.

In academic discourse, the terms gender, sex, sexuality and gender identity have taken on a variety of meanings and definitions. It is necessary, therefore, to define how these terms will be used in this paper. This is increasingly important as discussion of eunuchs cuts across several categories at once. This paper will make use of the definitions put forth by Mary Hawkesworth, though others have suggested and utilized these same definitions. The term “sex” will be used to denote biological sex, meaning chromosomes, hormones, genitalia and other physical, biological determinants. This refers to the body and the body only. Sex alone, as defined, has no bearing on what it means to be or act masculine or feminine. In addition, “gender identity,” is one’s feeling of being a man or a woman, “gender roles” are culture-specific expectations, and “gender role identity” is the extent to which a person approves of and participates in things deemed gender appropriate. These three separate definitions will all be implied in this paper’s use of the word “gender” to refer to the incorporation and expression of traits deemed masculine and feminine. Gender, in this layered definition, is not dependent on an individual’s sex. In addition to Hawkesworth’s definitions, this paper will use “sexuality” to denote the experience of humans as sexual beings with desire who may also engage in sexual intercourse.

There are numerous assumptions about sexuality and gender that are inherent in the traditional celibacy reading of the text. In order to adequately address these assumptions, an additional concept, as articulated by Hawkesworth, is useful. She posits a “natural attitude” about gender that has proved dominant over other alternatives. This “natural attitude” argues for two and only two genders that are invariant and inflexible, sex as determinant of gender, male/female dichotomy as natural, masculine or feminine as naturally assigned without choice, and that each individual must be classifiable as one or the other with deviation being seen as either comical or pathological. Implicit in these
assumptions is the assumption that heterosexuality is the only valid expression of sexuality. In addressing both the traditional celibacy interpretation and the metaphor for transgressive gender, the reader must be aware of this natural attitude and its tendency to devalue anything that does not fit into its schema.

Matthew 19:12 comes after a direct discussion about marriage in 19:3-9 and before discussion of children in 19:13-15. Verses ten to eleven can be seen as an expression of exasperation over the teaching, followed by an explanatory rejoinder, but it is not clear how to logically connect verse twelve.⁵ In the larger context, Matthew follows Mark for a good portion. Mt 19:3-9 follows Mk 10:2-12 with only a slight reordering about where in the conversation the reference to Moses appears. Luke 16:18 also parallels Mt 19:9 and Mk 10:18, each with slight variations in what constitutes adultery after divorce. It is at this point that the transition to the eunuch saying takes place in Matthew and in no other canonical Gospel. Following it, Matthew rejoins the account in Mark (10:13-16) with the blessing of the children, also paralleled in Luke 18:15-17.⁶ So, here, Matthew inserts a saying found neither in Mark nor in Luke. This passage may have possibly been found in Q and omitted from Luke, have come from another source, or may be a Matthaean creation. Circling in tighter, verse eleven and the final portion of twelve (He who is able to receive this, let him receive it), frame the eunuch saying, and appear to come from an editorial hand.⁷ The saying itself is then contained in verse twelve a-c, which may have been an independent pre-Matthaean saying that may have originated with the historical Jesus.⁸ Many attribute it to Jesus “because of the violent nature of the image, the Semitic structure of the declaration and the novelty of the proposal.”⁹ Because of this, some attention must be paid to both what the saying may mean on its own and what it means in the context in which Matthew places it.

In the saying itself, Jesus names three classes of eunuchs: those born eunuchs, those made eunuchs by others, and those that have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. These distinctions make use of a common Jewish division: the eunuchs born eunuchs correspond to the rabbinic “eunuchs of the sun” while those made eunuchs by men correspond to the rabbinic “eunuchs of men.”¹⁰ It is the meaning and identity of the third group that is the subject of debate. The Greek word translated as eunuch appears in the New Testament only in Mt 19:12 and Acts 8:27,¹¹ where it references a particular person. The Hebrew word usually translated as eunuch is saris, which is used to describe the two categories mentioned above.¹² Eunuchs appear in the Hebrew Scriptures in Deuteronomy 23:1 where they are excluded from the assembly and in Isaiah 56:3-5 where eunuchs that keep the Sabbath will be given an everlasting
name. So, in one instance, in the law, barriers are being put up that exclude eunuchs, while in Isaiah, there is a promise made that eventually those barriers would come down.

The traditional interpretation of this passage holds the third group of eunuchs to be referring to those who opt for celibacy. This ties the saying back to Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce, a connection made by Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria. This interpretation argues that it cannot “be denied that Jesus’ eunuch saying was primarily understood in a figurative sense of those who were able to remain continent in singleness.” A eunuch, then, whether from birth, made by man, or voluntarily celibate, is someone incapable of marriage. The metaphorical eunuch’s renunciation of marriage was in order to devote themselves “more fully to the urgent demands of the kingdom.” Tied to this, in the context of the larger teaching on marriage and divorce, the eunuch saying may also be positing that living like a eunuch is an “expression of fidelity” to a marriage, even after it has ended, with the acknowledgement that society will not deem this fidelity acceptable. Some suggest that Jesus’ use of the term eunuch is a response to it being used as a derogatory term toward him and his followers who were without wives. The saying, on the lips of Jesus, then becomes about the purpose and function of Jesus’ own celibate life, while in Matthew’s gospel it may serve as a comment on the marriage difficulties of the newly-arrived Gentile converts. Expanding from a renunciation of marriage and voluntary celibacy, the interpretation holds eunuchs to be a metaphor for training of the will and discipline. Clement of Alexandria applied it in a broad sense to discipline of one’s whole life and conduct. The eunuch is “an example of what one should be prepared to do for the Kingdom” and is “about moral conduct and the degree of renunciation demanded for the sake of the Kingdom.” This may have been an attempt on Clement’s part to completely remove any sexual significance or physical implication from the metaphor, given how it had been taken up by “Gnostics.” Both the celibacy interpretation and the expansion to an idea of larger renunciation see the third class of eunuch as a spiritual metaphor that extols the need to sacrifice for the kingdom. To be a eunuch is to have the willpower required for total dedication to God and a renunciation of all lesser ideals; for the metaphorical eunuch, the demands of the kingdom override any attachment.

There are several problems with the traditional interpretation as it has been outlined thus far. First, it partially relies on “eunuch” being a term that could evoke feelings of trustworthiness and asceticism. There is no evidence of self-castration as a metaphor for celibacy. This metaphor has been anachronisti-
cally read back onto the text. Further, the general view of eunuchs in antiquity was not of celibate or chaste individuals, rather:

eunuchs were not celibate. Indeed, they were not even viewed as chaste. In fact, eunuchs were universally characterized by the frequency, ease and adeptness with which they performed sex acts with both men and women.28

This certainly calls into question the interpretation of eunuch as a metaphor for celibacy. A closer look at the associations with the word “eunuch” suggests that this pericope challenges patriarchal constructions of society and values transgression.

Eunuchs were not just impotent. They were recognizable. In literature they were described as “neither man nor woman, but something composite, hybrid and monstrous, alien to human nature.”29 They were described as soft, effeminate, passive, submissive, immodest, weak, impotent and sexually available.30 They were termed half-women and pretty things, with contempt.31 This was not a holy or ascetic state.

In some cases the eunuch priest was described as a man who had deliberately made himself into a woman, taking on all of the negative implications that were attached to a woman’s body in antiquity.32

In other instances, the eunuch was below woman and was neither gender, combining “the most disagreeable aspects of both male and female.”33 The eunuch’s gender, then, was ambiguous, and not attached to his birth sex. While physically he was a castrated male, the eunuch’s gender was a function of appearance, behavior and social construction. In a system where male superiority, masculine superiority, is an essential part of societal structures, this ambiguous gender identity posed a problem for the eunuch. He was stigmatized and placed on the social margins, as he had given up the opportunity to participate in the social privileges of masculinity.

The man who voluntarily gave up these advantages was a low creature, despised as an individual who had deliberately forgone the rights and privileges associated with the possession of a male body. Moreover, the eunuch priest’s asexual condition kept him from filling the gender role of either a man or a woman, a circumstance which separated him from the legal and social privileges deriving from citizenship and from membership in a family.34
These eunuchs were known throughout the Mediterranean world and may have also been located in Samaria, so there is little reason to think Jesus and other Jews would not have known of the eunuchs there. If the author of Matthew really wanted to convey a message of celibacy, there are numerous words he could have chosen that would have conveyed that message, rather than a word that brought to mind images of questionable sexual practices and people excluded from the assembly by Jewish law in Deut 23:1. Given these associations with the word “eunuch,” careful consideration of the constructions of gender and sex in the time period will help illumine the numerous boundaries that eunuchs transgressed.

It is almost automatic to assume male superiority in the political and household systems as control was given to the emperor, the lord, the master, the father and the husband over both male and female subordinates and subjugated peoples. Established gender roles legitimized and sustained male superiority while also being the standard against which everyone would be judged. In this way, the male body became the symbol of the culture’s masculine ideals: “power and privilege to those born with testicles.” These distinctions began to break down, however, when men failed to fulfill their virtues or when women attained high social status. Sex and gender come together here, but also diverge very strongly. Masculinity was measured more by social status than by biological difference. While gender roles and norms may have been assigned by sex, social status could shift someone’s gender:

> Women did attain power over some men and would ironically become more masculine than these males based on the very kyriocentric symbolic gender constructions that were intended to subordinate females simply by their physiognomy.

How one had sex was, too, part of this structure. “To be a penetrative male was to exercise dominance” as possession of a penis and testicles was essential to being moral and virtuous; those without them naturally suffered from moral weakness and those penetrated were socially inferior. In that system, women, slaves of either sex, and boys were second-class. Eunuchs, both testicle-less and the submissive, penetrated partner, were even more so, since they had lost or given up the masculinity they had.

These understandings of gender and connotations of the word “eunuch” raise questions as to how a reading of the eunuch as a celibate exemplar was derived. What seems implicit in the traditional interpretation is the “natural attitude” posited by Hawkesworth. Seeing the eunuch as celibate requires
equating the inability to procreate with the inability to have sex, or in other words, the assumption that sex is solely procreativity.\textsuperscript{43}

The modern interpretation of this verse depends on seeing the eunuch from the perspective of a heterosexual imperative that defines the individual not only in terms of certain relations he or she has to others (only men and women have sex), but also in terms of specific sexual performances with others (only the penetrative act of a penis in a vagina is understood as sex).\textsuperscript{44}

Given all that has been previously discussed regarding the potentially unsavory connotations attached to the term eunuch, seeing the eunuch as incapable of procreative penetration as meaning incapable of sex is the only way to hold to a celibacy interpretation of the text. This interpretation has undermined and suppressed the power and radical nature of the text.

First, the saying must be taken alone, as it is a distinct saying apart from the rest of Matthew. The use of the word eunuch “would have played sharply upon the male image in an urban situation. The espousal of such a deviant condition could well suggest a social challenge.”\textsuperscript{45} It would shock the primary hearers and invite them to rethink their own existence. It may have functioned as an aphorism, “throwing down the gauntlet to the prevailing cultural patterns and sexual assumptions.”\textsuperscript{46} The use of such a loaded term is dramatic and attention-grabbing on its own. Elevating the “condition” to something undertaken because of or for the sake of the kingdom of heaven makes it even more so. What assumptions, then, are being challenged and what are the hearers called to do in response?

By exalting the eunuchs, Jesus challenges the dominant phallocentrism of patriarchy. The prohibition of castration stemmed from a revulsion at the loss of male privilege and the threat of gender confusion.\textsuperscript{47} The ambiguous gender of eunuchs transcended roles assigned by sex in ways that shocked the dominant system and resulted in their being ridiculed and demeaned. The eunuch stands outside binary sex and gender paradigms, opening a space to defy those norms. In Matthew 19:12, patriarchal power is to be given up in a metaphorical castration for the sake of the kingdom since the testicles were a bodily sign of power and superiority. The saying suggests “that sex-gender transgression is a biblically sanctioned identity practice.”\textsuperscript{48} The transgressive body of the eunuch opens the space in which the kingdom may enter: it assumes a kingdom free from patriarchal, heterosexist norms that oppress and limit. As eunuchs often symbolized shame, the saying calls men to “refuse to play [the] Mediterranean machismo game”\textsuperscript{49} that upheld male power that legitimatized hierarchy at the
expense of equality. The eunuch leads a boundary-blurring, subversive existence\textsuperscript{50} and the saying calls those that hear it to do the same in society.

It is also important to consider the function of the passage as it relates to the teachings that surround it. One must wonder if this reference to eunuchs is meant to remind Matthew’s Jewish-Christian audience of the passages in Deuteronomy and Isaiah. Is this another “you have heard it said, but I say” teaching, only indirectly that references previous understandings and then overrides them? Or does Jesus’ statement, with its varied meanings, serve to fulfill the promise in Isaiah that one day the eunuch would be brought into the Lord’s house? These possible interpretations must certainly be considered, as only Matthew includes the saying.

However, the saying, in conjunction with the discussion of marriage and divorce that precedes it has an immediate impact on the lives of those being addressed. The saying, on its own, calls for the elimination of patriarchal gender norms in the society. Paired with the teaching on marriage and divorce, the eunuch saying calls not for celibacy or fidelity, but rather for an elimination of hierarchy from the household. Again, in a symbolic castration, Jesus’ disciples were to give up male privilege and operate under a new definition of being male.\textsuperscript{51} Making eunuchs of all men, the saying, as placed in Matthew, “deprived them of the authority requisite to maintain their patriarchal position and keep their households in subjection.”\textsuperscript{52}

Looking at the saying on its own and then in conjunction with the nearby teaching in Matthew, one can see how the gender norms established by society, based on sex, class and sexual activity, are broken apart as the eunuch – an individual who transgresses gender norms – is elevated as a model. In The Manly Eunuch, Mathew Kuefler interprets Tertullian as seeming to imply “that Christian men must rid themselves of masculine status and identity” which was in line with the idea that sexual difference would be erased in the world to come.\textsuperscript{53} That seems to be the thrust of the passage. Gender distinctions and norms based on sex are radically disrupted, courtesy of the transgressive eunuch, and so people can “relate to one another as from the beginning” in a relationship of equality patterned after Genesis 1:27.\textsuperscript{54}

This passage, though easy to overlook, is of great importance today. The valuation of such a transgressive group of individuals, socially outcast because of their sexual physiology, gender expression and sexual practice, provide a striking parallel to transgender movements today. In the text, eunuchs break apart assumptions about gender and are used to call the hearers into a community of equals. Today, transgender individuals offer similar challenges to rigid gender structures and provoke many of the same anxieties that the eunuchs
posed. Understanding this text as a breaking of dominant modes of oppression based on gender opens a space for transgender inclusion in the church and another rethinking of what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom. This small pericope can facilitate a liberating moment where patriarchal and heterosexist norms are again broken for an elevation of transgressive gender.

Matthew 19:12 destabilizes gender categories determined by sex, class and sexual practice, calling the hearers into a new type of being that rejects machismo, patriarchy and power. The traditional interpretation misses the subversive call to a new type of discipleship and falls flat in the face of the myriad of associations that would have accompanied the term eunuch. With radically liberating words placed on the lips of Jesus, Matthew 19:12 opens up a space in-between sexual and gender differences where the kingdom can break in and equality is present.

Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 649.
6 Parallels derived from Synopsis of the Four Gospels, in English edited by Kurt Aland, 216.
7 Ibid., 114.
8 Ibid., 114, 201.
13 Ibid., 6, 8.

15 Ibid., 83.


19 Luz, 502.


21 Heth, 86.

22 Harvey, 13.


24 Heth, 86.

25 Harvey, 13-14.

26 Albright and Mann, 227; Harvey, 7.

27 Harvey, 9.


29 Lucian’s “The Eunuch,” quoted in Harvey, 7.

30 Hester, 21-2.


32 Ibid., 542

33 Ibid., 547.

34 Ibid., 555.

35 Harvey, A.E., 8.


38 Ibid., 23
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 54.
41 Hester, 18-9.
42 Ibid., 19.
43 Ibid., 17.
44 Ibid.
45 Dewey, 118.
46 Ibid., 121.
47 Hester, 28.
48 Ibid., 37.
49 Talbott, 41.


51 Talbott, 40.


53 Kuefler, 259.

54 Talbott, 42.
Models and the World of Thought: An Essay on Zoroastrianism’s Other Dualism

Matt C. Paulson

Introduction

It is a testament to the enigmatic character of Zoroastrianism that, although it is the oldest of the “revealed” religions,¹ and although in the course of its lengthy history it has come into contact with the intellectual and spiritual forces of Judaism, Hellenistic philosophy, Christianity, and Islam – not to mention the great traditions of the far East – it has yet to give rise to a great intellectual synthesis of its doctrines. One looks in vain in its history for something comparable to a Philo of Alexandria, Augustine of Hippo, Moses Maimonides, Averroes or Thomas Aquinas. If anything, the apologetic efforts of the sixteen chapters of Mardanfarrokh-I Ohrmazddad’s ninth-century Shkand-gumanig Vizar (“Doubt-dispelling Exposition”),² for all of their rigorous logic, underwhelm; one is left with the feeling that the scriptures of Zoroastrianism, as bristling with potential for a creative intellectual harvest as they appear to be, have failed to be exploited.
However, there is at least one aspect of Zoroastrianism that has not failed to grasp the attention of those outside its fold, namely its startlingly straightforward affirmation of dualism, i.e., the affirmation that the principles of goodness (personified in Ohrmazd) and evil (personified in Ahriman) are coeval. Yet, as remarkable as this axiological dualism is, there is another, far less commonly known dualism that lies at the heart of Zoroastrianism – a metaphysical dualism, which affirms in no uncertain terms that the physical world has as its ultimate ground, and partly mirrors, a non-physical, intellectual world, referred to in the following as the “two-levels thesis.” The present essay will explore this dualism as it is presented in the scriptures of Zoroastrianism, providing one possible point of departure from which Zoroastrianism may be studied according to its specifically philosophical and metaphysical dimensions.

What follows will be divided into three sections. In the first section, I will present the Zoroastrian doctrine of “models” (ratu) according to perhaps its five most remarkable and religiously significant aspects: the antiquity of the affirmation of the two-levels thesis; the cosmological significance of the models; the models as hypostases; the axiological significance of the models; and the ritual and eschatological significance of the models. In the second section, I will summarize the two-levels thesis as it is presented in the Platonic corpus, focusing on the ontological, epistemic, axiological and cosmological significance of the Forms, following which a brief comparison with Zoroastrianism shall be offered. In the third section, I will summarize and present the two-levels thesis as it has been variously affirmed and expounded within the Christian tradition, following which a brief comparison with Zoroastrianism shall again be offered. By way of conclusion, I shall argue that Zoroastrianism’s unambiguous affirmation of the two-levels thesis proves that it has held one of the most revered and longstanding doctrines in the history Western intellectual culture, and that, for this reason, its capacity for future development with regard to its metaphysical and philosophical implications should be uniquely promising.

The Two-Levels Thesis in Zoroastrianism

A brief summary of the two-levels thesis

Nearly every culture has affirmed at some point in its history that the visible and tangible does not exhaust reality – that there is, “behind,” “above,” or “within” that which can be experienced by the senses, an “invisible,” “spiritual” realm. In addition to this basic and widespread supernaturalism, a select few intellectual movements and religious traditions have affirmed a more detailed conception of the relationship between the visible and invisible, according to
which physical and mundane realities have as their counterparts intellectual or spiritual realities which determine, mirror or serve as the exemplars of them. In other words, according to this conception of reality, it is not simply the case that “behind” the veil of corporeality there is a numinous realm of significance which evades the senses; rather, the metaphysical contour of reality is such that every reality has a two-fold ontological constitution, with the intellectual or spiritual realm somehow grounding the material and physical. In what follows, this conception of reality shall be referred to as the two-levels thesis.³

Yasna 28: The Two Realms

While Greek philosophy had to wait until Plato in the early-fourth century B.C.E for an explicit, rigorously articulated two-levels thesis, and Christianity (following Philo) had to wait until Clement and Origen of Alexandria in the late-second and early-third centuries C.E., the affirmation of this doctrine by Zoroastrianism appears to be as old as the religion itself, and it makes its first appearance in the Gathas of the Old Avesta.⁴ In Y. 28:2, 9, is the following –

I [i.e., Zarathustra, the archetypal poet-sacrificer] who want to circumambulate you all, O Mazda Ahura, with my good thought for you to give to me the spoils of both existences, both that which has bones and that which is of thought, in accordance with Order [. . .] those whom you [= Ohrmazd] know to be, from the point of view of Order and good thought, following the established rules, and so according to the models— I shall fill for them, O Mazda, O Ahura, with attainments their wish.⁵

Three things stand out in this passage and are of immediate significance for explicating the two-levels thesis. First, the poet-sacrificer explicitly identifies two levels of reality, the first being that of “bones” (i.e., earthly, fleshly reality, frequently referred to as the “world of the living”), and the second, that of “thought” (i.e., non-physical, intellectual reality).⁶ For this reason, Zoroastrianism can be seen as “characterized by a double duality”, not only “between the original good and evil principles,” but also “between the ‘created’ worlds of thought and living beings.”⁷ Second, the text implies that there is a strong correlation between the world of thought and axiology, i.e., goodness and aesthetic coherence. While there may be imperfections and badness in the “world of bones,” the constellation of models in the “world of thought” is characterized by “Order.”⁸ And, third, and closely related to the preceding point, there is the mention of “models” (ratus), which implies that the imperfect earthly realities which constitute this world have as their counterparts perfect and unchanging
archetypes in the “world of thought,” i.e., subsistent models of how we and our world ought to be, according to the creative purposes of Ohrmazd.

Thus, from the outset, the theological vision of Zoroastrianism embraced an explicitly metaphysical (and not merely axiological) dualism. “Created” reality has a two-fold constitution, being comprised of the spatio-temporal physical realm on the one hand, and the noetic and “ideal” realm on the other.

**Bundahishn 1: The models of the corporeal creation**

Above, we saw that Zoroastrianism’s “world of thought” in some sense grounds its “world of bones.” This conception is more clearly set forth in Bdh. 1:33, 53, 58-59:

> First I shall discuss the creation of the creatures in the world of thought, then in the world of the living. . . . Through the Amahraspands, Ohrmazd obtained parts, when he had established . . . Models, whom he needed to forward the world of the living. . . . And he maintained the world of thought in the world of thought. And he established the world of the living in the world of thought, and then he passed it on to the world of the living. . . . Of the creation of the world of the living in the world of thought, first six, the seventh was he himself. For Ohrmazd belongs to both creations in the world of thought. . . . Ohrmazd nurtured his creation in the world of thought . . . in the world of the living, they are formed in the womb of the mother and born and nurtured . . . And by the establishment of the creation Ohrmazd is father and mother of the creation, for when he nurtured the creation in the world of thought, that was being its mother, when he put it into the world of the living, that was being its father.

This passage demonstrates three aspects of the Zoroastrian concept of creation relevant to the present essay. First, we see here that the “world of thought” chronologically precedes the “world of the living,” or physical reality. Second, the “world of thought” also has ontological precedence over the “world of the living,” whereas Ohrmazd was able to “maintain” the “world of thought” in the “world of thought,” the “world of the living” in some sense needs – is contingent upon – the “world of thought.” And, third, although the “world of thought” is without question the ground of the “world of the living,” with the former containing the principles of the latter, the ontological status of the two appears to be equal – Ohrmazd “belongs to” both aspects of reality, and he is just as much “father” of the first as he is “mother” of the second. In other words, we do not here find a dualism which is – as in the Platonic legacy – fiercely punctuated with regard to the ontological worth of the two realms, such that the physical
is regarded as a lesser realization of being than the spiritual and noetic; rather, the ontological "reality" of both realms is explicitly affirmed.

Thus, Zoroastrianism’s metaphysical dualism envisions a definite differentiation within the constitution of reality (the intellectual realm is distinct from and actually precedes the physical realm) while nonetheless maintaining a certain ontological equality between the two realms of creation.\(^\text{15}\)

\textit{Yasht 13: The models as hypostases}

Zoroastrianism’s two-levels thesis also tended to hypostatize the models, to identify a \textit{personal} being as the archetype of an earthly reality.\(^\text{16}\) We have already seen one example of this in the case of the Avestan Life-giving Immortals, who are not only divine beings, but, more still, \textit{models} for the “world of the living.”\(^\text{17}\) Perhaps the most telling example of such is to be found in the person of Zarathustra, the putative founder of Zoroastrianism. According to V. 2:43, Zarathustra (alongside \textit{Urwatat.nara}) is the “first life and model” of “all things in the bony world of the living”, and, in Yt. 13:152, we read –

We sacrifice to Zarathustra, the \textit{ahu}\(^\text{18}\) and \textit{ratu} \textit{[i.e., model]} of the entire bony existence, as the first guide, who gave the best gifts among (all) beings, who had provided the best command among (all) beings, who was the wealthiest among (all) beings . . . who was most worthy of sacrifice among (all) beings . . . the hero who, when sacrificed to, has (always) been said to be worthy of sacrifice and hymns . . . ‘according to Best Order.’\(^\text{19}\)

This passage demonstrates that while the tendency to hypostatize the models of the noetic realm – identifying them as divine beings, or personal divine entities who correspond to physical realities – may at first blush appear to be nothing more than an instancing of the primitive religious imagination operating as it were “unchecked” by the light of reason, the identification of Zarathustra – who was (at least conceived of as) an historical person – as a model sheds a rather different light on the matter. Here, we see realized in the physical world the “Ordered-ness” that characterizes the constellation of the models in the “world of thought” – Zarathustra as it were “contains” and “actualizes” in miniature the “patterns” according to which all things ought to be. Thus, this realization of \textit{ahu} in Zarathustra is exhibited in his good actions (“the first guide” who “gave the best gifts”) and words (“produced the best command”).\(^\text{20}\) And this realization of Ordered-ness in Zarathustra is testified to by what may be described as his \textit{fullness} (“the wealthiest among all beings”), a fullness which connotes fecundity (\textit{spenta}), strength (\textit{sawa}), and bountifulness (\textit{frasha}).
The Zoroastrian tendency to hypostatize the models should thus not be seen simply as a primitive, *ad hoc* multiplication of entities by the unlearned religious imagination. Rather, the “influence” appears to go both ways. Just as the ground of the physical world is to be found in the noetic, so too has the perfection of the noetic been realized and revealed in the physical.

**Yasht 19: The axiological significance of the models**

In the history of Western philosophy, the two-levels thesis has had two principal points of emphasis, the epistemic and the axiological, but while the Western tradition has often tended to focus its concentration upon the former, in Zoroastrianism, it is the latter that is the most significant. This significance is perhaps most clearly disclosed in the emphasis which Zoroastrianism places upon the notion of *Order*, which is mentioned so frequently in their scriptures. One of the most hallowed of all Zoroastrianism prayers is the praise of Order: “Order is the best good possession” there is. There are wished-for things in the wish for this one when one’s Order is for the best Order.”

At least two significant insights can be gleaned from this axiological emphasis. First, in contrast to contemporary Western intellectual culture’s widespread epistemic prizing of ‘fact’ over ‘value’ from the time of Galileo’s *The Assayer* (1623) onward (but, as we will see below, in accordance with the Platonic legacy), reality is understood primarily in terms of quality rather than quantity. In other words, the principal vantage point from which reality is to be beheld and understood is valuative, and both our moral actions and the physical world are to be adjudged according to their aesthetic coherence, or the degree to which they correspond to the pattern of Ohrmazd’s creative purposes. Second, as implied variously throughout the preceding, this pattern itself is identical with the constellation of the models, which subsist principally in the “world of thought,” but which have also been “incarnated” *in nuce* in Zarathustra.

**Yasna 1: The eschatological and ritual significance of the models**

Thus far, we have seen that Zoroastrianism embraces a conception of reality according to which there are two realms: the “world of thought” on the one hand, and the “world of bones” or “world of the living” on the other. We have seen also that the vantage point from which Zoroastrianism perceives reality is emphatically axiological, with the models constituting the “canon” as it were according to which one perceives how we and our world ought to be. It is at this point that the significance of Zoroastrian ritual – in which the poet sacrificer assists Ohrmazd in setting right and recreating the cosmos – declares itself
vis-à-vis the doctrine of models. Thus, in Y. 1: 1-4, 10, 19 the Yasna ritual is presented as follows –

I announce (them to you)! *I am assembling* (the sacrifice) to/of Ahura Mazda, *who has set* (everything in its proper place) . . . the one who . . . has set us in (our place), *who has fashioned us, who has structured us*, who is the most ’Life-giving' Spirit. I announce (them to you)! *I am assembling* (the sacrifice) *for (regenerating)* Good Thought, for Best Order, for Well-deserved Command, for Life-giving Humility, for Wholeness and Immortality, for the Fashioner of the Cow, the Soul of the Cow, for the Fire of Ahura Mazda, the one of the Life-giving Immortals who most often takes up his (ritual) position.24 I announce (them to you)! *I am assembling* (the sacrifice) for the *daily models of Order*; (firstly) for the Orderly Haoma-pressing Hour (Havani), a *model* of Order [. . .] *I am assembling* (the sacrifice) for Orderly Noon-time (Rapithvina), a *model* of Order [. . .] I announce (them to you)! *I am assembling* (the sacrifice) for all these models which are the *models of Order* [. . .] I announce (them to you)! *I am assembling* (the sacrifice) for all the ones worthy of sacrifice whose gifts are good, *both those in the world of thought and those in the world of the living* . . . according to the best Order.25

This passage neatly draws together the various aspects of Zoroastrianism’s two-levels thesis articulated in the preceding and discloses most vividly their religious significance. The recurrent mentioning of “assembling” indicates that the poet-sacrificer sees his prayer as being in some sense an imitation of the creative activity of Ohrmazd himself – the poet regathers the elements of the cosmos. We also see that, just as Ohrmazd created the “world of the living” via, and according to, the models in the “world of thought,” so too does the poet-sacrificer attempt a “microcosmic rebuilding of the cosmos” by invoking “all the elements of the ordered cosmos” according to “their divine models.”26 This invocation of the models is understood by the poet-sacrificer as an attempt “to place Ahura Mazda back in command and provide him with the elements needed to re-order the world”27; in other words, the Yasna ritual is understood as bringing about the renovation of the cosmos according to the models – as initiating the realization of how we and our “world of bones” ought to be.

Thus, while the two-levels thesis is indeed a rather curious intellectual affirmation, it is a good deal more than just that in Zoroastrianism. By postulating for this-worldly existence its vital significance and eschatological promise, the doctrine of the models both allows Zoroastrianism to attain to a coherent vision of reality and lies at the very heart of its ritual. To put the matter another way, while it is true that our world in its present condition is less than perfect, and while it is also true that we humans fail to realize our potential, Zoroas-
trianism’s affirmation of the two-levels thesis serves as a “bridge” of sorts that joins the hope that arises in this life with an ontological ground that assures the possibility of that hope’s realization. In what follows, we shall briefly explore the two-levels thesis as it appears in the Platonic corpus and Christian tradition, finding therein important points of similarity and contrast with the doctrine’s articulation in Zoroastrianism.

The Two-Levels Thesis in the Philosophy of Plato

Plato’s foremost philosophical contribution to Western intellectual culture has been his doctrine of Forms.\(^2^8\) Plato himself – who never wrote treatises, but, rather, chose to advance philosophical notions anonymously within fictional dialogues, leaving the reader uncertain as to what exactly Plato himself thought about the theses being advanced in his writings\(^2^9\) -- never offered a single treatise on the Forms which treated the matter in an exhaustive, sustained manner. Rather, he presents us with jewels of insight which vary in both length and degree, and which are not obviously able to be joined one with another in such a way as to attain to full coherence. Even so, in what follows, I shall attempt briefly to present Plato’s two-levels thesis – realized most especially in his doctrine of the Forms – according to what are perhaps its principal aspects.

The ontological and epistemic significance of the Forms

The significance of Plato’s doctrine of the Forms is first seen with regard to its epistemic and ontological implications, which are viewed in such close connection to one with another that it appears as though Plato affirmed the existence of the Forms because he saw such as the ontological prerequisite for the possibility of true knowledge.\(^3^0\) The epistemic significance of ontological Forms becomes apparent when we ask what something is, for example, What is a bed?\(^3^1\) Upon consideration of this question, we finally realize that, if our use of a single word to denote something which has many referents in the world is to be regarded as at all valid – in other words, if language is not to be regarded as without truly having the capacity to signify, and if knowledge is not to be regarded as an impossibility – then it must be the case that there is, ultimately, a single reality to which a given term refers, and by virtue of which the term attains its epistemic significance. Thus, with regard to the term ‘bed,’ we must postulate a non-physical, non-spatial, eternal and unchanging entity, viz., bed-ness – a bed-ness which infuses all physical beds with the reality of their character as beds while being identical with, and exhausted within, none of them – if our use of the single word is to be warranted.\(^3^2\)
Thus, according to Plato, the significance of the doctrine of Forms first declares itself with regard to ontology and epistemology. The Forms (ontology) are the precondition of the very possibility of knowledge (epistemology).

The axiological significance of the Forms

Yet, while the significance of Plato’s doctrine of the Forms first becomes apparent with regard to ontology and epistemology, there is good reason for believing that – in the eyes of Plato himself – the principal function of the Forms was to fight against ethical nihilism and provide a sure ground for axiology. In other words, for Plato, although the ontological reality of the Forms recommend themselves by virtue of their being a prerequisite of knowledge, this consideration – alongside the complications arising from positing the realm of the Forms on its behalf -- somewhat recedes into the background in light of the significance which the Forms have with regard to Beauty, and, most especially, Goodness. Thus, in the Symposium, it is Beauty, “itself by itself with itself” and “always in one form”, that lies at the summit of Diotima’s ladder, appearing before the soul “of a sudden” [exaiphnes], and allowing the soul’s eros to attain to fulfillment in accordance with moderation [sophrosunes] without running aground by the promptings of carnal desire. And, in the Republic, it is the Form of Goodness – “superior” even to “being” itself “in rank and power” -- that is suspended atop the Platonic universe as though a supernatural sun which invests all things with their final significance.

Thus, although contemporary philosophers and historians of philosophy tend to view Plato’s doctrine of the Forms according to its ontological and metaphysical implications, it must be recognized that – in the eyes of Plato himself – the axiological significance of the doctrine is equally crucial.

The cosmological significance of the Forms

Finally, it must be noted that, although Plato’s doctrine of Forms is most centrally concerned with axiology, ontology and epistemology, he nonetheless saw the Forms as bearing vital significance upon cosmology as well. In the myth of the Timaeus, for example, the master-craftsman (demiourgos) of the cosmos looked to “the eternal model” of the Forms in order that “our universe” might be “the most beautiful”; the establisher of the cosmos “wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible” – i.e., “wanted everything to be good and nothing to be bad” – so he “took over all that was visible [i.e., pre-existent matter]” and “brought it from a state of disorder to one of order” according to the Forms. For this reason, “the universe resembles more closely
than anything else that Living Thing of which all other living things are parts”, for “that Living Thing comprehends within itself all intelligible living things”. Thus we see that, according to Plato, the world experienced by the senses has, as the locus of its significance and its ultimate ground, the world of the Forms.

Comparison and conclusion

In Plato’s doctrine of the Forms, the most noteworthy points of similarity with Zoroastrianism’s two-levels thesis are the affirmations that the noetic realm has axiological and ontological precedence with regard to the world of the senses, and that, more still, with regard to cosmology, the world experienced by the senses in some sense images or reflects the noetic realm. However, there are at least four important differences between the two. First, whereas Plato’s doctrine of Forms plays a vital role with regard to the specifically philosophical issue of epistemology, they appear to have no comparable significance in Zoroastrianism’s doctrine of the models. Second, while Zoroastrianism was able to hypostatize the models, envisaging in the person of Zarathustra the confluence – in nuce – of is-ness with ought-ness, Plato’s philosophy in general, and doctrine of the Forms in particular, in no way welcomes the positing of the personal as the locus of ultimate significance. Third, while the central function of the models in Zoroastrianism is perhaps best seen with regard to their ritual and eschatological significance, the Forms of Plato – at least, insofar as we can tell, in his own eyes – offered nothing by way of comparison. Plato’s doctrine of the Forms, in other words, does not offer to its adherents an immediate mechanism whereby the Forms may be engaged so as to affect the renewal of the cosmos, such as one finds in the Yasna ritual of Zoroastrianism. And, fourth, unlike Zoroastrianism’s two-levels thesis, wherein there is an apparent ontological equality between the realities which comprise the “world of bones” and their models in the “world of thought,” according to Plato, the objects of sense experience have less reality – less “being” – than the Forms, and it is precisely for this reason that, in Plato’s philosophy, epistemology is able to be directly related to ontology.

The Two-Levels Thesis in the Christian Tradition

The Christological contour of all reality

While the two-levels thesis seems to be affirmed in Zoroastrianism chiefly according to its religious significance, and, in Platonism, according to its philosophical significance, the Christian tradition appears to offer a two-levels thesis which affords due significance to both these aspects. And, unsurprisingly, the
ultimate locus of the two-level’s thesis in the Christian tradition – as with
everything else – is the person of Jesus the Christ.

According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ – as the eternal Son of god
the Father – is “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning
and the end” of all things. As the logos of god, Christ has existed even from
“the beginning”, and it was he “through” whom “all things came into being,”
both “things in heaven and on earth”; more specifically, created reality was
“blessed” “in Christ” and “chosen” “before the foundation of the world [pro
kataboles kosmou]”; and, although the world has rebelled against god, with
creation “groaning,” and being in “labor pains” and “bondage to decay,” on the
cross, Christ has drawn all to himself, thereby “recapitulating” the whole of
reality, “reconciling” to god the Father “all things,” and realizing in himself –
through his resurrection – the principle according to which “all things” may be
made new.

In other words, according to Christianity, all reality has as its ultimate ref-
erence point Jesus the Christ, who, being the Son of god the Father, is not
only the source and term of all things, but, more still, the by and within which
all things are fully realized, for, although the world in its present condition is
“fallen,” there existed within Christ – before the foundation of the world – a
sort of “blueprint” of how we and our world ought to be.

The cosmological and philosophical significance of the archetypes

While the New Testament provides us with no explicit allusions to the Pla-
tonic legacy, the implications of its cosmic Christology were readily taken up
by those of its theologians with philosophical proclivities, who were familiar
with the Platonic doctrine of Forms. Augustine of Hippo in the late-fourth
and early-fifth century asserted the (ontological) realm of Forms to be the
precondition of knowledge. Before him, in the early-third century, Origen
of Alexandria united the cosmological significance of Plato’s doctrine of the
Forms with the New Testament’s Christological focus. Witness:

Wisdom [= Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of the Father], therefore,
must be believed to have been begotten beyond the limits of any begin-
ning that we can speak of or understand. And because in this very sub-
sistence of Wisdom there was implicit every capacity and form of the cre-
ation that was to be. . . Wisconsin, speaking through Solomon in regard
to these very created things that had been as it were outlined and prefig-
ured in herself, says that she was created a ‘beginning of the ways’ of
God, which means that she contains within herself both the beginnings
and causes and species of the whole creation.
Thus, in the Christian tradition, we see the Platonic doctrine of Forms as it were “wedded” to Christology, and this in such a way that the underlying principle of each is allowed to bear its influence upon the other. The Forms are posited as the unique ontological principle of both epistemology and cosmology, yet, at the same time, Christ – as the eternal Son of God – is posited as the ontological principle which grounds the Forms.

The soteriological significance of the logoi

The soteriological implications of Christianity’s (Christologically-informed) two-levels thesis were, in the patristic era, perhaps most rigorously developed by Maximus Confessor (580-662) in his *Ambiguum*, 7.60 In order to perceive how things truly exist “by nature,” one must turn one’s “questing eye with understanding towards the intelligible model (logos) according to which things have been made,”61 for “a logos preceded everything that receives its becoming from God;” more specifically, the Son of God is the *Logos* “whose goodness is revealed and multiplied in all things . . . with the degree of beauty appropriate to each being,” and who “recapitulates all things in himself.”62 Thus, within the *Logos* (= Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God), each of the logoi “was created in an appropriate way” such that, “at the appropriate time” and “according to the wisdom of the maker,” it has “acquired concrete actual existence in itself” – while “the maker is always existent Being,” they “exist in potentiality before they exist in actuality,”63 Through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of the Son of God, God has “adapted us to himself and knitted us together in the Spirit as a soul to a body and brought us to the measure of spiritual maturity derived from his fullness,”64 in consequence of which “the whole man, as the object of divine action, is divinized by being made God by the grace of God who became man.”65 In other words, the potentiality of concrete, worldly existents is affected through and within the incarnate Son of God, the *Logos* within which the logoi of God’s eternal plan – the “blueprint” of what we and our world ought to be – are fully realized.

Thus, while there is initially a real distinction between concrete existents and their archetypes, in Maximus Confessor, we see how the Christian tradition has attempted an eschatological synthesis between the two. Just as the ideal form of all things were adumbrated within the Son of God before their actual creation, so too, after their initial “fall,” they have been recapitulated within him, thereby being (at least from the vantage point of the eschaton, which has,
in some way, already been realized via the incarnate *Logos*) fashioned anew as according to their ultimate capacities and ideal forms

*Comparison and conclusion*

Interestingly, there is a high degree of correspondence between the points of emphasis in the two-levels thesis as it has been articulated and affirmed in the Christian tradition on the one hand, and Zoroastrianism on the other. Thus, just as with Zoroastrianism, in the Christian tradition we see an affirmation that the “archetypes” or “*logoi*” have precedence over their earthly counterparts with regard to cosmology, that – at least in one case, viz., Christ, the eternal *Logos* and Son of God – they are understood to be an *hypostasis*, and they bear heavy influence upon axiology and eschatology. However, there are at least three significant points of difference between the two. First, unlike Zoroastrianism (but, like the Platonic legacy), the “archetypes” play an explicitly philosophical role in the Christian tradition, especially with regards to epistemology. Second, although the Christian tradition has been able comfortably to hypostatize *an* archetype in the person of the Son of God, the tendency to do such appears to be rather limited; the angels and archangels that comprise God’s heavenly retinue are not envisaged as being models for earthly realities. And, third, and related to the preceding point, while there is a degree of similarity with regard to Christ and Zarathustra as persons in whom *all* the archetypes (or models) are contained *in nuce*, it must be recognized that the person of Christ has a degree of ontological and cosmic centrality higher than Zoroastrianism has attributed to Zarathustra (or anything else, for that matter). Thus, there does not seem to be any obvious reason why Zoroastrianism would be undermined, or would need to deny the two-levels thesis, were the historicity of Zarathustra himself to be denied. The same, however, cannot be said with regard to Christianity: if the historical existence of Christ were to be denied, Christianity’s philosophical system would collapse, and if his hypostatic pre-existence, incarnation, crucifixion, death or resurrection were to be denied, its doctrine of the two-levels thesis would be rendered void of significance.

**General Conclusion**

The two-levels thesis claims that the ontological composition of reality is two-fold. On the one hand, there are physical realities, and, on the other, there are noetic, non-physical realities that, though not ascertainable via sense-experience, are nonetheless just as (or more) real than those realities that are. Furthermore, the relationship between these two realms is such that the latter (noetic)
entities in some sense precede and ground the former (physical) entities, and, more still, the former (physical) entities in some way mirror or image the latter (noetic) entities, albeit imperfectly. To put the matter as simply as possible, according to the two-levels thesis, in addition to the reality of this imperfect world, there is a realm that, in some sense, truly exists, wherein how and what we and our world ought to be is somehow realized. In the preceding, we have seen that Zoroastrianism has – at least insofar as can be told – always affirmed the two-levels thesis as central to its doctrine and practice, and this affirmation is seen most clearly in its cosmology, axiological orientation, ritual and eschatology. More still, these points of emphasis afford interesting comparisons and contrasts with the two-levels thesis as it was affirmed by Plato, and has been affirmed by the Christian tradition, which have traditionally been recognized as the principal bearers of the two-levels thesis in the history of Western intellectual culture.

In bringing this essay to a conclusion, I want to raise the following consideration. While the two-levels thesis may appear to contemporaneity as a relic of the past which has no home in our (post-)modern world – i.e., as something which would quite unnecessarily complicate our ontology and make metaphysics a good deal “spookier” than it needs to be – there is a very real sense in which we simply cannot do without it. The warrant for this claim is perhaps best seen with regard to ethics, for, if it is not the case that there really is such a thing as real Goodness, what possible sufficient basis could our moral intuitions – which strike us more forcefully even than sense-perception – have? In other words, if it is not the case that atrocities such as the Holocaust and the rape and murder of the child Jessica Lunsford are, in the final analysis, somehow incongruous with reality itself at its deepest level, is not our disapproval of such acts as these seen to be emptied of its force, and will not the justification for “right” and “wrong” ultimately be determined by the desires of the one who is most clever and carries the biggest gun? Intuitively, most people cringe when witnessing people being treated unjustly, and believe that such things ought not to be. The question that must be faced, however, is this: Ought not, or what? Is reality such that it will perpetually endure what we believe to be moral atrocities? Or, rather, is reality such that injustice cannot prevail, and is this because the constitution of reality at its deepest level is such that it will not forever sustain the realization of injustices?

The two-levels thesis constitutes one of the most revered and longstanding traditions in the history of Western thought, and the considerations of the preceding paragraph provide just one way of demonstrating its continual significance. It has been the argument of the present essay that Zoroastrianism
deserves to be recognized as one of the bearers of this tradition, and that, for
this reason, its scriptures, faith and practices not only contain a doctrine which
is capable of being developed according to its philosophical and intellectual
implications, but, more still, provide auspicious resources for contemporary
intellectual culture.

Notes

1 This according to Mary Boyce (*Zoroastrians*, 1). Boyce more or less takes it for granted
that Zoroaster himself was an historical person, but, for the problems involved with
such a stance, see Prods Oktor Skjærvø’s *The State of Old Avestan Scholarship*, esp.
105ff.

2 An English translation of the text is available online at http://avesta.org/mp/shkand.
html.

3 It should also be mentioned that one of the staple features of the two-levels thesis is
that the *plurality* of reality in its physical appearance tends toward *unity* in the intellec-
tual, spiritual realm. Thus, e.g., while there may be *many* oak trees in the physical world,
in the intellectual world, there is but one *ideal* oak tree (and the capacity of one truly to
know the former depends upon one’s perception of the latter); or, while there are many
human beings in the physical world, in the spiritual world, there is an *archetypal* human
being (who serves as the paradigm according to which earthly humans must strive in
order fully to realize their potential as human beings), and so on.

4 The five Gathas are to be found in the *Yasnas* in the *Old Avesta* (27:13 & 28-24; 43-46;
47-50; 51; and, 53-54:1), and are perhaps the central-most texts of Zoroastrianism.
While according to tradition their author is none other than Zoroaster himself (see
Boyce, op. cit., n. 1, 17f.; cf. Skjærvø, op. cit., n. 1), they were transmitted orally for
centuries before being written down ca. the fifth century C.E. The point being made
here, however, is simply that testimony to the two-levels thesis is to be found in *even
the oldest strata* of Zoroastrian oral tradition. (On the antiquity of the *Old Avesta*, see
Skjærvø’s *Introduction to Zoroastrianism*, 5f.)

5 Emphasis mine.

6 Cf., e.g., Yt. 6:4—“He who sacrifices to the immortal sun . . . he sacrifices to Ahura
Mazda, he sacrifices to the Life-giving Immortals, he sacrifices to (his) own soul, he
satisfies all ones worthy of sacrifice, *both those in the world of thought and those in the
world of the living*”; Bdh. 3:7—“As Ohrmazd had fitted his creatures into each group of
Amahraspands, he established the world of thought and the world of the living in the
same manner.”


8 On this point, see Yt. 19:12—“*Living beings [= beings in the “world of bones”] who hold
the announcements of Order [= the constellation of models in the “world of thought”]*
will be indestructible. The Lie will be destroyed . . . and the villainess will cower in fear, and the villain will be destroyed: *thus is the model* (emphasis mine).

9 The word “created” is here placed in inverted commas so as to warn against the tendency to understand the Zoroastrian conception of creation in light of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex-nihilo*. Whereas the Christian doctrine of creation views the cosmos and all spiritual realities *other than the triune god* as having arisen by the sheer creative power of god (i.e., from literal non-existence), the Zoroastrian doctrine of creation tends instead to emphasize Ohrmazd’s “engenderment” and “setting down” (or “placement”) of created reality, and does not absolutely restrict the act of creation to the highest god (see Skjærvø, op. cit., n. 7, 37-40).

10 The “models” here alluded to are the Avestan Life-giving Immortals, viz., *Vohu Manah* (“best thought”), *Asha Vahishta* (“best order”), *Khshathra Vairiya* (“well-deserved command”), *Spenta Armaity* (“life-giving humility”), *Haurvatat* (“wholeness”), *Amertatat* (“non-dyingness”), and Ohrmazd himself. Their significance vis-à-vis the two-levels thesis in Zoroastrianism shall be treated presently.

11 See n. 10, immediately above.

12 Emphasis mine.

13 Cf. Bdh. 3:20—“there are innumerable beings in the world of thought *with whose assistance* the creations are set up” (emphasis mine).

14 Cf. Bdh. 3:12-19—in the world of thought, Ohrmazd, with the physical counterpart being mankind; in the world of thought, Wahman, with the physical counterpart being the cow; in the world of thought, Urdwahisht, with the physical counterpart being fire; in the world of thought, Shahrewar, with metals being the physical counterpart; in the world of thought, Spandarmad, with earth being the physical counterpart; in the world of thought, Hordad, with water being the earthly counterpart; in the world of thought, Amurdad, with plant-life being the physical counterpart. On this matter, see Boyce’s *Zoroastrianism*, 21-27, and Skjærvø’s “The Avestan Yasna: Ritual and Myth”, 79f.

15 The significance of this affirmation will become more apparent when we consider the two-levels thesis in the Platonic corpus and the Christian tradition, below.

16 Of course, here the two-levels thesis stands in stark contrast to its articulation in the Platonic corpus, and largely parts company with that found in the Christian tradition as well.

17 See ns. 10, 13, above. The identification of the Life-giving Immortals as models first occurs in Y. 1, which text shall be discussed in more detail presently.

18 “*Ahu*” pertains to existence, connoting especially the new existence wherein Order will be realized; see Skjærvø, *Introduction*, 14.

19 Emphasis mine.

20 In Zoroastrianism, one’s existence is axiologically measured explicitly according to the goodness or badness of one’s thoughts, words, and deeds.
21 The close connection between the models and Order is testified to in, e.g., Y. 1:22—“O all greatest models! O Orderly model of Order!”

22 Or, “reward”.

23 Y. 27:14 (e.g.)

24 On this last sentence, see ns. 10, 14, above.

25 Emphasis mine.


27 Ibid., 80

28 For a summary of Plato’s doctrine of Forms, see Robert Heinaman’s ‘Plato: Metaphysics and epistemology’ (in From the Beginning to Plato, 356-393), and, especially, G.M.A. Grube’s Plato’s Thought, 1-50.

29 On this point, see especially Charles Kahn’s Plato and the Socratic Dialogue.

30 On this point, see especially Plato’s celebrated divided-line illustration in Republic, VI, 509d-511e, wherein he suggests that the value and degree of knowledge is directly correlative with the object of knowledge.

31 Republic, X, 596a-597e

32 Cf. Phaedo, 100b—“I assume the existence of a Beautiful, itself by itself, of a Good and a Great and all the rest”; 100d—“all beautiful things are beautiful by [virtue of the Form of] the Beautiful”; 90e—“We should not allow into our minds the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it” (cf. 101dff.).

33 On this point, see especially Charles Kahn, op. cit., n. 29, caps. 5, 11, 12; and, John Rist’s Real Ethics, 10-26.

34 On this point, see especially Plato’s own Parmenides and bk. 1 of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics.

35 See Republic, VI, 505a—“the good is the most important thing to learn about and . . . it’s by their relation to it that just things and the others become useful and beneficial”; 508ef.—“Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful than they”.

36 201d-212c

37 211b

38 506b-509d

39 509b

40 27d-41a (esp.)

41 29a
Cf., however, Plotinus’ *Enneads*, 5:7. Although Plotinus does not posit as the ultimate source and term of all that is a personal reality, he here seems to argue that there is a Form—i.e., an ideal realization in the noetic realm—of every individual person.

Rev. 22:13

Jn. 1:1f.

Jn. 1:3

Col. 1:16

Eph. 1:16

Rom. 8:21f.

Jn. 12:32

Eph. 1:10

Col. 1:20

Rev. 21:5

On this point, see Gerald O’Daly’s ‘Augustine’ (in *From Aristotle to Augustine*, 388-428, esp. 393-396) and Frederick Copleston’s *History of Philosophy*, 58ff.

In the Christian tradition, the principle means of understanding the sonship of the Son were provided by the Wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible (esp. Prov. 8:22-30; Wis. Sol. 7-8; Sir. 24; cf. Jn. 1:1-3, 18; 1 Cor. 1:24; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3), according to which the Wisdom (and other things, such as the Word, Power, Spirit, etc.) of god is a property of god which is both (quasi-)personal and eternally generated by god.

In Greek (sophia), which was Origen’s mother-tongue, as in Latin (sapientia), the term designating “wisdom” is feminine in gender.

On *First Principles*, 1:2:2, emphasis mine. For yet another example of the significance of the two-levels thesis in the cosmology of the Christian tradition, see Jaroslav Pelikan’s treatment of the Trinitarian dimensions of Bonaventure’s theology of creation in his *Growth of Medieval Theology*, 282ff.; and, Frederick Copleston’s treatment of John Scotus Eriugena’s cosmology (op. cit., n. 56, 121f.).

The *Ambiguum* were treatises wherein Maximus attempted to explain certain of the more unclear passages found in the works of Gregory Nazianzus (fl. late-fourth century) over-against the interpretations given to them by the (heretical) “Origenists.”

II (54)
66 It ought also to be mentioned that, at least in those strands of the Christian tradition with a strong sacramental emphasis—viz., Roman Catholicism and (most especially) Eastern Orthodoxy—the “archetypes” are seen to have a ritual significance as well. Thus, in the Eucharist, Christ is truly, corporeally present in the bread and water, which communicate to the partaker the divine life.

67 The reason for this, of course, is not that Zoroastrianism fails to attribute significance to the person of Zarathustra; rather, it is because it does not connect this significance with any of the particulars of Zarathustra’s historical existence.

68 Of course, this is not at all to assert that the more epistemically and metaphysically modest versions of Christianity offered by the tradition’s more liberal theologians (which may deny such things as the hypostatic pre-existence or bodily resurrection of the Son of god) need deny the idea of a transcendent realm in general, nor the religious, existential significance of Jesus of Nazareth in particular. The point, rather, is simply that the Christian tradition’s affirmation of the two-levels thesis as a robust philosophical system which radically posits the Son of god as its principle (archē, ratio) cannot bear the metaphysical weight placed upon it if such things as pre-existence, ontological equality with god, incarnation, etc., are denied to him.

69 In passing, I mention that I am not attempting to prove a genetic relationship between Zoroastrianism, Platonism and the Christian tradition with regard to the two-levels thesis, i.e., I am not here claiming that Zoroastrianism “gave birth” to the two-levels thesis and “passed it on” to Plato and, through Platonism, to the Christian tradition. While such a thesis as this would perhaps be a good deal more intriguing than the thesis advanced in the present essay, as Bruce Lincoln has argued in his ‘The Center of the World and the Origins of Life’ (325f.), to suppose that the presence of an idea in two traditions necessarily presupposes the “borrowing” of one from the other is illicit when the idea itself is something that arises easily enough from basic aspects and dimensions of human experience.

70 And, indeed, it is worth mentioning that the two-levels thesis seems to be making something of a comeback in analytic philosophy (e.g., Alonzo Church’s ‘The Need for Abstract Entities in Semantic Analysis’ in the Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, vol. 80, July 1951, 100-112), ethics (e.g., John Rist’s Real Ethics), aesthetics (e.g., David Bentley Hart’s The Beauty of the Infinite, Eerdmans, 2003), theology (e.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theo-Drama, vol. 5, 385-394), philosophical anthropology (e.g., Charles Taylor’s Sources of the Self, Harvard University Press, 1992), and, more reluctantly, philosophy of mind (e.g., Jaegwon Kim’s Mind in a Physical World, MIT Press, 1998).
My minister once explained his ministry to me as “delighting in the presence of others.” I took this to mean that at its easiest, ministry is reaching out in love to those we admire, and inspiring peace and forgiveness in a respectful, accepting community. I also understood that at its most challenging, ministry is caring for people we don’t like, and welcoming, connecting and creating safety for people we have never met, in situations we would have never anticipated. Ministry is offering a nonanxious presence in moments when worry and fear are to be expected. At the end of the day, I heard my minister say, ministry is being heartened to greet and sing with one another. When I heard him say this, I thought: this is a job I can do. This is a people-centered job, a community-oriented vocation. Just let me know where to sign up.

Of course, it did not take long for my teachers and spiritual friends at divinity school to begin adding to the job description. Perhaps you’ve heard them, too, talking about ministry as pastoral agility, finding the sacred in ordinary
things, or translating theology into experience, and experience into truth. For awhile, I found myself nodding along, happily expanding my conception of ministry by adding this and that category of enlightened service to others, but then I encountered the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Protestant theologian, and Chogyam Trungpa, a Buddhist monk and spiritual teacher. Despite their different backgrounds and religious contexts, these two thinkers share an understanding of ministry as not only a service to the community, but also, and as importantly, an exploration of self. To those of us committed to delighting in the presence of others, the pastor and the monk offer this startling caveat: ministry is to delight in the presence of me, too.

Taking my cue from Trungpa and Bonhoeffer, I began to see how ministry emerges from the intersections of public and private life, solitude and community, loneliness and companionship. Although not often considered in conversation with one another, their views constitute a compelling convergence of ministerial wisdom. By examining how these religious thinkers support their arguments for a different kind of balance between individual and community, I found myself becoming less resistant to a self-focused understanding of ministry.¹ In Jonathan Rosen’s depiction of Rabbi Deborah Green in his novel, Joy Comes in the Morning, I came face-to-face with the minister’s need to be needed, and gathered more evidence for why natural helpers like me need to develop the self-understanding that comes from spiritual practices undertaken in solitude. I signed up for ministry believing that I could do it as a service to others, and this is true. What is also true, however, is that one of the best ways I can serve a community is by knowing, reflecting on, and practicing how to be alone.

Why To Be Alone

My first mistake was thinking that solitude is a choice. To both Bonhoeffer and Trungpa, being alone is fundamental not only to ministry, but also to what it means to be human. Bonhoeffer writes, “we must practice being alone because it is how God made us, how God calls us, and how we will die.”² To Trungpa, aloneness is a goal we must attain to experience the truth, the one-ness of the universe, or the flowing (un)consciousness of creation.³ Writing from a Buddhist context, Trungpa goes further than Bonhoeffer in his understanding of what it means to be alone, suggesting not only physical separation from other people, but even giving up “the watcher” of inner consciousness, the voice that says whether or not we are doing well or poorly, moment by moment of our lives.⁴ At the same time, both teachers emphasize self-knowledge and inner explora-
tion as the basis of healthy interaction with others and the world. Because “you cannot avoid yourself,” and because “wisdom happens to be a domestic affair,” ministry begins at my home, with my heart, my soul, my body.5

This is not easy for me, a natural helper, to accept. I resist the investment of long afternoon hours and potentially community-serving, productive mornings thinking about myself, reflecting on my own views, retelling my stories, practicing the ways I articulate my truths to others. Surely, there is a homeless shelter that needs my research skills, or a political campaign that wants someone to direct the phone bank. Surely, I should invest my time and talent in responding to the needs and wants of others as much as possible, as a practice of ministry, as the practice of ministry.

Similar concerns about the balance of solitary reflection and community interaction in the life of a minister animate Jonathan Rosen's portrayal of Rabbi Deborah Green in his novel, Joy Comes in the Morning. Far from the self-focused ministry advocated by Bonhoeffer or Trungpa, Rosen's protagonist often demonstrates a “here I am, Lord!” kind of ministry, a “Pick me! Pick me!” kickball court cry that reminds me of the ways I use the service of ministry to draw the attention of others. Through Deborah's attempts to reconcile her ministry to patients and congregants with her ability to care for and know herself, Rosen articulates how ministers struggle to be alone. As Deborah gently ties an old man's shoes on the street, seeing a need and immediately filling it, she is “flooded with...the joy of kneeling down, erasing herself for a moment in an act of kindness.”6 For just a moment, in this lovely act, perhaps Deborah is re-joining the universe, and letting go of her “watcher,” as she “erase[s]” herself through helpfulness. But I also wonder if she is neglecting the ministry that begins with self-understanding, by ignoring her need to be needed by this unfamiliar old man.

Professor Stephanie Paulsell and others have mentioned a caricature of the minister as a “quivering mass of availability,” and in scenes such as this one, I can see Deborah shake, just slightly, with her ever-present availability to the needy world. In other scenes, however, she resists responding immediately to the needs of others. When Lev, a potential romantic partner, shows up in her office with a question for the rabbi, she also feels “erased by Lev's need” in a way that makes her want to throw him out of her office rather than respond to his questions.7 Through Deborah's struggles, Rosen illustrates the challenges of balancing self-knowledge (solitude) and community care (companionship) in a way that defines and strengthens an individual's ministry. This is the same balance that I seek and struggle with in my own ministry.
When my devotion to self-awareness flags, Deborah's story also helps me remember that there is plenty of work for me to do in the world, as long as I watch out for my need to be needed. Likewise, Bonhoeffer and Trungpa didn't intend for the minister to hide herself away forever, or lose herself in contemplation at the times when the community cries out for care. While they are convinced that the study and care of others cannot be undertaken responsibly without the study and care of self, they also describe how the individual's aloneness takes place amidst community, within community, and in relation to community.

According to these religious teachers, the categories of solitude and community need one another. “The day together would be unfruitful without the day alone, both for the community and for the individual,” writes Bonhoeffer.8 Noting the “perils and pitfalls” of solitude, the German theologian does not recommend aloneness without its communal counterpart, lest we sink into a “bottomless pit of vanity, self-infatuation and despair.”9 Trungpa, too, writes about the process that leads us from self-knowledge to helpfulness in relationship, from what Bonhoeffer would have called “the day alone” to “the day together.”10 Although the first step on the Buddhist path is to learn to love ourselves, the second step is to “communicate to people, to establish a relationship and gradually help them” in a selfless way.11 Such helpfulness, or ministry, is simply not possible until we have made friends with ourselves, Trungpa argues.12 Reaching out to others blindly can indicate an unwillingness to look at ourselves or help ourselves. It may even indicate a distaste or dislike of our selves and our concerns. This is not easy, and Trungpa does not understate the difficulty of beginning to work on befriending ourselves, of “opening up our territory rather than marching into someone else’s.”13 He writes, “it takes a lot of time to pick up the thing, put it in our mouth, chew it, taste it and swallow it. It takes a long time to take our fences down...It takes a long time and a long process of disciplined patience.”14 Such a process is not instinctual for me. Like Deborah, I am impatient to serve and be helpful right away. Even stranger than the idea of developing a general comfort with solitude is the realization that I have work to do on myself, by myself, as I learn how to be alone.

How To Be Alone
On the days when I find myself contemplating another solitary task, I usually wish for the chance to selflessly respond, rather than generate and reflect. When I am not sure what to do with my independence, I take comfort in real-
izing that though I am by myself, I am not alone. My teachers in self-reflection, Bonhoeffer and Trungpa among them, have been here before, and I hear them reminding me not only why I should stick it out, but also how I can stick it out. Across languages and decades, they offer instruction in how to be alone, through the spiritual practices and disciplines that ground their own ministries: meditation, prayer and teaching.

Meditation

The daily practice of meditation features prominently in religious and spiritual life for both Bonhoeffer and Trungpa. While Bonhoeffer’s view of meditation is distinct from Trungpa’s, both urge the reader not to expect anything special to emerge directly from silent, meditative practice. Bonhoeffer notes “it is not necessary for us to have any unexpected, extraordinary experiences while meditating,” and reassures the reader that she may have good or bad experiences in thoughtful contemplation, but that should not deter her from “observing [her] period of meditation with great patience and fidelity.”

Trungpa underscores the unexpected similarity between the spiritual lives of these teachers, as he writes “[in meditation practice] there is no promise of love and light or visions of any kind- no angels, no devils. Nothing happens: it is absolutely boring.” With this in mind, however, he argues that there is no way around developing a relationship with meditation, with boredom, with aloneness, as part of understanding the dignity of simplicity, the wholesome nature of this kind of sanity, and the Buddhist understanding of the universe.

Taking these words to heart, I continue to explore meditation as an ordinary, boring, and highly recommended way to be alone. Such quiet solitude does not come easy to an impatient, relationship-centered person like me, and so I appreciate above all that it is a practice, a way of being that isn’t meant to be polished or perfect. Instead, it is described as a gradual accretion of both positive and negative experiences, and as an activity that takes practice.

Prayer

In addition to meditation, Bonhoeffer offers descriptions of the spiritual practices of prayer and intercession. He describes prayer as a way of bringing our concerns to God, and he assures us that each prayer is heard and certainly answered through Jesus Christ. Too often already, I have put myself forward as a helper who can take it all on myself, and I have forgotten that ministry is also mediation, referral, and connection. Ministry is the practice of bringing my concerns, and the concerns of my community, back to God.
Like Bonhoeffer, I count prayer as crucial in my understanding of ministry, because it shifts the borders between what is mine and what is God’s; what is my community’s and what is mine. Through prayer, also, we blur the line between speech and silence, described by Bonhoeffer and others as the first attributes of solitude and community. Prayer becomes a practice of boundary-crossing, to be learned and practiced alongside meditation as a practice of ministry.

**Coming Back to Community**

Through meditation and prayer, we can develop the self-understanding necessary to be alone. After “the day apart,” however, comes “the day together,” and both Bonhoeffer and Trungpa describe teaching as the bridge that connects solitude to community. The minister here rejoins the world to give “selfless help, true compassion,” Trungpa’s third step on the bodhisattva path. From a place of self-friendship, she delights in the presence of self and others, and demonstrates her mastery of ministerial arts by teaching them to her students. Strengthened by self-knowledge, teachers can begin to navigate the many complexities of teaching itself, as teacher and student seek right relationship with each other. Trungpa writes, “[the bodhisattva path] begins formally with the student taking refuge...in the lineage of teachers, the teachings, and the community of fellow pilgrims.” Lest a student get too comfortable, however, he points out that “taking refuge does not mean becoming dependent on our teacher or the community or the scriptures. It means giving up searching for a home, becoming a refugee, a lonely person who must depend on herself.” Independence is assumed, even as we form deep connections with the teachers who will help us most.

It is the job of the teacher, as well as the minister, to encourage students in their spiritual formation without dependence, and inspire devotion without becoming the object of that devotion. “You need a teacher so that you can become independent,” Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki explains, “...the teacher will show you the way to yourself.” Through the eyes of Trungpa and Suzuki, the teacher is described as a mirror and as a spiritual friend who “minds our business,” reflecting back to us both our beauty and grotesqueness. Here, self-knowledge is the foundation of the minister’s authority to act as a mirror for the characters and dreams of her community. When she sees herself not as she wishes to be, but as she is, she is able to practice the clear-sightedness that will allow her to act as a true spiritual friend, teacher, and guide to others.

The ultimate limitation of the teacher’s role comes not from her desire to foster independence in her students, however, but by what Bonhoeffer and
Trungpa believes to be the ultimate aloneness of the human condition. Trungpa writes, “a teacher or fellow traveler or the scriptures might show us where we are on a map and where we might go from there, but we have to make the journey ourselves. Fundamentally, no one can help us.” Quoting Luther, Bonhoeffer translates this sentiment into his own vocabulary, writing that “the confrontation with death and its demands comes to us all; no one can die for another...I will not be with you then, nor you with me.” While Trungpa describes a spiritual journey, and Bonhoeffer the journey of life itself, both teachers emphasize that there are some things that we must do for ourselves, by ourselves, without relying on the help or companionship of others. Our challenge is to make sure that we know which activities belong in which category, and how to move between them when we must.

Theologically, neither author leaves us in a lonely space, instead reminding us there is much we can do together, and offer one another, as we move through life. Bonhoeffer restores community to each of us by recognizing our belonging in the community of faith, while Trungpa reminds us that we all belong to one another and the universe. The minister who is too mindful of our solitude could forget that we all belong to God and to one another. But this is a truth that Trungpa and Bonhoeffer relate. Belonging, like teaching and praying, is a bridge we cross between individualism and community, and it extends to all. Bonhoeffer writes, “strong or weak, wise or foolish, talented or untalented, pious or less pious, the complete diversity of individuals in the community...is a reason for rejoicing in one another and serving one another.” Ministry creates and sustains that beloved community, to which we all and always belong.

**Ministry between Solitude and Community**

In the shadow of Bonhoeffer and Trungpa, and in my ongoing conversations with other spiritual friends, I hear a call to the kind of ministry that delights in the presence of others and self. This will be a ministry that grows from the spiritual practice of being alone and makes use of solitude in prayer and meditation. It will be a ministry that keeps God present, a ministry that takes concerns to God instead of piling them up in the hidden caverns of my heart and mind, and it will be a ministry of crossing the bridge from solitude to community, by teaching others how to be alone. Here, ministry is simultaneously most comforting and worrisome: it is a practice of trying to live all these realities, in solitude and community, and always in conversation. Both states are useful, and both are true, at least for this minister and her conception of the practice of ministry.
Notes


3 Trungpa, 150-151.

4 Ibid, 150.

5 Bonhoeffer, 332; Trungpa, 93.


7 Ibid, 133.

8 Bonhoeffer, 333.

9 Ibid, 333.

10 Ibid, 333.

11 Trungpa, 91.


13 Ibid, 91.

14 Ibid, 91.

15 Bonhoeffer, 335.

16 Trungpa, 53.

17 Ibid, 57.

18 Bonhoeffer, 336.

19 Ibid., 333.

20 Trungpa, 91.

21 Ibid, 103.

22 Ibid, 103.


24 Trungpa, 133.
25 Ibid, 103.
26 Bonhoeffer, 333.
27 Ibid, 337.
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