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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When we joined the editorial staff of The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School, the journal had recently undergone a major rebranding period. This period was marked by a change in the journal's name, a renewed focus on curating a diverse body of content within each publication, a new website, a regularized publication schedule, and a host of other changes that strengthened the quality of the journal and revitalized its presence around the Harvard Divinity School campus.

Our task, coming upon the journal after these major improvements had been implemented, was much more modest in scope. We sought to continue utilizing the structures that had been set in place by our incomparable predecessors and to bring our own perspectives and ideas to the table without diminishing the quality or stature of the journal in any way. The issue you currently hold in your hands represents our modest attempt to carry on the legacy of the journal while also making it our own unique project that reflects the diversity and breadth of our various interests.

No publication led by graduate students, however, could come to fruition without the many helping hands that supported us tirelessly behind the scenes. We are grateful for our many friends and colleagues throughout the Harvard Divinity School community that helped to bring this edition of the journal to fruition:

In the Office of Student Life, Tim Whelsky and Katie Caponera were incredibly helpful and supportive as we took over the reigns from the previous managing team, learned the ropes of running a journal as quickly as we could, and ultimately brought this journal to fruition in its current printed form. It is thanks

to their friendly guidance throughout the year that we were able to navigate this process with minimal bumps in the road.

Professor Anne Monius, the journal's indefatigable faculty advisor, provided guidance throughout the year and generously served on the faculty review board, even when she was away from campus enjoying a well-earned sabbatical. We are grateful for her ongoing support of and many contributions to the journal.

Lewis West and Will Morningstar, our predecessors as editor-in-chief and managing editor respectively, generously offered their support and guidance throughout the year. Their tireless efforts to build up and improve the journal during the 2014-15 academic year made our work much easier. We thank them for their willingness to consult with us as we built upon the groundwork laid by them and the successes of the previous publication.

An anonymous faculty review board played a key role in the editorial process at the most advanced stages of review. Each of the faculty reviewers approached their task with deliberate care and thorough consideration, even in the midst of a busy spring season of teaching, events, and administrative duties. We are continually grateful not only for their willingness to be a part of the editorial process, but for their support of a student-run, student-centered journal.

The student editorial board also provided much-needed assistance throughout the academic year. Every member of the editorial board contacted professors from around the world to advertise the call for papers in the fall and, in many cases, reviewed two or three submissions in the spring. Their hard work, energy, and tireless dedication to the journal were essential to bringing this final product to fruition. We are eternally grateful to them all!

Our layout editor, Alexa Kutler, provided much-needed expertise in preparing the journal for print. Her kindness, abundant energy, and immeasurable patience as we finalized all of the documents for publication in the middle of commencement activities and a multitude of other events made our lives much easier as we finalized the journal for publication.

Finally, the HDS Student Association generously provided the funding necessary for making this year's printed issue possible. We are grateful for their annual support of the journal.

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This issue opens with Elaine Belz's (GTU) examination of the current material conditions of the 12th-century Virgin of Vladimir icon, which challenges the reader to consider the materiality of icons as an indispensable element in our understanding of their historical and theological significance. She pushes us to see the surface damages to the Vladimirskaya icon as marks of its persistence, survival, and interaction with various communities—marks that ultimately invite its viewers to experience how God is able to work in, among, and through our woundedness.

In the second essay, Samuel Dubbelman (Boston University) argues that recent treatments of Augustine's "negative theology" do not adequately consider the hamartiological rationale behind his admission of ignorance. On Dubbelman's reading of Augustine's Confessions, lack of knowledge about God and self is not primarily owing to an ontological gap between the two entities, but to the weight of individual sin. This essay also explores the way that the phrase "learned ignorance" better captures Augustine's position than does the common designation "negative theology."

Next, Joseph Kimmel (HDS) revisits a perennial question encountered by Buddhist thinkers—what is the role of others in one's pursuit of enlightenment? He describes the tension observed between the emphasis on compassionate engagement with others on one hand and the cultivation of solitary spiritual practices on the other. His writing draws from Buddhaghosa's

Visuddhimagga to advance this exploration of the relationship between an individual and others vis-à-vis enlightenment.

Fourth, Adeel Mohammadi (HDS) examines the function of *nasab* (lineage/filiation) in early and mediaeval Islamic contexts. In particular, he traces the use of the maternal *nasab*, which was less common than the paternal *nasab* and had ambiguous consequences for the child: it could point to a noteworthy mother, or conversely record some impropriety in the child's lineage. Surveying bibliographic and legal material, Mohammadi points out important dimensions to the legal and social structures of Muslim societies.

In the final essay, Xavier Montecel (Boston College) offers a critique of the contemporary tendency to reduce Christian sacramental practice to the pedagogical role of exercises for training sacramental vision or shaping Christian desire through ritual performance. He contends that the sacraments ought to be regarded as bearing intrinsic moral power and describes how Christian ethics can emerge from—rather than eclipse or disconnect with—the sacramental life. This understanding is developed in relation to the categories of remembrance, promise, and prophetic action.

To conclude, the Journal spoke with Professor Harvey Cox about his forthcoming book, *The Market as God*. We touched on the religious (and often idolatrous) dimensions of wealth and the financial industry, and in this context were able to discuss a range of other issues as well: endangerment to the environment, the economic convictions of Martin Luther King Jr., the Occupy movements, nonviolent social change, and the 2016 presidential election.

- Ryan Gregg, Naohito Miura, and Jason Smith



A WOUNDED PRESENCE:

THE VIRGIN OF VLADIMIR ICON

Elaine Elizabeth Belz
PhD student in Theological Aesthetics
Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA

fig 1. Detail, Unknown artist, Our Lady of Vladimir, first third of the 12th century, tempera on wood. Hall Museum Church of St Nicholas, Moscow.

The Virgin of Vladimir, or Vladimirskaya, icon¹ is well-known, and beloved by many who know nothing of its history. Yet the scarred and worn surface testifies to a long history, but not one of neglect. There is an evident intentionality to the abrasions that have removed all paint from the Virgin's hand and her child's hand and foot, abrasions which, by revealing the wood beneath the paint, also impose an awareness of the icon's materiality. Other chips and cracks speak of age and use. These accidental qualities of the icon are, nevertheless, generally overlooked, as the imagination fills in the gaps to supply an impression of the pristine image. My intention in this paper is to suggest that the surface damage to the icon should be considered—indeed, considered part of the icon itself. They are marks of its persistence, survival, and interaction with various communities. They demonstrate that through this icon, the holy Theotokos has been made present in a world not yet made perfect; so they give us a tangible experience of how the holy does not remain ensconced in heaven, but participates in our world. Thus, I will argue, the Vladimirskaya exemplifies what Alejandro García-Rivera calls “a wounded innocence.”

Orthodox theologian Gennadios Lamouris explains that because the “real content of Orthodox art is the ‘new creation’ in Christ...[t]he common

1 The photograph included here is a public domain image, found online at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimirskaya.jpg> (accessed May 13, 2016). To view the full icon in greater detail, please visit the Tretyakov Gallery website: http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/collection/_show/image/_id/2216

world, the world of decay, was wholly unrelated to it.”² Icons are meant for liturgical settings, in which they help to lift worshippers out of their ordinary lives and into an experience of the new creation. Can this purpose be reconciled with the fact of icons’ (and church buildings’) inevitable decay? In seeking to answer this question, I will approach the Vladimirskaya through the lens of theological aesthetics. In particular, I will rely on several key concepts García-Rivera develops in his book, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*.³ Regarding method, García-Rivera writes that a “theological method proper to a theology of art tends toward synthesis, putting things together, rather than analysis, taking things apart. A theology of art ought to understand the whole rather than the parts.”⁴ Thus he seeks to develop a theological aesthetics that

sees a true continuity in the beautiful. The beautiful encompasses the ugly and the pretty, the grotesque and the ordinary, the artist and the artist’s community, the work of art and the work of craft, the natural and that made by human hands. Indeed, a living aesthetics is less a disinterested beholding of some alienated object than that which moves the human heart.⁵

The list he gives is, of course, not exhaustive, but it stresses the communities to which the artist belongs and for whom the work is made. “[T]he experience of Beauty, that is, the beautiful, is a complex, intrinsically communal experience,”⁶ and since God is Beauty itself, an experience of the beautiful is “also an experience of intimacy with God.”⁷ Here he is not even speaking of specifically religious art, yet he uses language that is clearly appropriate to the consideration of liturgical art.

While García-Rivera writes as a Roman Catholic theologian, much of what he has to say is shared, although perhaps in different terms, by Orthodox theology. However, I wish to note that my reflections on the Vladimirskaya, especially through the lens of theological aesthetics

2 Gennadios Limouris, ‘The Microcosm and Macrocosm of the Icon: Theology, Spirituality and Worship in Colour’, in *Icons, Windows on Eternity : Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), pp. 93-123 (p. 96).

3 Alex García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence : Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003).

4 García-Rivera, xi.

5 García-Rivera, ix.

6 García-Rivera, 5.

7 García-Rivera, 3.

as I have studied it with Prof. García-Rivera, are a Western perspective. I do not pretend to see with Byzantine eyes. Therefore I will draw from Eastern and Western sources, as well as interdisciplinary sources, as I approach the Virgin of Vladimir not as an art historian, but as a theologian.

Materiality and Religious Practice

FATHER MICHEL, THE PRIOR OF CHEVETOGNE, STRESSES THAT THE ICON COMMUNICATES THE FAITH OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD. IT EXPRESSES NOT A SUBJECTIVE VISION BUT ONE OF THE COMMUNITY. 'THE ICON IS A VISION OF FAITH AND UNDERGIRDS PRAYER.'

– FRANÇOIS SEJOURNÉ, "ONE STAGE ON A SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE."⁸

In her study of contemporary American material religion, Colleen McDannell makes the observation that "People need objects to help establish and maintain relationships with supernatural characters, family, and friends," adding that "Christians use goods and create religious landscapes to tell themselves and the world around them who they are." Material objects function thus to aid in the formation of community identities. They also transmit belief systems, but not merely through illustrating points of dogma. "The sensual elements of Christianity are not merely decorations that mask serious belief; it is through the visible world that the invisible world becomes known and felt."⁹ Through the giving and receiving of religious objects, as well as displaying and experiencing them in homes and in churches, Christians practice their faith, "as one would practice the piano in order to become a competent pianist."¹⁰ The material objects used in Christian worship help not only to reflect or confirm faith, but to engender it. Recalling what Limouris has said about the liturgical function of icons—to lift people from their ordinary lives into an experience of the new creation—we can appreciate the difference between the ways words and objects teach the faith. Humans learn not only through the contemplation of ideas, but even more primarily through imitation. Seeing the gestures in icons can trigger an urge in the viewer to "try out" the gestures her or himself, especially when the saints depicted have become familiar as family, and their iconographic depiction gives the visual cues that these are people one should imitate. In other

8 François Sejourné. "One Stage on a Spiritual Pilgrimage." in Limouris, *Icons, Windows on Eternity*, 191-192 (p. 192).

9 Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity : Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 272.

10 McDannell, 2.

words, icons and other religious objects engage us in embodied learning—what McDannell calls “practicing” the faith.

Through this embodied practice the worshipper develops a Christian habitus,¹¹ that is, a disposition toward future action informed by Christian faith. As García-Rivera explains, habitus is “the development of a higher disposition toward embodying experience...” and we can in turn speak of a “liturgical habitus as a higher disposition toward worship. As such, the habitus also becomes a sensibility” oriented toward mystery.¹² García-Rivera names Christian mystery a “sensible mystery,” because it is not mystery in the sense of an unsolvable puzzle, or even a puzzle to be solved, but rather mystery to be experienced. The liturgical habitus, then is oriented toward a “sensibility to the ineffable,” and because “Divine Mystery is Beauty itself,” the liturgical habitus is also a sensibility to beauty. As we have seen above, García-Rivera describes beauty as “that which moves the human heart.” A sensibility to divine beauty developed through a liturgical habitus, then,

reveals the human heart to itself precisely because it orients it to another heart. This movement and orientation is...a unitive revelatory experience. It reveals not only the many but also the One. More important, it reveals the very nature of Beauty itself, the many now become one. Unitive revelatory experience, in other words, is the experience of [one of] the oldest understandings of beauty, unity in diversity.¹³

It is no wonder, then, that people are moved to touch icons.

Léonide Ouspensky describes the emotional impact of the Umilenie (Our Lady of Tenderness) icon type, of which the Vladimirskaia is but one example. This type “emphasizes the natural human feeling, the tenderness of

11 While I am most directly influenced by Peircean thought regarding habit, the term *habitus* is drawn from the work of sociologist Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s use of the term indicates habits acquired through the internalization of social knowledge—a narrower concept than Peirce’s, but Bourdieu’s sense is the one that applies here. See David Wagner, “Peirce, Panofsky, and the Gothic,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 48:4 (Fall 2012), pp. 436-435 for more on Peirce’s concept of “habit” and its relation to Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. An excellent discussion of *habitus* as I use it here can be found in Alex García-Rivera and Thomas Scirghi, *Living Beauty : the Art of Liturgy* (Lanham Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), pp. 83–86.

12 García-Rivera and Scirghi, 11.

13 García-Rivera and Scirghi, 37-38.

motherly love.”¹⁴ Noting that this type is attributed to St. Luke, he reminds us that, as with the “apostolic liturgies” and “apostolic canons,” these types are attributed to St. Luke not because any of the extant copies were actually written by him, but “because they have an apostolic character and are covered by apostolic authority.”¹⁵ That apostolic authority sanctions them for liturgical use; the liturgical habitus they help to form, we might say, can be trusted as standing in the apostolic faith. In addition, that tradition assures the sacramentality of the icons. As the liturgy for the feast of Our Lady of Vladimir affirms:

When for the first time your icon was painted by the announcer of evangelical mysteries and was brought to you so that you could identify it and confer on it the power of saving those who venerate you, you rejoiced. You who are merciful and who have blessed us became, as it were, the mouth and voice of the icon. Just as when you conceived God, you sang the hymn: ‘Now all the generations will call me blessed,’ so also, looking at the icon, you say with force: ‘My grace and my power are with this image.’ And we truly believe that you have said this, Our Sovereign Lady, and that you are with us through this image.¹⁶

This prayer also exemplifies how in the liturgy, words, gestures, and actions work together with the icons in performing their formative role. What is said about the icon reinforces what the icon itself “says”—or, as the adage goes, “What the ear hears, the eyes are contemplating.”¹⁷ And through the icon, the saint depicted (in this case, Mary) is made present: “you are with us through this image.”

“Liturgy cannot exist without art,” writes Limouris. “The best example is iconography: it can be analyzed and understood theologically only if we take into consideration the ‘incarnation’ of art in the subject matter, colours, lines, expressions, etc.”¹⁸ In other words, to understand icons theologically and liturgically, attention must be paid to each particular icon’s subject but also its formal and material qualities—the means through which Christ, the saints, or, in our case, the Theotokos, become present to a particular gathered liturgical community.

A Superficial Look

14 Léonide Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), p. 60.

15 Ouspensky, 62.

16 Quoted in Ouspensky, 62-63.

17 Sister Olga, quoted in Sisters Minke, Albertine, and Olga. “Icons Coming to Life,” in Limouris, *Icons: Windows on Eternity: Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 188-190 (p. 190).

18 Limouris, “The Microcosm and Macrocosm of the Icon,” 93.

In a letter published under the title, “Icon: An Expression of Prayer and Sacrament,”¹⁹ an unnamed Russian iconographer elucidates the composition of icons in language ripe for theological exposition. The recurring theme in his discussion is the materiality of the icon: matter matters, principally because the material, lines, color, and compositional structure of an icon make up its givenness and particularity. An icon is properly understood as revelation, not merely an artist’s expression of an idea. The icon really relates to its archetype, whether Christ, Mary, or a saint, “whose action impresses its character” on the icon.²⁰ According to Bissera Pentcheva, the language of “impressing” traces back to the ancient and medieval theory of extramission—the belief that rays sent from the eyes actually contact objects, returning to the eyes to impress the object onto the viewer’s memory. In other words, vision was tactile. She quotes Theodore the Studite: “[the artist] takes matter, looks at the prototype, receives the imprint of that which he contemplates, and presses it like a seal into his matter.”²¹ Thus, the icon attempts “to express the paradox of the tangible versus the intangible rather than the visible versus the invisible..”²² Or, as our anonymous iconographer puts it:

This, then, is the body of the icon, the unique plastic expression of the spiritualized human body. ... [T]his iconographic body created through the medium of panel and line, of colour and surfaces, is the only form which in its concrete simplicity, can ever be indwelt by grace.²³

Icons are sensual objects, and through their sensuality they present to us “the primitive beauty and purity of the material which sings the praise of God.”²⁴ The flat surface of the icon, Pentcheva suggests, interacts with other sensory input from the liturgy (lights, incense, and singing, for example) to overwhelm the senses and thus bring the worshipper to an embodied experience of the divine. By virtue of its materiality, an icon, “while itself an absence...

19 Anonymous, ‘Icon: An Expression of Prayer and Sacrament’, in Limouris. *Icons: Windows on Eternity: Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), pp. 195-201.

20 Anonymous, 195.

21 St. Theodore the Studite, quoted in Bissera V. Pentcheva, ‘The Performative Icon’, *The Art Bulletin*, 88 (2006), 631-55 (p. 636).

22 Pentcheva, 636.

23 Anonymous, 197.

24 Anonymous, 198.

enacts divine presence” through mimetic performance, that is, the performance of presence.²⁵

What Pentcheva and the unnamed iconographer both claim about icons, Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart affirms more generally about the whole of creation. Hart repeatedly speaks of superficiality, a term which the Western mind tends to associate with triviality. Placing Hart in conversation with iconography elucidates his meaning, which completely reverses that thinking. He argues instead that a philosophy or spirituality that tries to get at the depth of things ultimately does away with the very things it seeks to know more profoundly. As he puts it, “beauty does not ‘essentialize’ (essences are supremely anaesthetic), but remains always at the surface...it is the ‘eloquence’ of being, which reveals being’s gratuity.”²⁶ The following is worth quoting at length, because, although Hart does not overtly draw the connection, it relates quite thoroughly with the spirituality of icons:

Inasmuch as creation is not the overflow of some ungovernable perturbation of the divine substance, or a tenebrous collusion of ideal form and chaotic matter, but purely an expression of the superabundant joy and agape of the Trinity, joy and love are its only grammar and its only ground; one therefore must learn a certain orientation, a certain charity and a certain awe, and even a certain style of delectation to see in what sense creation tells of God and to grasp the nature of creation’s inmost (which is to say, most superficial) truth.²⁷

Although he does not discuss icons directly, it is not hard to imagine him writing his (normally dense) tome beneath the reflected light of a candle on an icon’s surface.

Even his choice of the term “ground” recalls the gold background of many icons which reflects to us mortals the heavenly light. Perhaps we might adopt Hart’s language and speak of that gold ground as “an expression of the superabundant joy and agape of the Trinity.” As if describing the surface of an icon, Hart speaks of “the splendor of concrete form...awakened by the aesthetic exteriority of otherness, the beauty of the other.” Applying this language to icons, we see that the spirituality of praying with icons does not turn us inward or

25 Pentcheva, 631.

26 David Bentley Hart. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 141.

27 Hart, 254-55.

invite introspection, but rather turns us outward toward the other. Hart argues, in fact, that subjectivity “is only in being opened—formed—by the light of the other; one’s ‘self’ is that ‘matter’ in which beauty impresses itself...”²⁸ Pentcheva likens the “concept of the icon as surface” with Martin Heidegger’s definition of truth as “the unconcealedness of being,” and Hart seems to be saying something very similar here. Like Hart, Pentcheva’s analysis warns against the temptation to look for the truth in an essence beyond the given surface. Through its mimetic performance “the icon uncovers a divine vision by giving it a material being—textures that can be grasped and sensorially experienced. ... The icon as surface becomes the sensual ‘givenness’ of absence.”²⁹

And so we turn to the Vladimirskaya itself. The 12th-century icon is painted in tempera and gold leaf on wood, and measures 69 cm x 104 cm vertically oriented.³⁰ The panel is composed of five pieces of wood in differing sizes, whose joints are visible through the painted surface: three vertical boards, and horizontal boards along the top and bottom. The image appears in a carved recess approximately 43 cm x 67 cm, leaving a very wide frame. The entire frame and the background of the image itself appear to have been covered in gold leaf, which is now mostly worn through or chipped off. The traditional inscriptions indicating Mary and Christ are barely visible, but present.

Yet in this derelict condition, the Virgin and her Son command attention. Their figures merge into one organic form that nearly fills the recessed space. Dressed in highly textured and ornamented red robes, they seem to present themselves to the viewer’s sense of touch as well as sight. The infant’s scarlet robe shimmers with highlights of bright gold, and he wears a dark blue sash, also highlighted in gold, around his waist and over his shoulder. The Virgin’s maphorion is decorated with the traditional eight-pointed star on her head and shoulders (the star on her right shoulder is not visible, but may be assumed), edged in crimson with fringes of gold. The red of her robe and maphorion is of such a deep hue as to appear almost black.

Together, the Virgin and Child make up the foreground of the image, with nothing but gold for a background. In place of an illusion of depth given by background objects, the Virgin’s dark robe and eyes evoke a spiritual depth to be

28 Hart, 143.

29 Pentcheva, 651.

30 Measurements according to the Tretyakov Gallery website. http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/collection/_show/image/_id/2216#
 Accessed 28 October 2011.

found in her person. At the same time, the Virgin seems to be pressing forward toward the viewer, almost with a sense of urgency, as if against a window pane. The contrast between her dark and his bright red robes, her shadowed and his bright face, creates the effect that she seems to recede even as she presents to the viewer her Son. She cradles her Child in her right hand, and with her left calls the viewer's attention to him. Although her head is bowed toward her Son, her gaze is fixed on the viewer, and her large, almond-shaped eyes bearing a deep melancholy are the defining feature of her face. The Child sits in her right hand, his bare feet dangling. He reaches upward to her with his whole body, grasping her around the neck with his left hand, clutching her veil with his right, and pressing his cheek to hers. His gaze is toward his mother's face.

Paradoxically, the Virgin and Child sit motionless and serene; and yet his whole body moves toward her in a gesture that feels timeless and eternal. His left leg apparently curls upward, as the sole of his left foot is visible, his garments draping around it and suggesting both motion and sensuality. Light plays on his face and on the Virgin's slender, long nose. These details lend an almost sculptural quality to the painting. His face expresses delight, with a slight smile on his lips.

The entire surface of the icon, including its frame, is uniformly pitted and chipped. The red ground beneath the gold leaf shows through, as does the material of the wood. Most of this damage appears accidental, as if it resulted from ordinary handling, or abuse, or poor conservation. Given the icon's age, this is hardly surprising. While we might be tempted to recreate, in the imagination, the pristine condition of this icon (in which, perhaps, the Virgin's robes were redder in hue and lighter in value), its present condition reminds us that all artworks, like all material objects, are impermanent and require human care to preserve them. The mere fact that we are able to observe this icon (if only in photographic reproduction) testifies to the care of centuries of communities even as the chips and cracks testify to the icon's use. Clearly it was not kept hidden away.

But something in this image further testifies that it was also not protected from human touch. The entire left hand of the Virgin and right hand of her Child are worn through to the wood, along with the fingertips of the Virgin's right hand, and most of the top of the infant's right foot. These abrasions suggest that over the centuries, devotees have not only handled the icon, but have touched it in meaningful gestures, connecting to the Virgin and child through their hands and his foot. These abrasions stand out from the otherwise uniform pattern of chipped paint and gold leaf. That difference from ordinary, expected wear foregrounds the icon's devotional use, confronting the viewer with evidence

of a storied history that must be considered part of the icon as much as the wood, paint, and gold leaf.

There is so much in the “mere” appearance of this icon to move the viewer’s heart, both in the icon’s composition, which tell us about the Virgin and her Son (the God-Bearer and God); and in the icon’s present condition, which tells us something, even if nothing specific or factual, about the audiences of faithful and unfaithful viewers who have interacted with this icon and through it, with the Theotokos, with Christ, and with other people. Any viewer of this icon enters into some kind of relationship, however fleeting, with the whole Orthodox tradition that produced and preserved it,³¹ and thus with the many individual persons who have also approached the Vladimirskaya. But without knowledge of the icon’s history, that connection may only be vaguely felt. The known history of this icon, however, is somewhat sparse. While the particular history is important, as it makes the Vladimirskaya the particular icon that it is, we may also be grateful to have some information, however elusive, about the icon’s history marked into its very flesh.

History and Background

Historical data may be scarce, but various Russian historical chronicles provide clues. In the literature available in English, details sometimes differ, but do not seriously conflict. The 12th century icon is the earliest extant icon we have of its particular composition; and while it certainly stands in an earlier tradition of the Eleousa (Our Lady of Tenderness) type, its unique characteristics—most notably, the Christ Child’s arm around his mother’s neck and his upturned foot—may have originated with this icon. Hans Belting assumes it copies an earlier icon, reminding us that “we can only conjecture about the original icons.”³² However, all other images sharing the compositional details of this 12th-century expression of the Eleousa (Umilenie in Russian) are copies of this icon, the Vladimirskaya or Virgin of Vladimir. As Maria Gasper-Hulvat notes, in the case of a miracle-working icon like the Vladimirskaya, “its copies depict

31 The Councils, such as the Second Council of Nicea which pronounced on the veneration of icons in 787, represent a community of consensus: see Chrysostomos of Myra (Konstantinidis). “The Triumph of the Icons as Means of Dialogue and Sign of Unity,” in Gennadios Limouris, *Icons, Windows on Eternity : Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), p. 3.

32 Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence : a History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 281.

not only the image of the Mother of God, but also the tangible miracle-working icon itself.”³³

Written in Constantinople around 1130, it seems to have been made as a gift from the Patriarch of Constantinople to the Russian Grand Duke at Kiev. The date of the gift varies: Gasper-Hulvat places it between 1125-1131;³⁴ Belting sets the date at 1136;³⁵ while Skrobucha, working from the Russian Chronicles, is only willing to link the icon’s arrival at Kiev with the foundation of a church built there between 1131-1136.³⁶ According to legend, the icon was seen levitating in the Kiev church, and this was taken as a sign that the icon wished to move.³⁷ In any case, the icon was taken by Andrei Bogolyubsky, son of the Grand Duke of Kiev, to Vladimir. The new site was chosen by the icon, according to legend: near Kiev, the horses transporting it stopped and refused to go any further.³⁸ The Uspenski (“Dormition”) Cathedral of Vladimir was built to house the icon, which was installed in the cathedral in 1161 and decorated with a revetment of gold, silver, precious gems, and pearls. There, the icon continued to perform miracles—“large-scale, public, and political, as opposed to many other Russian miracle-working icons that were credited with personal healing miracles.”³⁹

However, Skrobucha points out some intriguing ambiguity in the icon’s history. The Russian Chronicles, he notes, do not give a clear account of the icon’s fate in several disasters. For example, he cites a fire of 1185 which “ravaged Vladimir,” of which the chronicles state that “the fire took everything and nothing was left after the conflagration.”⁴⁰ Skrobucha names at least one scholar who concluded that the Vladimirskaya was also destroyed (which would imply what we have is a later copy), but counters that the chronicles go on to specifically name the icon in the 13th-century Tartar invasion of Vladimir. During that invasion, according to the chronicles, the Tartars stripped the icon of its precious revetment, but apparently left the icon itself behind.⁴¹

33 Marie E. Gasper-Hulvat, “The Icon as Performer and as Performative Utterance: The Sixteenth Century Vladimir Mother of God in the Moscow Dormition Cathedral,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 57/58 (2010), 175-186 (p. 177).

34 Gasper-Hulvat, 176.

35 Belting, 281.

36 Heinz Skrobucha, *The World of Icons* (London: J. Murray, 1971), p. 76. Unless otherwise noted, the following history is taken from Skrobucha (a.k.a. HP Gerhard), 76-80.

37 Gasper-Hulvat, 176.

38 Gasper-Hulvat, 176.

39 Gasper-Hulvat, 177.

40 Skrobucha, 79. He is directly quoting the chronicles.

41 Skrobucha, 79.

In 1395, the icon was brought to Moscow to protect the city from invasion by Mongols led by Timur (Tamerlaine), and indeed, the invaders were repelled. After a brief return to Vladimir, the icon was set up in 1480 in the Uspenski (Dormition) Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin—a cathedral, again, which was built specifically to house it. During this time, two copies were made of it, one for each of the Uspenski Cathedrals; this fact has led scholars to conclude that the 12th-century Vladimirskaya traveled between the two cathedrals, and, while away from either cathedral, would be substituted with a copy which, as Gasper-Hulvat suggests, would play the role of the 12th-century icon in its absence.⁴²

In 1918-1919, the icon was examined in the State Restoration Workshops in Moscow. Skrobucha comments that the detailed notes from these examinations show that testing confirmed dates given in the chronicles, further casting doubt on the theory that the 12th-century icon was lost in a fire and replaced with a 13th-century copy. The examinations also revealed that the icon had been repainted multiple times. The only portions of the original painting that survive are the faces of both the Virgin and Child, his hand around her neck, and part of his shoulder. These portions are also the only part of the icon which retains the canvas backing that must have originally covered the entire surface of the wood. Skrobucha observes that “the faces have been preserved so well and have withstood the ravages of time better than the rest of the icon because the paint ground here is superimposed on a canvas,” whereas in the repainted portions of the icon, “the chalk background was applied straight on to the wood and so did not have such a secure base.”⁴³

That the icon was originally written with no canvas backing except what little exists today would be astonishing. However, if we recall that the icon had been cladded with a revetment later stripped by Tartar invaders, it seems likely that the original painting, along with the canvas beneath it, came off with the revetment, leaving only the faces and other small sections not covered by the cladding. Without the canvas backing, then, the newly repainted icon would become subject to the “ravages of time” and require additional repainting. Presumably the first repainting was done by someone familiar enough with the icon to recall the basic composition and colors; Skrobucha does mention that the 20th century examinations revealed that over time, as the icon was repainted, the figure of the Theotokos was altered. Whether the original hues

42 Gasper-Hulvat, 177.

43 Skrobucha, 79.

or not, Skrobucha describes the icon as a “harmonious combination of golden, cherry-red, blue and ochre yellow tones,”¹ with the faces painted in warm olive. The Child’s face is brighter than his mother’s, but the Virgin’s face also blossoms with pink and red tones.

In the end, we are left with a fragmented sketch of the history of this icon which is itself fragmentary. From a strictly artistic perspective, the icon’s present condition seems regrettable; from an historical perspective, it leaves us wondering and conjecturing: it presents us with a puzzle, but not a mystery. From the perspective of theological aesthetics, however, it draws us into a sensible mystery, the mystery of a “wounded innocence.”

A “Wounded Innocence”

In his book, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches Toward a Theology of Art*, Alejandro García-Rivera develops an important theological insight: the “wounded innocence” which appears in the very title of his work. We commonly think of innocence with respect to moral actions—innocence as a state of having not (yet) sinned, of not (yet) knowing evil. In this sense, innocence becomes “a mark of moral immaturity because it is also seen as a kind of ignorance.” But García-Rivera argues that innocence may also be conceived as a virtue that is gained, “something a person has fought to achieve.” This way of understanding innocence stems from Irenaeus, for whom the story of the “Fall” in Genesis 3 is a story of human development, “a tale of expulsion and subsequent pilgrimage... [which] begins a journey of both learning and moral advancement.” For Irenaeus, the evils and sins to which human beings are subject may be seen as growing pains on the way to a future state of perfection. Thus “[t]he Fall brought to self-consciousness a profound vulnerability, a radical openness to being acted upon, that, ultimately, expresses itself as the need for intercession, a call for sacred sympathy.” That sacred sympathy ultimately meets us in the incarnate Christ, the “crucial element in a theology of art.”²

In the Orthodox tradition (of which Irenaeus is very much a part), the Incarnation is the justification for the production and veneration of icons. Gasper-Hulvat writes,

In Christ...we encounter a visible image of God; in Mary, we find the fleshly materiality into which the logos entered in order to create the visible Christ.

1 Skrobucha, 80.

2 García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 15-18. Cf. Hart, quoted above, p. 9.

Thus, as a reference to the Incarnation, every icon of Mary is a justification of the orthodox ...veneration of all icons.³

García-Rivera carries this point further: the Incarnation is foundational to a theology of art, all art, not only icons or religious art. He proposes that the “eschatological dimension of the Incarnation suggests a little explored possibility for a theology of art, the dynamics of innocence emerging from human struggle within the garden of good and evil.” That struggle involves the dramatic interplay of “human compassion and divine sympathy” such as we see in the exchange between worshippers and icons or crucifixes which they touch, and where they leave votive candles, written notes, Milagros, and other gifts of supplication or gratitude. This struggle is a struggle not only for justification (the remission of sins) but also for sanctification, or theosis: the achievement of innocence, becoming fully human.⁴ Innocence gained is a “wounded” innocence precisely because it has come through a great struggle;⁵ like Jacob who wrestled with the angel (Gen. 32.23-32), a wounded innocence comes away with a new name—and a limp.

Since, as García-Rivera argues, “[a]rt is about experience: not in order to lose one’s innocence, but in order to gain it,”⁶ the history so evident in the very material of the Vladimirskaya speaks to us of such experience and struggle. Indeed, we can see in the icon various facets of a wounded innocence. First, it shows us the holy Theotokos, who, Orthodox theology teaches, was the first human to achieve perfection and enter fully into the Kingdom of Heaven. The Orthodox Church never adopted the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which claims that Mary, through a special grace, was conceived and born without original sin. Rather, through God’s gift of Torah to the Jewish people, Mary became the pinnacle of humanity and indeed all creation. As Léonide Ouspensky words it, “The Virgin is the first of all humanity to have attained, through the complete transfiguration of her being, that to which every

3 Gasper-Hulvat, 177.

4 García-Rivera, 19.

5 Cf. Revelation 7.14-17: “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (v. 14, NAB)

6 García-Rivera, 76.

creature is summoned.⁷ Or as Vladimir Zelinsky explains, from the Orthodox perspective,

preservation from original sin would deprive the Mother of God of her personal freedom; it would demean her act of obedience to God, her holiness. ... If a different spiritual nature were given to her, apart from her will, then she is no longer ours and cannot constitute our glory. We cannot then say to God: 'We have given her to thee,' as the Church says concerning this on the feast of Christ's Nativity.⁸

Icons of Mary, such as the Vladimirskaya, depict her in her glorified, divinized state, but at the same time, in her struggle as well. Just as icons of Christ in his crucifixion juxtapose his suffering and glorification, his death and his life, the Vladimirskaya shows us the Mother of God simultaneously perfected and struggling for perfection: we see in her eyes the sorrow of a Mother who knows of her Child's future sufferings, and yet she serenely returns his affection while also inviting the viewer into that love shared between Mother and Child. In so doing, she grants us what the philosopher Josiah Royce called "religious insight:" insight into both the need for and way of salvation.⁹ García-Rivera writes that

theology can discern the beautiful in the agonized face of a crucified man not as a sadistic exercise or as an expression of deep despair but because theology recognizes that Beauty shines through its communal dimension. Theology discerns the beautiful in the face of a crucified man through the lens of the community that gathers around the foot of his cross.¹⁰

While the Vladimirskaya only hints at the crucifixion through Mary's sorrowful gaze, it is clear that the icon itself has suffered. If we take its materiality seriously—and we should, because it is through that materiality that the icon mediates the presence of Mary and her Child—we may discern the beautiful not in spite of but because of her abrasions, seen through the lens of the community that gathers before—and touches—the icon.

7 Léonide Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), p. 60.

8 Vladimir Zelinsky, 'The Mother of God in the Orthodox Church,' in *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons* (Goleta, CA: Seat of Wisdom Books, 2007), pp. 767-800 (p. 799).

9 Cf. García-Rivera, 18.

10 García-Rivera, 5.

That community includes not only worshippers, but vandals and thieves, gift givers and gift recipients, caretakers and artists, including restorationists. Howard Caygill contends that the destruction or passing out of existence of artworks is “closer to their creation than has been fully appreciated by modern aesthetics.”¹¹ He relates the two in processes of care and conservation, as well as intentional destruction or alteration of one work of art in the production of another (for example, in the removal of a revetment from an icon). All artwork, like everything else that exists in time and space, is impermanent; any work’s continued existence is due to human care. The damage to this icon has provided opportunities (however modern art historians and preservationists may feel about it now) for multiple artists to lovingly repaint the image, which, in Orthodox tradition, makes those artists channels of God’s grace.

In addition, we see ourselves in this icon. Its damage renders the image of the divinized Theotokos more bearable and approachable to us who have not yet achieved perfection. As Gasper-Hulvat reminds us, “Orthodox theology, particularly that of icons, emphasizes the perception of the divine as light. But the light of the divine is intensely blinding; that which enables sight also prevents vision when it exceeds the viewer’s capacity to behold it.”¹² Veils, whether literal (in the case of veiled icons or revetments) or figurative (in the case of the iconostasis “veiling” the mysteries) may obscure, but they also make vision possible. Perhaps the chipped paint and scars on the Vladimirskaia’s surface serve as a veil to us who are wounded and not yet fitted for the beatific vision. We can approach Mary and Jesus in this icon, because it is like us: worn, damaged, and impermanent. And while they have attained resurrected glory, we may see that like us, they too have been wounded. The Scriptures tell us the risen Christ still bears his scars.

Anglican theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in his reflection on the Vladimirskaia, notes that the Child’s “boisterous” movement toward his Mother, “seizing handfuls of her clothing and nuzzling his face against hers,” shows us that God is

11 Howard Caygill. “The Destruction of Art.” In *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon. (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 163.

12 Gasper-Hulvat, 183.

not ashamed to be our God, to be identified as the one who is involved with us; here, though, it is as if he is not merely unashamed but positively shameless in his eagerness, longing to embrace and be embraced. It is not simply that God will deign not to mind our company; rather he is passionate for it. The image of God's action we are presented with here is of a hungry love.¹³

In the Incarnation, God chose to approach us by taking on human flesh and becoming subject to the conditions of our existence. Joining us in our struggle for innocence, Christ also was wounded. An incarnation-based theology of art must address not only the subject matter and formal qualities of a work of art, but also its capacity for brokenness. In the Virgin of Vladimir, we see that capacity both in the subject matter—in the Mother's sorrowful eyes, and in her Son's undignified emotion—but also in the very material of the icon itself. Like God's damaged creation, is not discarded but lovingly restored and maintained. And it still functions to mediate divine presence, demonstrating that God is able to work in, among, and through wounded vessels—ourselves included

13 Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things : Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Brewster Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006), pp. 23–24.

I Do Not Know:

THE HAMARTIOLOGICAL RATIONALE OF LEARNED IGNORANCE IN AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

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ON THIS PRINCIPLE IF ANYONE ASKS ME WHICH VIEW WAS HELD BY MOSES YOUR GREAT SERVANT, I WOULD NOT BE USING THE LANGUAGE OF MY CONFESSIONS IF I FAIL TO CONFESS TO YOU THAT I DO NOT KNOW (*SI TIBI NON CONFITEOR: "nescio"*) (XII.XXX.41).²

A story is often told that Augustine, when asked what God was doing before the creation of the world, responded that God was creating hell for people who ask dumb questions. Actually, he spoke against such a response.

This is my reply to anyone who asks: "What was God doing before he made heaven and earth." My reply is not that which someone is said to have given as a joke to evade the force of the question. He said: 'He was preparing hells for people who inquire into profundities.' It is one thing to laugh, another to see the point at issue, and this reply I reject. I would have preferred him to answer 'I am ignorant of what I do not know' ("Nescio, quod nescio") rather

1 This paper originated in a class I took with Dr. Christopher B. Brown on The Church in Late Antiquity at Boston University School of Theology in Fall 2015. I would like to thank Dr. Brown for allowing me to write on topics that interest me. I would also like to thank my wife McCall Dubbelman, my father Peter Dubbelman, and my friend Luke W. Mills for reading various stages of the paper.

2 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 270; henceforth I cite this translation within the text in parenthesis." The critical edition of the Latin text I am using for this paper is *Confessionum libri XIII: quos post Martinum Skutella Iterum*, ed. Lucas Verheijen (Turnholti: Brepols, 1981), 240; henceforth I cite the original Latin from this edition.

than reply so as to ridicule someone who has asked a deep question and to win approval for an answer which is a mistake (XI.xii.14).³

Augustine would rather a person admit her ignorance than use careless temporal language to describe an activity of God before God created time. Similar confessions of ignorance dominate Augustine's discussion of time in book eleven of the *Confessions*. He asks "What is time?" and basically answers that he does not know. "Who can comprehend this even in thought so as to articulate the answer in words? Yet what do we speak of, in our familiar everyday conversation, more than of time?" (XI.xiv.17). He knows (*scio*) what time is until someone asks him what it is; then its meaning eludes his grasp (*nescio*).⁴ He tries to suggest that time is a distension, but a distention of what he admits, "I do not know" (*nescio*) (XI.xxvi.33). His discussion of time concludes confessing to the Lord that the cause of such ignorance must be the weight of his own sin. "Lord my God, how deep is your profound mystery, and how far away from it have I been thrust by the consequence of my sins (consequential delictorum)" (XI.xxxi.41). Augustine believes he has fallen from the luminous reality of God's truth and consequently cannot adequately see nor understand the true depth of things. Augustine's confessions of sin, then, push his confessions of ignorance.⁵

3 Emphasis mine.

4 "Quid est ergo tempus? Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare uelim, nescio" (XI.xiv.17). "I confess to you, Lord, that I still do not know what time is (*ignorare me adhuc*), and I further confess to you, Lord, that as I say this I know myself to be conditioned by time" (XI.xxv.32). "So my God, I measure, and do not know (*nescio*) what I am measuring" (XI.xxvi.33). Augustine's response of ignorance to the question "What is time" follows the pattern of two prior questions: "Who then are you, my God?" (I.ix.4) and "What then am I, my God?" (X.xvii.26). Augustine's comment that he understands time until he is asked to think about it is similar to what Robert Jenson has called truth in the "dumb sense", that is, "the sense with which we all use the word when behaving normally, and which just therefore I cannot and do not need to analyze further". Robert Jenson, "What if it were true?", *Neue Zeitschrift fur systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 43, n.1 (2001), 3. C. Kavin Rowe has also made use of Jenson's notion of the dumb sense of truth referring to truth "in the smart sense, that is, with extensive reference to recent philosophical analysis and their relevance to theological exposition...and truth in the dumb sense", that is, the way we ask "is that true?" in ordinary life. *World Upside Down* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 160-1, [fn. 45].

5 Augustine confessed his own ignorance at least seventy times in the *Confessions*: Book I: I.vi.7; I.vi.8; I.vi.10; I.vii.11; I.vii.12. Book III: III.vii.12; III.vii.14; III.x.18; III.xii.21. Book IV: IV.ii.3; IV.xiii.20; IV.xiii.20; IV.xv.24; IV.xv.25; IV.xv.26). Book VI: VI.iii.4; VI.iv.5; VI.iv.6; VI.v.7-8. Book VII: VII.i.1; VII.i.1; VII.i.2; VII.vii.11; *Book VIII*: VIII.vi.14; VIII.vi.15. *Book IX*: IX.iv.9; IX.vii.16; IX.xi.28; *Book X*: X.v.7; X.viii.15; X.x.17; X.xv.23; X.xx.29; X.xxviii.39; X.xxxvii.61-2. *Book XI*: XI.ii.2; XI.iv.6; XI.viii.10; XI.xii.14; XI.xiv.17; XI.xxii.28; XI.xxv.32; XI.xxvi.33; XI.xxvi.33; XI.xxix.39. *Book XII*: XII.v.5; XII.vi.6; XII.xxx.41. *Book XIII*:

The primary thesis of this article is that hamartiology drives Augustine's confessions of ignorance just as much as, or more so, than ontology; that is to say, Augustine believed that the weight of his sin hindered him from fully knowing and understanding the truth of ultimate reality and, therefore, his repeated admissions of what he does not know can be seen as a practice of the confession of sin. It is standard to attribute the formulation of the doctrine of "original sin" to Augustine, but this doctrine is seldom considered in treatments of his "negative theology." The second, or correlate thesis, is that because hamartiology can be understood as the primary theological rationale behind Augustine's admissions of what he does not know, the phrase "learned ignorance" (*docta ignorantia*) better describes what Augustine is doing and why he is doing it, than does the usual imported Dionysian designation "negative theology." First, the phrase "learned ignorance" is used by Augustine himself in Letter 130 and, in its original context, represents a spiritual practice of prayer. What Augustine is actually doing in these passages is an exercise of confessional prayer. Describing such a practice as "learned ignorance" depicts well the intentional and habitual nature of a spiritual practice, whereas "negative theology" has the unfortunate connotations of philosophical speculation devoid of daily embodied practices.⁶ Second, the description "learned" better captures

XIII.xi.12; XIII.xiv.15; XIII.xxxviii.53. Several of these references include multiple confessions of ignorance.

6 That is not to say that "negative theology" was ever purely speculative. On the contrary, even the more "complete apophaticism" (Paul Rorem) of Dionysius was a spiritual practice of striving towards union with the God beyond Being. For more on the designation "complete apophaticism" see Paul Rorem, "Negative Theologies and the Cross," *Lutheran Quarterly* XXVII, no. 3. (Autumn 2009), 314-331. The essay may also be found in *The Dionysian Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 121-141. The work of the French philosopher Pierre Hadot suggests that the ancient philosophical schools primarily understood themselves as a way of life which involved cultivating certain spiritual practices. Hadot reminds us that for Plato even mathematics were used to train the soul to raise from the sensible to the intelligible. Pierre Hadot, "Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy," *Critical Inquiry*, 16.3 (1990), 483-505. For a summary of Hadot's thought see Arnold Davidson, "Spiritual Exercise and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot," *Critical Inquiry*, 16.3 (1990), 475-482. For an argument on the inherent connection of apophaticism and ascetic disciplines aimed at following God see Jeffrey Vogel, "Growing into the Darkness of God: The Inseparability Between Apophatic Theology and Ascetic Practice," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 15, n.2 (Fall 2015), 214-230. What I am suggesting is that the designation "negative theology" has the ring of purely speculative/academic connotations in the ears of most people today.

Augustine's positive stance towards the knowledge of ultimate reality than does "negative." Because Augustine believed that he would one day fully know and love God, his frequent admissions of what he does not know do not represent a movement away from understanding towards a union with God in a darkness of unknowing, but rather are, more often than not, confessions of ignorance in the midst of a search for understanding. Third, "ignorance" does a better job representing the subjective and hamartiological impetus behind Augustine's admissions of his lack of knowledge than does "theology," which tends to place the emphasis on the transcendent nature of God, not the inability of the subject.

Secondary Literature

Negative theology is typically associated with the Eastern Christian tradition stemming especially from the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, which famously made the distinction between "affirmative" (cataphatic) and "negative" (apophatic) theologies.⁷ Several scholars have recently suggested that a variation of negative theology can also be found in the Latin West in the writings of Augustine.⁸ Although this is the case, work on Augustine's negative

7 *The Mystical Theology*, ch. 3 in *Pseudo-Dionysius the Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 138. Dionysius the Areopagite was one of the two named converts from Paul's sermon "to an unknown" God in Athens (Acts 17:22-34). Eusebius of Caesarea listed him as the first Bishop of Athens (*Ecclesiastical Histories* III.4). The four treatises (*The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*) and ten letters attributed to Dionysius are now believed to be written some five hundred years later. The best introduction to Dionysian Mystical theology is now Paul Rorem,

The Dionysian Mystical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). For an introductory text from an Orthodox perspective see Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (New York: Continuum, 1989). For an overview of recent scholarship on Dionysius see the various essays in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles Stang (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

8 Vladimir Lossky stated that "negative theology is not foreign to St. Augustine;" "Elements of negative theology' in the thought of St Augustine," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 21 (1977), 75. Andrew Louth explained that the Latin West "had its own tradition of the incomprehensibility of God, powerfully articulated by Augustine (d. 430), innocent of the Dionysian terminology;" "Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 143. Knut Alfsvag argues that "there is no doubt that the basic familiarity with an apophatic approach to the ineffability of God within the Latin context is the result of the work of Augustine." Knut Alfsvag, *What No*

theology, here represented by the scholarship of Vladimir Lossky and T.J. Bavel, has overlooked the rationale of the doctrine of sin that undergirds Augustine's admissions of ignorance. John Peter Kenney's recent work on contemplation in late antiquity, on the other hand, gives priority to the confession of sin within Christianity and helps shed light on the theology lurking behind Augustine's practice of learned ignorance.

Vladimir Lossky suggested in the 1970s that a modest apophysis is present enough in the works of Augustine to warrant speaking of at least "the elements of negative theology in his religious thought."⁹ I suggest that his importation of the concept of "negative theology" to describe Augustine's statements of ignorance caused him to treat the primary rationale behind Augustine's learned ignorance as the inherent transcendence and unknowability of God and, therefore, to completely overlook explicit instances of a hamartiological rationale. First, Lossky made no comment on the immediate connection in Letter 130 between learned ignorance and human infirmities, even though he quotes the sentence in full. "Therefore there is in us a certain learned ignorance, if I may say so; but it is learned in the Spirit of God, who helps our infirmity."¹⁰ Secondly, in his treatment of the "ascension narratives" of the Confessions Lossky asserted that Augustine's descriptions of a "sudden" contact with divine reality are central for understanding Augustine's mysticism, but he did not mention Augustine's clear attribution that it was the weight of his sexual habit that caused him to come crashing back down to multiplicity (Conf. VII.xvii.23).¹¹ On top of this, Lossky pointed to a similar "ascension" text in *De Trinitate* VIII.2.3, but omitted Augustine's complaint that greed hinders the contemplative from fully grasping God. "And what weight (pandere) is it, I ask, that drags you back but the birdlime of greed (cupiditatis) for the dirty junk you have picked up on your wayward wanderings?" (*De. Trin.* XIII.2.3).¹²

Mind Has Conceived: on the significance of christological apophaticism (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2010), 93.

- 9 Vladimir Lossky, "Elements of 'Negative Theology' in the Thought of St. Augustine", *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, v.21, n.2 (1977), 68.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 71; emphasis mine.
- 11 Lossky comments regarding *De Trinitate* XIII.2.3 that the sudden "flash of uncreated reality that lightly touches the consciousness for a moment and then disappears is reminiscent of the 'suddenly' (ἐξαίφνης) of Plato." *Ibid.*, 74. For biblical instances of this adverb see Mark 13:36; Luke 2:13; 9:39; Acts 9:3; 22:6.
- 12 Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), 244. Henceforth I cite this translation in parenthesis. The Latin is taken from Augustine, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De Trinitate, Libri XV, Libri I-XV* (Turnholti: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1968), 1: 271. Henceforth I use this text for the Latin of *De Trinitate*.

It seems that because Lossky was attempting to find elements of an Eastern apophaticism in Augustine, the immutable and unknowable nature of God became the key criterion to an Augustinian “negative theology.”¹³

T. J. van Bavel also does not mention hamartiology in his exposition of Augustine’s “aphaireticism.”¹⁴ Following the work of Pierre Hadot, Bavel distinguishes between Platonic “aphaireticism” and Neo-Platonic “apophaticism.” Plato’s aphaireticism consisted in abstracting particulars in order to attain knowledge of the simplest Being; on the other hand, Plotinus’s apophaticism, according to Bavel, consisted of negating all predicates of the divine because the One is beyond all Being and Intelligence. Therefore, for Plotinus, according to Bavel’s rendering of Hadot, the One can never be an object of knowledge. Bavel suggests that Augustine’s thought is more in line with Plato’s aphaireticism than Plotinus’s apophaticism.¹⁵ Although Bavel attributes a more positive position to Augustine regarding the knowledge of divine reality, he still does not even consider the place the doctrine of sin played in Augustine’s negative statements. The closest Bavel comes to considering a hamartiological rationale is in his explanation that “the reason why God remains incomprehensible is that all created things are mortal and changeable.”¹⁶ But Bavel does not move from here to discuss the doctrine of sin. Here, like Lossky, Bavel also cuts out the end of the quote in *De Trinitate* VIII.ii.3 with the explicitly hamartiological rationale (“the birdlime of greed”) for why the contemplative cannot understand the untrammelled nature of truth itself.¹⁷

John Peter Kenney, on the other hand, has recently offered a rereading of the mysticism of the Confessions, suggesting that the ascension narratives (VII.x.16, VII.xvii.23, and IX.x.23-25) were more “confessions” than examples

13 Lossky, “Elements of Negative Theology”, 74. Andrew Louth takes Augustine’s hamartiology a little bit more seriously than does Lossky. In his treatment of Augustine’s mysticism in his important work on the origins of the Christian mystical tradition, Louth mentions the inability of humans to ascend to God due to sin and he quotes *De Trin* VIII.2.3 until the last sentence. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1981), 148.

14 T.J. van Bavel, O.S.A., “God in between Affirmation and Negation According to Augustine”, in *Augustine: presbyter factus sum*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, Earl C. Muller, Roland J. Teske (New York: P. Lang, 1993), 73-97.

15 *Ibid.*, 85.

16 *Ibid.*, 79.

17 *Ibid.*, 76.

of “contemplation.”¹⁸ Kenney suggests that the key to interpreting these passages is the overall theology undergirding them and that the theology in the accounts in book VII as a Platonist and IX as a Christian are roughly univocal: they simultaneously teach human transcendence and the inability of the soul in and of itself to sustain contact with ultimate reality. Kenney states that the fleeting nature of the contemplative accounts are due to Augustine’s belief that the soul is fallen and powerless to effect its own salvation. For Kenney, therefore, the narratives were not intended to serve as guides to attaining contemplative union with the divine, but rather, in these narratives, “Augustine sketches a consistent Christian portrait of his soul’s discovered limitations and his need for a divine mediator.”¹⁹ In Kenney’s hands Augustinian “Contemplation, far from being an end in itself, serves to open the Christian soul to confession.”²⁰ Here, the line of demarcation between Platonism and Christianity is not found in the inherent unknowability of God (Lossky), but rather in the priority of the practice of confession.²¹

Neo-Platonism as represented by Plotinus is indispensable to interpreting Augustine’s confessions of ignorance. But, in the rush to compare Augustine to Plotinus many scholars seem to have completely overlooked Augustine’s explicit attribution of his ignorance to the doctrine of the Fall. Augustine repeatedly admitted his inability to remember or understand in the *Confessions* not primarily because of a metaphysical conviction regarding the unknowable nature of God, but rather because of his belief that the dredges of sin still lingered in his soul preventing him from fully grasping the depths of ultimate reality.

18 For a succinct summary of his argument see John Peter Kenney, “Mysticism and Contemplation in Augustine’s *Confessions*”, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 190-201; for a more comprehensive treatment see *The Mysticism of Augustine: rereading the Confessions* (NY: Routledge, 2005) and *Contemplation and Classical Christianity: A Study in Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

19 John Peter Kenney, “Mysticism and Contemplation in Augustine’s *Confessions*”, 192.

20 *Ibid.*, 191.

21 *Ibid.*, 199.

Learned Ignorance as Spiritual Practice

Augustinian “learned ignorance” must first be understood as a practice before it is analyzed as an idea.²² Most notably the phrase “learned ignorance” surfaced in Letter 130 to Proba, a wealthy Roman widow who was concerned about what to pray because she was perturbed by Paul’s statement that “we do not know what to pray for as we ought” (Rom. 8:26). Augustine instructed Proba that she ought to pray for “the happy life”, but she does not know what to pray exactly because she cannot fully imagine true happiness yet.²³ This is because the happy life is not just being happy, but rather consists in finding happiness in the right thing, eternal communion with God. Paul teaches that the Christian does not know what to pray for because she cannot adequately think of eternal happiness. She does not know what she cannot think of as it is.²⁴ That is to say, she cannot fully imagine the future blessed life with God. Therefore, Augustine describes a practice of casting aside whatever comes to mind because it cannot capture what the heart truly desires. “Whatever comes to mind as we think, we cast aside, reject, disapprove, and know that this is not what we seek although we do not know what sort of thing that is.”²⁵ Since we cannot fully think of our future bliss, Augustine stated that “There is in us, therefore, a certain learned ignorance, so to speak, but an ignorance from the Spirit of God, who helps our weakness.”²⁶ Augustine turned to the language of Romans 8:26 to describe this as praying with inexpressible sighs

22 Philip Sheldrake, among others, has emphasized the centrality of practice in the study of spirituality. Sheldrake affirms that historically spiritualities originate from practices more so than ideas: “concrete spiritualities grow out of the actual practice of the Christian life rather than out of intellectual concepts conceived in isolation from experience and from reflection on experience.” Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 25. For an overview of the landscape of modern spirituality studies see Claire Wolfteich, “Animating Questions: Spirituality and Practical Theology”, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, vol. 13, issue 1 (2009), 121-143.

23 Aristotle likewise identifies the end goal of human life as happiness. Happiness is the final end because it is chosen for its own sake and never for another reason. Aristotle defines happiness in light of the function of humanity, which is “an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.” Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (NY: Penguin, 1953), 76.

24 Augustine, “Letter 130”, in *Letters 100-155*, trans. Roland Teske, vol. II/2 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 197.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

of groanings. The Spirit “makes the saints intercede with inexpressible groans, therefore, when he inspires them with the desire for so great a still unknown reality, which we await with patience.” Augustine asked “How, after all, do we express, how do we desire, what we do not know?”²⁷ Because this is the case Augustine explained that overly loquacious prayers should be avoided. Instead, he advocated the practice of “the brothers in Egypt” who prayed “very brief ones that are tossed off as if in a rush.”²⁸ Such prayers are “very often carried out more with sighs than words, more with weeping than with speaking.”²⁹

Likewise, Augustine’s admissions of ignorance in the *Confessions* may be understood as a spiritual practice reminiscent of the kind of learned ignorance that he advocated to Proba in Letter 130. Due to infirmities people cannot know final happiness and, therefore, do not know how to pray as they ought. The language of the *Confessions* is, likewise, first and foremost a prayer.³⁰ The very first confession of ignorance during his infancy narrative is spoken as a prayer to the Lord: “What, Lord, do I wish to say except I do not know (nescio) whence I came to be in this mortal life” (I.vi.7).³¹ The period of Augustine’s infancy, shrouded in the darkness of forgetfulness, is also a period marred by the darkness of original sin.

27 *Ibid.* 198. Notice that the language of “sigh” or “groan” is also used in all the ascension narratives in the *Confessions* and in a very similar ascension passage in *Sermon on Psalm 41*. “For a brief while having come within reach of that sound, so that by an effort we may catch something from that house of God, yet though the burden, so to speak, of our infirmity, we sink back to our usual level and relapse to our ordinary state. And just as there we found cause for rejoicing, so here there will not be lacking an occasion for sorrow...[man] is still groaning here, still bearing about the frailty of the flesh”. Also, notice the connection between the inability to maintain contact with transcendent reality due to the burden of human infirmity and “sighing.” *Sermon on Psalm 41*, in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (NY: The Modern Library, 2006), 25.

28 *Ibid.*, 193.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Robin Lane Fox takes both the style of a first person prayer and the “mystical aim” (his words) of the *Confessions* quite seriously. Robin Lane Fox, *Augustine: Conversations to Confessions* (NY: Basic Books, 2015), 2, 13.

31 “*Quid enim est quod uolo dicere, domine, nisi quia nescio, unde uenerim huc, in istam dico uitam mortalem an mortem uitalem? Nescio*” (I.vi.7).

The Positive Quest for Knowledge

The designation “learned”, as in “learned ignorance”, seems to better express Augustine’s positive stance towards knowledge than does the label “negative.” Augustine’s positive stance towards knowledge may be substantiated through four examples. First, the initial conversion Augustine experienced in the Confessions is the conversion to philosophia, “the love of wisdom.” Second, many of the statements of ignorance in the Confessions are statements of historical ignorance that are later corrected by the knowledge of Platonism and finally Christianity. Third, the predicament that humans are not able to fully comprehend an infinite God does not cause Augustine to infer that the true knowledge of God is to be found in unknowing, but, rather, it leads him to pray and ask God for understanding. Fourth, when Augustine does most explicitly engage in the practice of “negative theology”, he describes such understanding as a good start, but not the end of knowledge.

First, Augustine’s initial “conversion” in the Confessions is a conversion to philosophia, “the love of wisdom”, through reading Cicero’s Hortensius. It is here that Augustine begins narrating his return and ascent back to God, “I began to rise up to return to you” (III.iv.7). What delighted him was Cicero’s exhortation to not “study one particular sect but to love and seek and pursue and hold fast and strongly embrace wisdom itself, wherever found” (III.iv.8).³² The influence of Cicero continued into Augustine’s career as a Bishop. For instance, Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana* (“On Christian Teaching”) may be interpreted as a manual of rhetoric for Bishops to use in preaching. One of the implications of Augustine’s emphasis on the need for rhetoric in Christian preaching is that people will not believe the truth simply because it is true (the

32 Such a commitment to pursuing truth wherever it may be found, is similar to what Ted Peters calls “ecumenic” theology, which “places theological reflection into dialogue and even creative mutual interaction with domains of human experience or knowing outside of the Christian Church. The whole of reality becomes the theologian’s *ecumene*, so to speak.” Ted Peters, *Sin Boldly* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 342. For further explanation of this term see Ted Peter’s preface to the first edition of *God: The World’s Future*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), viii-xi. Although Augustine’s early “ecumenic” approach to knowledge seems to wane as he grows older. In an article comparing Augustine’s and Nicholas of Cusa’s use of Platonism Edward Cranz has suggested that Augustine increasingly becomes more pessimistic about the ability to know ultimate reality through taking a look around the neighborhood. Edward F Cranz,, “Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa in the Tradition of Western Christian Thought,” *Speculum* 28, no. 2 (1953): 297-316.

Platonic fallacy); instead, Augustine argues that the truth must be defended and compellingly presented with rhetoric. It is also quite plausible that Augustine's doctrine of sin influenced his position on this issue. The Christian Bishop must use the tools of rhetoric to move his readers towards the truth because they cannot count on the soul by its own powers to respond to the truth. Along similar lines, Augustine's "negative theology" in the Confessions may be another trope in his arsenal of rhetoric intended to delight and move the reader.³³ First, the rhetorical nature of negation may be seen as a device of worship; that is, the negations are intended to enhance God's superlatives. Saying that no words can adequately describe God is one way to praise God. Secondly, saying what he does not know may also be intended to prepare the reader to more readily accept Augustine's statements of what he does know. This would be somewhat similar to a modern Politician connecting with the reader and covering his basis by asserting "I don't know about this or this" but "I will tell you one thing, I do know this."

Second, the majority of statements of ignorance during his philosophical quests in Books III to Book VII are statements of historical ignorance that are later amended with correct knowledge first of Platonism and then of Christianity. For instance, two of the most common confessions of ignorance in these chapters are wrong views of evil and spiritual substance. First, he was ignorant that evil was not a thing in itself, but only a negation of the good: "I did not know that evil has no existence except as a privation of good" (III.vii.12); "I did not know (non noueram) nor had I learnt that evil is not a substance" (IV.xv.24). Second, Augustine continually laments that he was ignorant of the possibility of spiritual substance: "Although I had not the least notion or even an obscure suspicion how there could be spiritual substance" (VI.iii.4).³⁴ Although Augustine continues to still admit his deep ignorance as a Christian in Books X to XIII, he seems more willing to declare what he knows to be true of God. "This I know (Hoc noui), my God, and give thanks. I know (Noui) and confess to you...We know this, Lord, we know" (Nouimus, domine, nouimus) (XI.vii.9).

33 I owe the interpretation of *On Christian Teaching* as handbook of Christian rhetoric for Bishops and the implications against the "Platonic fallacy" to Dr. Christopher B. Brown, who presented this interpretation in a class at Boston University School of Theology on The Church in Late Antiquity in Fall 2015.

34 Again, "I retained so much vanity as to be unable to think any substance possible other than that which the eyes normally perceive" (VII.i.1); "I did not know (*ignorabam*) what to think about your substantial nature" (VI.v.7-8).

Third, the fact that the human mind cannot adequately conceive of or describe God did not cause Augustine to stop seeking after a positive knowledge of the truth. At the very beginning of the *Confessions* Augustine asked “Who then are you my God?” and his answer demonstrates the tension between the need to speak of God and the inability of finite human words to describe the infinite God. After several attempts at answering his question, he is brought up short: “But in these words what have I said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you? Yet woe to those who are silent about you because, though loquacious with verbosity, they have nothing to say” (I.iv.4). Elsewhere, a very similar predicament in *De Trinitate* caused Augustine to pray for revelation: “Now since we ought to think about the Lord our God always, and can never think about him as he deserves; since at all times we should be praising him and blessing him, and yet no words of ours are capable of expressing him, I begin by asking him to help me understand” (*De Trin.* 5.1).³⁵ Here the elusive nature of God and God’s truth caused Augustine to pray for understanding and, as evidenced in *Confessions* Books XI to XIII, incited him to search the scriptures for answers.

Fourth, there are only two passages in *De Trinitate* where Augustine explicitly engages in “negative” theology.³⁶ In both Book V.1.2 and Book VIII.2.3 Augustine strung together a list of negative predications of God in order to demonstrate that knowing what God is not is a good place to begin in understanding the nature of God. Augustine first used negative theology in book five while attempting to make sense of the biblical revelation of the Trinity (books one to four) through using the categories of human philosophy (books five to seven). In treating Aristotle’s categories of accidents he asserted,

Thus we should understand God, if we can and as far as we can, to be good without quality, creative without need or necessity, presiding without position,

35 *The Trinity*, 189; my emphasis.

36 Here negative theology is understood as the practice of directly negating ones affirmations, or stating what God is not, in order to stress the absolutely unique nature of God or God’s work. My definition of explicit negative theology derives from Charles Stang, who defines “negative theology” as “a name given to a tradition within Christianity that confesses God to be so utterly transcendent, so beyond our concepts and names for God, that we must in fact ‘negate’ them in order to free God from such cramped categories.” Charles M. Stang, “Negative Theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius the Areopagite,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 161.

holding all things together without possession, wholly everywhere without place, everlasting without time, without change in himself making changeable, and undergoing nothing. Whoever thinks of God like that may not yet be able to discover altogether what he is (*quid sit*), but is at least piously on his guard against thinking about him anything that he is not (*quid non sit*) (*De Trinitate* V.1.2).³⁷

In the second explicit instance of negative theology Augustine turned his attention “in a more inward manner” spending the next seven books looking at the human mind as the image of God. Here Augustine admitted again that knowing what God is not is a good place to start: “For it is no small part of knowledge, when we emerge from these depths to breathe in that sublime atmosphere, if before we can know what God is (*scire possimus quid sit deus*), we are at least to know what he is not (*scire quid non sit*)” (*De Trin.* VIII.2.3).³⁸ He then proceeded to list nine things God is not: God “is certainly not (*non est*) the earth, nor (*nec*) the heavens, nor (*nec*) like earth and heavens, nor any such thing as we see in the heavens, nor . . .”³⁹ In both of these passages Augustine asserted that knowing what God is not may be a helpful starting place to thinking of God as God; what he does not do is describe such “negative” knowledge as the summit of understanding as does Dionysius.

Subjective and Hamartiological Rationale

Augustine explains in Letter 130 that Proba does not know what to pray for because she does not know what she cannot think of as it is. One of the primary reasons she cannot do this is on account of the infirmity of sin. Such a subjective and hamartiological rationale for ignorance may be evidenced in at least four places. First, it can be seen in the opening paragraph of the Confessions. Second, it is further demonstrated by the overall purpose and structure of the narrative as a confession of praise for God’s redemption of sin. Third, it is further substantiated by the fact that Augustine explicitly said that it is the weight of lust that held him down from fully contemplating God. Lastly, it is shown in a radical confession of anthropological ignorance in which Augustine reversed the usual polarities of negative theology stating that, because of his sinfulness, there are actually things he could know about God with more accuracy than he could know about himself.

37 *The Trinity*, 190. *De Trinitate*, 207.

38 *The Trinity*, 243; *De Trinitate*, 270.

39 *Ibid.*

First, Augustine opens the *Confessions* claiming that humanity desires to praise God while bringing with them the knowledge of their sin. Augustine's use of the conjunction "nevertheless" (*tamen, sed*) represents this reality: man carries "with him the witness of his sin and the witness that you resist the proud. Nevertheless (*et tamen*), to praise you is the desire of man" (I.i.1). The necessity to praise God while remaining a sinner shows up in other statements where Augustine confessed that all words fall short of the reality of God, but humanity must nevertheless speak of God (I.iv.4). After summarizing this tension Augustine made the same declaration of "nevertheless" right before his first confession of ignorance. After confessing his sin (I.v.6), he inserted another conjunction, "Nevertheless (*sed tamen*) allow me to speak before your mercy, though I am but dust and ashes" (I.vi.7). The first thing Augustine said to God is a statement of ignorance: "What, Lord, do I wish to say except that I do not know (*nescio*) whence I came to be in this mortal life or, as I may call it, this living death? I do not know (*nescio*) where I came from . . . I do not remember (*non enim ego memini*)" (I.vi.7).

Second, such a hamartiological impetus also fits with the overall purpose and narrative structure of the treatise as a confession of praise to God for forgiving his past and present sin. For instance, the entire second book is a meditation on his sinfulness in the sixteenth year of his life. He opened the book saying "I intend to remind myself of my past foulness and carnal corruptions" (II.i.1). He reiterated his purpose stating, "Why do I record this episode? It is that I and any of my readers may reflect on the great depth from which we have to cry to you?" (II.iii.5). Again, he announced his purpose: "But I shall nevertheless confess to you my shame, since it is for your praise (*Ps. 105:47*)" (IV.i.1). With this in mind, it is possible to understand the narrative structure of the *Confessions* as a confession of praise for God's redemption of his past (Book 1-9) and present (Book 10) sin. Augustine alluded to this structure at the beginning of Book 10, "Stir up the heart when people read and hear the confessions of my past wickedness [Books 1 to 9], which you have forgiven and covered up to grant me happiness in yourself, transforming my soul by faith and your sacrament" (X.iii.4). The story does not end with the confession of his past sins, but he turned to confess, "not who I was, but what I have now come to be and what I continue to be" (X.iv.6). Here Augustine repeatedly confessed that even in the present he is still weighed down by sin, although seemingly "venial" in nature.⁴⁰

40 Twice in Book IX Augustine admits the possibility of sin in his life. First, Augustine opens Book IX defending his decision not to withdraw immediately from his profession as a rhetorician. "One of your servants, my brothers, might say

Third, Augustine described himself as weighed down by lust both before and after his baptism. Early in his narrative he described his lust as “a thick mist shutting me off from the brightness of your face, my God” (II. iii.8). In Book VII, as a Platonist, Augustine had come to be convinced that God’s substance was transcendent, “but from the disappointment I suffered I perceived that the darkness of my soul (*tenebras animae*) would not allow me to contemplate these sublimities” (VII.xx.26). It is this weight that caused him to come crashing down from his Platonic ecstasy: “I was astonished to find that already I loved you, not a phantom surrogate for you. But I was not stable in the enjoyment of my God. I was caught up to you by your beauty and quickly torn away from you by my weight (*pondere*). With a groan (*cum gemitu*) I crashed into inferior things. This weight was my sexual habit (*et pondus hoc constuetudo carnalis*)” (VII.xvii.23). Interestingly, Augustine did not tell his “conversion story” in chapter XIII as an acceptance of the truth of Christianity; rather, having already become convinced of the truth of Christianity, he told the story of his conversion from lust towards a life of celibacy. “I will now tell the story, and confess to your name, of the way in which you delivered me from the chain of sexual desire (*concupitus*), by which I was tightly bound, and from the slavery of worldly affairs” (VIII.vi.13). It was “chaste Lady Continence” who beckoned Augustine in the garden through countless examples (VIII. xi.27). The verse that Augustine happened upon when he picked up the scriptures also spoke directly to his sexual licentiousness (Rom. 13:13-14). Augustine concluded the account of his conversation stating that “The effect of your converting me to yourself was that I did not now seek a wife and had no ambition for success in this world” (VIII.xii.30). Although this is how Augustine described his conversion, the chains of lust still seem to be weighing Augustine down as a Christian in Book X. While confessing his present state, Augustine picked back up the theme of God’s command of continence.⁴¹ The

that I had sinned in this matter . . . I would not contest that. But, most merciful God, did you not grant pardon and remission for this fault with my other horrendous and mortal sins, in the holy water of baptism?” (IX.ii.4) Second, in the context of defending himself for weeping over the death of his mother, again Augustine speaks to the reader to interpret his actions as they may. “If he finds fault that I wept for my mother for a fraction of an hour. . .let him not mock me but rather, if a person of much charity, let him weep himself before you for my sins” (IX.xii.33).

41 It is here that Augustin begins his famous refrain “Grant what you command, and command what you will” that supposedly infuriated Pelagius the British Monk (X.xx.ix.40).

first command Augustine used to illustrate his lack of continence is God's command not to lust. Here, Augustine confessed that although God had given him the strength to live a celibate life, images of past sexual acts still remained in the halls his memory. "But in my memory of which I have spoken at length, there still live images of acts which were fixed there by my sexual habit" (X.xxx.41). Although Augustine desired to completely shake these memories, they still came back to haunt him in his dreams. Augustine believed that the weight of his sexual habit still held him down from fully contemplating God and experiencing the happy life.⁴²

The weight of sin hindering contemplation is also succinctly depicted immediately following the second explicit instance of negative theology in *De Trinitate* (VIII.1.2). After a list of nine negations Augustine invited the reader to contemplate God in God's-self, if they could.

Come, see if you can, O soul weighed down with the body that decays (Wis 9:15) and burdened with many and variable earthy thoughts, come see it if you can – God is truth . . . Do not ask what truth is; immediately a fog of bodily images and a cloud of fancies will get in your way and disturb the bright fair weather that burst on you the first instant when I said "truth." Come, hold it in that first moment in which so to speak you caught a flash from the corner of your eye when the word "truth" was spoken, stay there if you can. But you cannot; you slide back into these familiar earthy things. And what weight (pondere) is it, I ask, that drags you back but the birdlime of greed (cupiditatis) for the dirty junk you have picked up on our wayward wanderings?⁴³

In Lossky's treatment of Augustine's negative theology he left out the rationale of the last sentence; but with the last sentence included, Augustine explicitly attributed the inability of the subject to contemplate the eternal reality of God because of the weight of their sin.

Fourth, when Augustine began his confession of who he currently is in Book X, very much like his first confession at the beginning of the infancy

42 Even in the last Book Augustine is still speaking of ignorance while lamenting the weight of cupidity: "To whom can I expound, and with what words can I express the weight of cupidity pulling us downwards into the precipitous abyss and the lifting up of love given by your Spirit... To whom can I communicate this? How can I speak about it?" (XIII.vii.8)

43 *On The Trinity*, 244; *De Trinitate* 271.

narrative, he started with what he did not know about himself. Here Augustine reversed the normal polarities of apophasis and said that due to sin he was more of an enigma to himself than God. Even though 1 Cor. 2:11 says that the spirit of man knows what is in him, “yet there is something of the human person which is unknown even to the spirit of man which is in him.” Augustine knew something of God that he did not even know about himself, namely, he knew that God could not be subjected to violence (pace Manichees), “whereas I do not know (nescio) which temptations I can resist and which I cannot.” Therefore, Augustine said his confession of himself in the present would include both what he knew of himself and what he does not know of himself: “let me confess what I know of myself (Confitear ergo quid do me scio). Let me confess too what I do not know of myself (confitear et quid de me nesciam)” (X.v.7).⁴⁴

Conclusion

One of the prominent confessions of Augustine in his most famous treatise is what he does not know. I have argued that the primary theological impetus undergirding such a practice is hamartiological in nature. Augustine believed that his sin hindered him from fully contemplating divine reality. Along these lines, I have also suggested that Augustine’s own phrase “learned ignorance” better describes what Augustine is actually doing when he confesses what he does not know than does the foreign Dionysian designation “negative theology.” This is the case for several reasons. First, learned ignorance better captures the actual practice of what is going on in the Confessions. Augustine’s admissions of what he does not know are a spiritual practice of confession grounded in the habitual exercise of prayer. Secondly, I suggested that the designation “learned” better captures Augustine’s optimistic stance towards the knowledge of God and the truth, whereas “negative” seems to put the emphasis on the inability to know ultimate reality. Because Augustine believed that God would one day be genuinely known and loved in a beatific vision, which constituted the happy life, his admissions of ignorance did not represent a movement towards union with God in noetic darkness, but may be seen as a cry for understanding. Third, I have suggested that “ignorance” points to the

44 Augustine’s introduction to the last three books follows this same pattern. After stating that he is turning his attention to the interpretation of scripture he says “For a long time now I have been burning to meditate in your law and confess to you what I know of it and what lies beyond my powers – the first elements granted by your illumination and the remaining areas of darkness in my understanding” (XI.i.1).

subjective and hamartiological rationale behind Augustine's confessions of what he does not know, whereas "theology" tends to place the emphasis on the transcendent nature of God. Here Augustine was radical in his assertion that due to the weight of sin humanity cannot ascend to God. Because this is the case, Augustine surmised that "my entire hope is exclusively in your very great mercy" (X.xxix.40).

ESSENTIAL OTHERS ON THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT:

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN THE
VISUDDHIMAGGA'S PRESENTATION OF PROGRESS ALONG THE
PATH

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Introduction

What roles do others play in one's pursuit of enlightenment? Is there room for others in one's quest? Are others necessary, superfluous, or perhaps obstructive? Passages from Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*¹—a highly influential, comprehensive treatise on Buddhist doctrine written in Sri Lanka in the 5th Century CE—describing family and kin as “impediments” to progress towards enlightenment may suggest that others are to be avoided (VSM III 29), with the path to enlightenment best pursued alone. Yet other passages—perhaps most prominently the extended discussion of corpse meditation (VSM VI)—suggest quite the opposite: that other figures, far from being impediments to one's progress, in fact play an essential role in aiding one towards enlightenment. Corpses, teachers, and others more generally are depicted in specific passages executing critical functions that result in the meditator being able to see essential truths of reality (e.g., the pervasiveness of impermanence). This new depth of vision, linked also to a change in values that more appropriately coheres with the actual nature of existence, comes not in spite of others but precisely because of them. The need for others along the path to enlightenment, and the fact that awakening comes not solely through

1 All references in this paper to the *Visuddhimagga* are taken from: Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, trans. Nyanamoli Himi (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2010).

the carefully-guarded solitude of individual meditation but because of specific, insight-producing interactions with others, raises a number of important questions: Why, and how, do others play significant, even essential, roles in one's progress towards enlightenment? Why does one need to look at another to see the absence of one's self? What is learned through others that cannot be learned (or learned as fully) just by oneself?

Previous scholarship on the *Visuddhimagga* has largely overlooked these fundamental questions. Works that have addressed the importance accorded to others in the *Visuddhimagga* have tended to restrict their attention to ethical considerations—focused squarely on Buddhaghōṣa's treatment of morality (*sīla*) with respect to others in the first section of his text—and have ignored the value given to others more generally throughout the *Visuddhimagga* in aiding one towards enlightenment.² Other scholarly works, meanwhile, have adopted a macroscopic view in analyzing the structure and content of the text as a whole and comparing it to works of similar scope and purpose.³ This lack of attention to the specific importance of other figures for the meditator's progress along the path thus presently exists as a lacuna in the scholarly literature on the *Visuddhimagga*. This paper therefore aims to address

2 Such works include both scholarly analyses of Buddhaghōṣa's presentation of moral behavior and technique-centered guides based on the *Visuddhimagga* regarding how to live ethically among others. For an example of the former, see: U Dhammaratana, *Guide through Visuddhimagga* (Varanasi: Maha Bodhi Society, 1964); also, Damien Keown, "Morality in the *Visuddhimagga*," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 6(1) (1983): 61-75. For an example of the latter, see: Gyana Ratna Sraman, "Loving Kindness Meditation in the *Visuddhimagga*," *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, 53(1) (2004): 462-466. Other ethically-focused studies, such as Maria Heim's investigation into Buddhaghōṣa's conception of moral agency and intention, make reference to the *Visuddhimagga* but do not specifically explicate the value of others for one's progress towards enlightenment; see: Maria Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghōṣa on Mind, Intention, and Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

3 A "macroscopic" analysis of the *Visuddhimagga*'s structure and content, along with a "microscopic" discussion of a particular section of the thirteenth chapter employed to underscore the "literary-dramatic" elements of the work, can be found in: Steven Collins, "Remarks on the *Visuddhimagga*, and on Its Treatment of the Memory of Former Dwelling(s) (*Pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa*)," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 37(5) (2009): 499-532. Comparisons with other texts are made, for example, in: P.V. Bapat, *Vimuttimagga and Visuddhimagga: A Comparative Study* (Poona: P.V. Bapat, 1937), and Tilmann Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988).

this dearth of scholarship, guided by the questions posed above, through an analysis of Buddhaghōṣa's presentation of the essential roles played by corpses, teachers, and others more generally, in one's progress towards enlightenment.

Corpses

The sixth chapter of the *Visuddhimagga* depicts corpses playing a particularly prominent role in assisting one towards enlightenment through their remarkable ability to communicate impermanence in such a striking way that the reality of decay cannot be denied. While, lacking sentience, they represent a special kind of "other," it is precisely through this lack that corpses become freed from continually manufacturing false appearances to aid a meditator in her quest to perceive reality clearly. As Buddhaghōṣa illustrates near the end of his sixth chapter, humans are highly prone to self-deception. Not wanting to face the reality of change, ignorant of the impermanence inherent within all things, and greedy for self-centered pleasures, people employ all measures of disguise and distraction in an attempt to cover up the body's current state of decay. According to Buddhaghōṣa, the living body is:

...a collection of over three hundred bones, jointed by one hundred and eighty joints, bound together by nine hundred sinews, plastered over with nine hundred pieces of flesh, enveloped in the moist inner skin, enclosed in the outer cuticle, with orifices here and there, constantly dribbling and trickling like a grease pot, inhabited by a community of worms, the home of disease, the basis of painful states, perpetually oozing from the nine orifices like a chronic open carbuncle, from both of whose eyes eye-filth trickles, from whose ears comes ear-filth, from whose nostrils snot... (VSM VI 89)

As this description indicates, one's body in reality is just as repulsive as a corpse, being the "home of disease" and marked invariably by the rather revolting processes of steady, gradual decay. But humans, not wanting to face this truth, make daily attempts to disguise their bodies' foulness. Buddhaghōṣa, commenting on this vain endeavor, writes:

...by rubbing out the stains on its teeth with tooth sticks and mouthwashing and all that, by concealing its private parts under several cloths, by daubing it with various scents and salves, by pranking it with nosegays and such things, [the body] is worked up into a state that permits of its being taken as "I" and "mine." So men delight in women and women in men without perceiving the

true nature of its characteristic foulness, now masked by this adventitious adornment. (VSM VI 90)

While acts like “rubbing out the stains on [one’s] teeth” and “concealing [one’s] private parts” may seem to be simply practices of good hygiene and modesty, Buddhaghōṣa observes that they lead problematically to ignorance and self-delusion: though the body in reality is “just as repulsive” as a corpse, because of the daily grooming and window-dressing performed upon it, one not only perceives it as “agreeable” and “desirable,” but even more troublingly as “permanent” and as an enduring “self” (VSM VI 91). Thus while the repulsiveness of a living body could function quite effectively in illustrating the truth of impermanence, humans in their willing self-delusion mask the body’s decay to such an extent that precisely the opposite message is communicated. Rather than looking squarely at their bodies, seeing the body’s decaying state, and thereby realizing the truth of impermanence that extends to the very notion of a self, humans instead mask their decaying bodies to limit the appearance of change, look only at the well-groomed disguise, and conclude wrongly that an enduring self exists beneath the layers of embellishment. Buddhaghōṣa thus draws a direct connection in the passage quoted above between personal grooming habits (e.g., “rubbing out the stains on [one’s] teeth... mouthwashing... pranking it with nosegays and such things”) and the perception of an enduring self—and “I” and “mine”—within one’s body. Consistently concealing the body’s “true nature of ...characteristic foulness” enables one to live in a state of denial with respect to one’s impermanent, decaying state, and symptomatic of that denial, to embrace the notion of an enduring self, an “I” immune to change.

Furthermore, as noted by Buddhaghōṣa in VSM VI 88, though a living being is “just as foul” as a corpse, such foulness, rooted in the reality of impermanence, cannot be perceived, because humans go to such great lengths to hide their decay under “adventitious embellishments” (VSM VI 88). For this reason, a corpse is a highly valuable object of meditation for those desiring to progress along the path to enlightenment, because, in contrast to all the living humans that surround oneself, the corpse is the only one truthfully exhibiting its physical condition. Freed from the concerns of personal appearance that commonly accompany sentience, the corpse presents a certain integrity of exterior and interior, lacking in most members of well-groomed society, that confronts the meditator with the inescapability of decay. By presenting its stark repulsiveness in an undeniable way, the rotting body forces the meditator to look beyond the superficial window-dressing of apparent, adorned existence in

order to acknowledge the uncomfortable reality of change, impermanence, and decay at its heart.

This process of extrapolation from the obvious decay of the corpse to the impermanence of all other facets of society (including the meditator herself) is presented by Buddhaghosa not as occurring according to an explicitly conscious and logical set of deductions, but more so through an ingraining process by which persistent meditation upon a corpse gradually changes one's perspective on the rest of existence, leading ultimately to a manifestation of the jhana factors (characteristics of meditative mental states), "access," and enlightenment (VSM VI 64, 67-68). Beginning in sections 50 and 51, Buddhaghosa relates how this ingraining process works when he writes:

The meditator should apprehend the sign thoroughly in that body [i.e. corpse] in the way of apprehending the sign already described. He should advert to it with well-established mindfulness. He should see that it is properly remembered, properly defined, by doing that again and again. Standing in a place not too far from and not too near to the body, he should open his eyes, look and apprehend the sign. He should open his eyes and look a hundred times, a thousand times, [thinking], "Repulsiveness of the bloated, repulsiveness of the bloated," and he should close his eyes and advert to it. As he does so again and again, the learning sign becomes properly apprehended by him. (VSM VI 50-51)

Buddhaghosa presents here a process of inculcation whereby a meditator learns to see not just the corpse before her, but reality more generally, in a new way. Through repeated meditation upon the rotting body, one eventually apprehends the learning sign. In particular, by ingraining the deceased's message of impermanence and decay into her perception both through persistent, meditative gazing upon the corpse (looking with "well-established mindfulness" a "hundred," even a "thousand" times) and silently reminding herself of its essence as decay (constantly repeating "repulsiveness of the bloated"), the "learning sign becomes properly apprehended" (VSM VI 51). This progression to a deeper, more accurate way of perceiving then advances from apprehension of the learning sign to seeing the counterpart sign (section 66), experiencing manifestation of the jhana factors (section 67), and enjoying "access" (section 68). Moreover, Buddhaghosa notes that through this meditative process of ingraining the corpse's decaying state within one's perception, one comes to "reverence" and "love" the corpse, as one realizes that "in this way [i.e. through the change in perception made available by meditation

upon the rotting body], I shall be liberated from ageing and death” (section 64). Thus, Buddhaghōṣa indicates that meditation upon the corpse launches a process within the meditator that so changes her perspective that ultimately she becomes enlightened. Nowhere in this process does Buddhaghōṣa suggest that the meditator consciously and deliberately applies the corpse’s decaying state to the rest of window-dressed reality (including herself), but rather this extrapolation occurs as the result of a persistent, meditative ingraining of the image of the rotting body, a process that itself molds one’s view of reality so profoundly that liberation eventually results.

The figure of the corpse thus not only aids a meditator in perceiving the pervasiveness of impermanence, but also, through the meditator’s persistent meditation on the rotting body, enables her to develop a permanently-changed vision that perceives all things as impermanent, even when she has returned from the charnel ground to her society. This altered vision, in turn, fosters a change in emotions and values (e.g., reverencing and loving the rotting body) that are characteristic of one moving towards enlightenment.

Beyond their liberating lack of sentience, what particular features of corpses make them so efficacious for this transformative ingraining process? Buddhaghōṣa’s presentation of corpse meditation suggests that this inculcation of a new way of seeing, leading to a change in values and eventually to insight and enlightenment, results due to four enduring characteristics of corpses. Though Buddhaghōṣa does not explicitly delineate this four-fold arrangement, he nevertheless suggests through his presentation of corpse meditation that four particular traits of corpses imbue them with particular efficacy for assisting one towards enlightenment: their essence as decay, their features as composite, their stationary quality, and their affective unpleasantness.

First, corpses, in contrast to living humans (including the meditator herself), can have their “essences” equated relatively easily with the process of decomposition. Buddhaghōṣa instructs the meditator to link the “essence” of the corpse upon which she is meditating with the state of its decomposition when he writes:

... [the meditator] should bring to mind the fact that [the corpse] has an individual essence, its own state of being bloated, which is not common to anything else, since it was said that he defines it by the fact of its having attained that particular individual essence. The meaning is that it should be defined according to individual essence, according to its own nature, as “the inflated, the bloated.” (VSM VI 35; emphasis in original)

If a meditator were simply to reflect upon herself, looking at herself in an attempt to discover the reality of impermanence, a variety of possible essences, ways of defining oneself, could obstruct her endeavor. Looking upon herself, she may see a person holding the essence of particular role within her family (e.g., “daughter,” “sister”) or community (e.g., “bhikkhuni”), or she may define herself in terms of her quest for enlightenment or in some other role. In all such self-definitions, she would impede her progress along the path by obscuring her vision of her essential emptiness with temporary roles. By contrast, the corpse, lying naked in a charnel ground, stripped not only of all physical adornments but also of all social roles, can have its essence much more easily understood as “decay.” Buddhaghosa thus suggests that the corpse quite starkly is no longer a figure defined by its social roles or personal goals; its essence has become synonymous with its state of decomposition and therefore can be defined by the meditator as “the inflated, the bloated”—and all the more so because of the particularly shocking, disturbing nature of a rotting corpse.

Once the essence of the dead body is linked in this manner by the meditator to the impermanence of decay, Buddhaghosa then advances the process of instilling a clarified vision of reality within the meditator by instructing her to reflect deeply on the various characteristics of the corpse before her. In section 35 he writes: “Having defined [the corpse] in this way, [the meditator] should apprehend the sign in the following six ways, that is to say, (1) by its color, (2) by its mark, (3) by its shape, (4) by its direction, (5) by its location, (6) by its delimitation” (VSM VI 35). In other words, having appreciated the process of decay at the heart of the corpse’s essence—having apprehended the fundamental position of impermanence in the definition of a being—one then solidifies that understanding by carefully considering the corpse in terms of both its composite parts and the details that characterize it. After observing in detail the corpse’s physical features (including its “color,” “shape,” and so forth), the meditator then takes account of how it is positioned, including the direction it faces and the placement of the various parts of the body relative to one another (or, alternatively, relative to the position of the meditator) (VSM VI 39-41). This process of careful attention and meditation on the collection of parts that compose the corpse, building upon the meditator’s appreciation of the body’s essence as decay, result in the formation of the “counterpart sign” (VSM VI 43), which via the progression discussed above leads to a host of benefits including manifestation of jhana factors and access (VSM VI 67-68).

Moreover, not only can the corpse’s essence be appreciated as in a state of decay, its characteristics used to reveal its composite nature, and its counterpart sign employed as a step leading to the experience of access, but it

also is highly valuable to the meditator because of its stationary quality and the increasing unpleasantness of its affective properties. The corpse's stationary nature allows the meditator the time needed to imbue her mind with the image of the rotting corpse, so as to instill within her a changed vision of reality. Buddhaghosa references this valuable aspect of the corpse implicitly when he exhorts the meditator to repeat the phrase "repulsiveness of the bloated" while looking upon the corpse a "hundred," or even a "thousand," times (VSM VI 50). The dead body is particularly well-suited for this ingraining process as its repulsiveness only sharpens as the hours pass: the meditator seeing the corpse's essence as "bloated" and its characteristics as nothing more than a composition of elements is confronted by the disturbing and unforgettable reality that the corpse's repulsiveness only grows worse. The stationary nature of the dead body thus both provides adequate time for ingraining the message of impermanence while driving home this message by an increasingly pungent, affective experience of decay.

Finally, persistent meditation upon the undeniable foulness of the corpse, emblazoning its message of impermanence upon one's vision leads beyond just a change of perception to an alteration in one's values and emotional reactions appropriate for one moving towards enlightenment. As Buddhaghosa writes in section 64:

Now, as to the words, when he has established reverence for it by seeing its advantages and by perceiving it as a treasure and so come to love it, he anchors the mind on that object: here, having gained jhana by exercising his mind on the repulsiveness in the bloated, he should increase insight with the jhana as its proximate cause, and then he should see the advantages in this way: "Surely in this way I shall be liberated from ageing and death." (VSM VI 64)

Here one sees the intertwining of emotional maturation and progress along the path to enlightenment via insight and the jhana factors. While accounting for the corpse as truly and essentially repulsive, one simultaneously can regard it as a "treasure," because of what it reveals to the meditator about the nature of reality. By thus perceiving the truth of its message, one's emotional reactions towards the dead body begin to change, as one now comes to "reverence" and even to "love" the corpse. In a similar way, the counterpart sign is described later as producing "happiness and joy" within the meditator specifically because meditation upon this sign "brings access" (VSM VI 80), leading to liberation (VSM VI 64).

Thus the corpse plays a very important role in the alteration of both the meditator's vision and values as she progresses towards enlightenment. Through its stark and undeniable repulsiveness, its essence as decay, its composite, stationary qualities, and strongly unpleasant affective properties, the rotting body instills within the meditator an awareness of impermanence that she would be hard-pressed to find elsewhere in well-groomed, window-dressed society.

This rare ability of the corpse to highlight impermanence against the backdrop of a society that persistently disguises decay underscores the necessity of others more generally in the pursuit of enlightenment. Through his presentation of the invaluable nature of corpses for one seeking enlightenment, Buddhaghōṣa indicates that progress along the path is not a solitary endeavor. Despite the distractions that certain relationships may create (VSM III 29), other kinds of relationships—such as with corpses and, as will be discussed later, with monastic teachers (an ironic pair, to say the least)—provide critical assistance. Though corpses are a special kind of “other” due to their lack of sentience, Buddhaghōṣa's presentation of the meditator-corpse interaction suggests that their rather unique assistance occurs precisely because corpses, as non-sentient others, are one of the few kinds of figures who have nothing to gain from supporting society's illusions and lies. As seen in Buddhaghōṣa's description of corpses' unadorned, fully-truthful depiction of their rotting state (e.g., VSM VI 1-10), corpses, as corpses, exhibit a certain freedom in death from the pressure exerted by social forces to conform to the perpetuation of image distortion. No longer having anything to gain by appearing better than they really are (e.g., through the daily grooming processes, seen above, practiced by everyone else in society, including the meditator herself), corpses at last are able to show on their exterior what they always have been on their interior: a collection of decaying processes. Because exactly the opposite message is communicated to the seeker of enlightenment by nearly every other member of society, whom Buddhaghōṣa depicts as trying desperately every day to conceal and disguise the fact of her decaying state (“...by rubbing out the stains on [one's] teeth with tooth sticks and mouthwashing and all that, by concealing [one's] private parts under several cloths, by daubing [one's body] with various scents and salves...” (VSM VI 90)), interaction with a corpse presents a precious opportunity to encounter the truths about existence (e.g., the reality and pervasiveness of impermanence) which lead to liberation.

Moreover, since the meditator herself is a member of this society, influenced by its processes of disguising reality, an exclusively solitary quest—looking only within herself for enlightenment—is not likely to be sufficient for

seeing past the false façades ingrained within her by living in a society of disguises. For this reason, a figure whose values are not influenced by the society, who can express its essence truthfully rather than being coerced by social pressures to conceal its decay, becomes invaluable for seeing beyond the distortions of truth taught through one's social environment to the meditator from birth. Thus engagement with a particular kind of "other"—one who through its lack of sentience lies unaffected by society's façades and therefore is strikingly unlike most members of society—is essential for progress along the path. While a solitary pursuit leaves one vulnerable to the distortions and falsehoods that characterize society, an intimate interaction with one who sits outside the lies of this society, offering the rare opportunity to see a true, undistorted image of human essence, is therefore of tremendous value to one seeking an accurate perception of reality.

Teachers

Corpses, however, are not the only figures that stand opposed to the falsehoods propped up by the rest of society. As Buddhaghōṣa indicates in the third chapter of the *Visuddhimagga*, monastic teachers (described by Buddhaghōṣa as "good friends" to those whom they instruct) also share corpses' rejection of window-dressing through their commitment to a faithful transmission of the Dharma. Teachers' instructive "friendship" of their disciples is presented by Buddhaghōṣa in a complementary fashion to the rare insights offered by corpses. Specifically, Buddhaghōṣa's comments regarding the critical assistance provided by monastic teachers to those endeavoring to progress along the path may be interpreted in two main senses: 1) historically and universally: centering on the role of Śākyamuni Buddha as the first "good friend" whose instruction extends to everyone; and 2) presently and personally: focusing on the benefits the individual practitioner reaps from pursuing meditation under the guidance of an experienced teacher.

First, in an historical and universal sense, the instructive friendship of Śākyamuni Buddha is presented by Buddhaghōṣa as having played an absolutely foundational role in revealing the path to enlightenment for all beings. Buddhaghōṣa refers to the Buddha's role as a "good friend" and as the link between friendship and enlightenment when quoting Śākyamuni's comments to Ānanda about his relationship to all "living beings": "Ānanda, it is owing to my being a good friend to them that living beings subject to birth are freed from birth" (*VSM* III 62). In other words, the path to enlightenment has been revealed by Śākyamuni Buddha to other sentient beings—who thereby can become "freed from birth"—because of his action as a "good friend" to them. Thus in a broad, universal sense, the relationship of the Buddha to all sentient

beings serves an essential role in these beings' quest for enlightenment because, due to the Buddha's action of friendship in explicating the path, enlightenment has now become accessible to other beings.

At a more present-focused and personal level, however, the role of instructive friendship plays no less critical a role. In sections 62 to 65 of the *Visuddhimagga's* third chapter, Buddhaghōṣa emphasizes that in the process of selecting a meditation subject and embarking upon meditative practice, one must first find a teacher from whom a meditation subject can be received. One is not to choose a subject on one's own but must locate the highest available teacher on a hierarchy of possible instructors who properly can instruct one as one sets out upon the path. Specifically, Buddhaghōṣa writes that while the ideal teacher would be Śākyamuni Buddha himself (the only one who "possesses all the aspects of the good friend" (VSM III 62)), after his "final attainment of Nibbāna," one should consult any of the Buddha's eighty disciples. When they all have passed away, one should seek out "someone with cankers destroyed," but if such a person is unavailable, then one should locate the highest available teacher ranging from a "non-returner" to "one who is familiar with one Collection together with its commentary and one who is himself conscientious" (VSM III 62-64). After thus listing the types of individuals qualified to act as "good friends" by providing guidance in meditation to those seeking enlightenment, Buddhaghōṣa then explains why learning from such a teacher is so important when he writes: "For a teacher such as this, who knows the texts, guards the heritage, and protects the tradition, will follow the teachers' opinion rather than his own. Hence the Ancient Elders said three times, 'One who is conscientious will guard it'" (VSM III 64). In just these few lines, Buddhaghōṣa highlights three times the importance of protecting the tradition of the Buddha's teachings. He thus communicates that meditation guided by an experienced teacher is important, because through such relational learning, the Buddha's words are guarded, ensuring that teachings remain faithful to those of past instructors (stretching back to Śākyamuni Buddha himself, the ultimate "good friend" of seekers of enlightenment) rather than being corrupted by the interpretations and opinions of new practitioners. Such protection not only aids in ensuring the maintenance and continuation of the Buddha's teachings but also guards individual practitioners themselves against getting lost in their search for truth, a possible consequence of distorting or misinterpreting the words of the Buddha by seeking enlightenment without proper guidance.

Buddhaghōṣa continues his presentation of the importance of being guided in meditation by an experienced meditation teacher later in this same chapter when he explains how one should behave after locating a suitable

instructor. Specifically, after “approach[ing] the good friend” and “ask[ing] for the meditation subject” sincerely, the student is directed to “relinquish” herself to “the Blessed One, the Enlightened One,” or to another teacher, if the Buddha himself is not her instructor (VSM III 124, 126). Through this act of profound trust, one commits oneself to utter dependence upon—and obedience to—one’s teacher. Such obedience is illustrated by Buddhaghōṣa in his brief story about three disciples who practice such thorough obedience to their master that they express a willingness to die terrible deaths if these somehow would be to the master’s advantage. Because of their willing attitude, and specifically through their obedience in “following his advice,” all three disciples were able to attain Arahantship (VSM III 127). In addition, Buddhaghōṣa explains the range of specific benefits that result from dedicating oneself to one’s instructor, as well as the variety of dangers that stem from failing to do so. In section 124, for example, he writes:

...without having thus dedicated himself, when living in a remote abode [a meditator] might be unable to stand fast if a frightening object made its appearance, and he might return to a village abode, become associated with laymen, take up improper search and come to ruin. But when he has dedicated himself in this way no fear arises in him if a frightening object makes its appearance; in fact only joy arises in him as he reflects: “Have you not wisely already dedicated yourself to the Enlightened One?” (VSM III 124)

Thus by failing to relinquish oneself to one’s teacher, one leaves oneself open to fear, distraction from one’s commitment to the path, and ultimately to a spiritual “ruin” that sharply contrasts the steadfast joy that arises in one dedicated to the Buddha (or one’s specific instructor). But by relinquishing oneself to the authority of the teacher, a layer of protection is established against doing as one pleases in one’s search for enlightenment, meaning that one cannot (or at least should not) give up when at a place along the path that is frightening (particularly relevant, for example, for those practitioners meditating on corpses in charnel grounds), or when the attractions of lay life appear particularly enticing. In addition, a failure to dedicate oneself to one’s teacher is associated with an inability to learn from such figures, as seen in section 126 where Buddhaghōṣa comments, “for one who has not dedicated his person thus becomes unresponsive to correction, hard to speak to, and unamenable to advice, or he goes where he likes without asking the teacher” (VSM III 126). Such resistance to instruction and insistence on following one’s own desires is then directly linked to “misconducting” oneself, or to giving up

meditative practice altogether for the “lay state.” By contrast, the one who has relinquished herself heeds correction, lives “in dependence on the teacher,” and thereby is able to receive the teacher’s assistance in “material things,” “Dhamma,” and “cryptic books,” which lead to “growth, increase, and fulfillment” in one’s quest for enlightenment (VSM III 126).

As the passages above indicate, besides the roles played by corpses in assisting one along the path, meditation instructors also serve as instructional “friends” who provide critical guidance to those seeking enlightenment. Beginning with Śākyamuni Buddha himself, these teachers aid their students by directing them in ways that uphold the Buddha’s teachings and protect disciples from losing their way. Furthermore, such teachers act as figures to whom students can dedicate, or relinquish, themselves, trusting themselves completely to their respective masters. By this process, students open themselves to their masters’ instruction and find strength to resist fear and distraction as they progress towards enlightenment.

This presentation of the critical role teachers play alongside corpses in the communication of truth underscores Buddhaghōṣa’s discussion with respect to corpses of the essential role of others more generally in one’s pursuit of enlightenment. As in the case of a meditator’s interaction with decomposing bodies, the relationship between meditator and teacher functions efficaciously towards greater appreciation of reality, because good monastic teachers, like corpses, have no interest in maintaining the distorted, window-dressed depiction of reality pervasive in society. Because their primary commitment is to the faithful transmission of the Dharma (VSM III 64), teachers, like corpses, are freed from the maintenance of window-dressing to teach their disciples the truths of impermanence and decay that run counter to society’s dominant message. While differences exist between these two groups in certain details of their respective interactions with seekers (discussed near the end of this paper), including their respective motivations for communicating plainly the reality of decay, both corpses and monastic teachers nevertheless provide essential assistance to those seeking enlightenment. As seen in the passages presented above, not only do teachers and corpses both provide the seeker an accurate presentation of reality, but they also aid in the meditator’s emotional maturation. On the one hand, persistent meditation upon a corpse leads to a change in values such that the rotting body is revered and loved because it is recognized as a “treasure” leading to liberation from “ageing and death” (VSM VI 64). Likewise, in a complementary way, dedication to one’s teacher makes possible an enduring commitment to the monastic life, as well as “joy” in place of fear when one’s monastic practice involves “frightening objects” (VSM III 124).

Thus relationships with others like corpses and teachers function in critically-important ways for the seeker of enlightenment as they reveal truths disguised by nearly everyone else in society and create opportunities for emotional maturation. This maturation in turn both reflects a more accurate perception of reality (e.g., seeing corpses as the treasures they are, rather than being repulsed and frightened and therefore avoiding that which is so rare and valuable) and helps one endure when encountering frightening objects or other challenges along the path.

Others in General as Logically Valuable

Others execute other essential roles beyond the functions performed specifically by corpses and teachers, however. While corpses and teachers provide specific examples of how and why others are necessary for one's progress towards enlightenment, Buddhaghōṣa also suggests that others occupy an important position in the more abstract sense of being logically essential for discerning the emptiness in the interrelations among entities. In Buddhaghōṣa's presentation of how to perceive the voidness inherent within formations, he posits the existence of a "quadruple logical relation" between oneself and others—set forth previously in the Majjhima Nikāya—that functions as a means of recognizing that not only is the self empty but the fundamental characteristic of formations is voidness as well. In explicating the passage "I am not anywhere anyone's owning, nor is there anywhere my owning in anyone" (Majjhima Nikāya II 263), Buddhaghōṣa explains its meaning according to four possible relationships: "(i) he sees no self anywhere [of his own]; (ii) nor does he see it as deducible in the fact of another's owning; (iii) nor does he see another's self; (iv) nor does he see that as deducible in the fact of his own owning. This is how he discerns voidness in the quadruple logical relation" (VSM XXI 54). Here one sees four possible relationships where an enduring entity potentially could exist, and therefore, in order to reveal the voidness inherent to formations, Buddhaghōṣa details the emptiness of each of these "logical relations." First, as has been previously established in Buddhaghōṣa's text and revealed through meditation practices (e.g., corpse meditation), the self itself is empty. Having previously discussed this point at length (see, for example, Buddhaghōṣa's presentation of the essential "voidness" of the wheel due to its "dependence on conditions" (VSM XVII 283)), Buddhaghōṣa accepts it as a given and moves on to his second point: that no self of one's own can be perceived in its existence in relationship to another. Though relations exist in some sense between individuals, within those relationships one cannot deduce the existence of a self to which the other (e.g., a family member) is related.

Thus Buddhaghōṣa writes, “he does not see [a self of his own] deducible by conceiving a brother [to own it] in the case of a brother, a friend [to own it] in the case of a friend...” (VSM XXI 54). His third point then mirrors the first: just as there is no self of one’s own in itself, there is also no self of the other in itself. Building upon this point, Buddhaghōṣa comes to his fourth contention: that just as one cannot deduce one’s self through its relationships with others, one cannot find others’ selves in their relationships with oneself. Consequently he writes, “he does not see in any instance another’s self deducible owing to this fact of his owning a brother in the case of a brother, a friend in the case of a friend...” (VSM XXI 54). Thus others are very important logically-speaking in discerning the essential voidness of reality, because the emptiness which the self can recognize in itself accounts for only one of the four possible logical relations among entities. In order to recognize that voidness characterizes not only one’s own self but also the selves of others and the relations between oneself and others, one needs to incorporate others into one’s reflection, depending upon others in a logical sense in order to more fully appreciate the pervasiveness of voidness throughout both selves and formations.

This presentation of the logical necessity of the other offers an important contrast to the functions of corpses and monastic teachers in Buddhaghōṣa’s portrayal of the relationship between others and one’s progress along the path. While rotting bodies and monastic teachers, as seen above, play critical roles in revealing one’s essence as decay, others are of value even when engaged at a purely intellectual level. Others, regardless of any personal characteristics, even when existing only in a logical exercise, still provide valuable assistance in the transformation of one’s perceptions of reality. In Buddhaghōṣa’s discussion of others’ logical necessity, the very existence of others, and specifically the theoretical relationships between oneself and these others, reveals the truth of “voidness” that, like the teachings of corpses and monastic masters, counters the lies promoted by society that keep people from an accurate perception of reality. In this case, others do not promote a message about existence that opposes the dominant presentation of the surrounding society (as in the cases of corpses and teachers), but instead, the very existence of the other herself creates an opportunity for personal, intellectual reflection, which fosters a realization of voidness that counters society’s distortions. While one might object that such reflection is merely a private activity, suggesting that realization of truth can occur through solitary effort, though this intellectual reasoning is presented by Buddhaghōṣa as practiced by a single meditator, the essence of the activity relies centrally on the presence of others. Without relationships with others, this insight-fostering reflection would have no basis; lacking familiarity with

relationships, the logical deductions of this exercise cannot be made. Thus even through personal, intellectual reflection—theoretical exercises that lack the interpersonal interaction seen above with dead bodies and teachers—Buddhaghōṣa communicates that one cannot reach enlightenment alone.

Conclusion

Thus while the path to enlightenment may appear at first glance to be a rather solitary endeavor, with progress towards this goal impeded by certain others (VSM III 29), Buddhaghōṣa's treatment of the path in the *Visuddhimagga* indicates that others play a variety of critical roles that aid one in realizing the true nature of reality. On the one hand, others fill an important logical role in that their existence, particularly in relationship to oneself, aids the seeker of enlightenment in discerning the essential emptiness within relations. Others' existence and relationships with the seeker thus present her with the opportunity to deduce voidness through logical reasoning. Beyond this logical value of others, however, specific types of individuals offer particularly beneficial relationships by advancing a vision of reality that accords with reality's true nature, while contrasting the distortion of this nature prevalent throughout society. Specifically, corpses and teachers are two of the remarkably rare examples of figures not promoting society's denial of decay. Freed (either through death or through commitment to the Dharma) from society's incessant window-dressing, corpses and monastic teachers are rare examples of figures expressing a presentation of reality in which the pervasiveness of change, impermanence, and decay is acknowledged honestly. Because they are two of the very few voices communicating the truths of impermanence (i.e. Dharma), relationships with them are essential for one who seeks to understand truly the impermanent nature of existence.

While Buddhaghōṣa thus underscores throughout his text this critical assistance offered by others for one's progress along the path, a number of questions about the relationship between an individual and others vis-à-vis enlightenment still remain, such as: If two teachers occupy the same level on the path to enlightenment (e.g., stream-enterer, non-returner, etc.), are they equally efficacious in aiding a student towards enlightenment? Are there other factors that differentiate the efficacy of instructors? How can a particularly efficacious teacher (or corpse) be found? Future studies, therefore, may build upon the examples offered in this paper of how others assist one in critical ways towards enlightenment to investigate more specifically how such influence occurs and the qualities that characterize particularly efficacious relationships.

THE AMBIGUITY OF MATERNAL FILIAION (NASAB) IN EARLY AND MEDIEVAL ISLAM

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1. Introduction

Classical Arabic names can include up to five elements:¹

- 1) the *ism/alam*, or the given name²
- 2) the *kunyah*, or the paedonym, e.g. Abū Walīd (the father of Walīd)
- 3) the *nasab*, or the lineage/genealogy, e.g. ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (the son of ‘Abd al-Barr)
- 4) the *nisbah*, or the relational name, e.g. al-Rāzī (the one from the city Rayy)
- 5) the *laqab*, or the nickname, e.g. al-Jāhīz (the one with protruding eyes)

It is the third category, the *nasab*, which is the topic of this present paper. While the *nasab* can refer specifically to the patronym (or, as this paper argues, the matronym), *nasab* also refers to a person’s genealogy more broadly.

Discussions of *nasab* have tended to focus on the patrilineal, to the exclusion of the matrilineal. On some level, this is to be expected, as the identity of one’s father is not always obvious; maternal identity, on the other

1 See *Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd ed.* s.v. ‘Ism’; Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Names* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 1-13.

2 A systematic attempt to organize and trace Arabic given names can be found in Ibrāhīm al-Sāmarrāī, *al-ʿĀlam al-ʿArabīyah* (Baghdad: al-Maktabah al-Ahliyyah, 1964).

hand, is established by her giving birth. Paternity is more often challenged than maternity, and so discussions of paternal *nasab* are expected to be more prevalent. Additionally, assumptions about misogyny in Islamic societies might make discussions of maternal *nasabs* seem irrelevant for the social realities of individuals living in these societies. It is the argument of this paper, however, that maternal *nasabs* are an important dimension to understanding the institution of the *nasab* and should not be ignored.

Filiation to the mother was indeed a phenomenon recorded in the biographical sources—men being called Fulān ibn Fulānah, or ‘so-and-so, son of so-and-so (i.e. his mother).’ The jurists also construct the maternal *nasab* as part of a child’s rights, placing it alongside paternal filiation as a necessary ingredient to an individual’s efficacious participation in society. Yet we also observe that maternal *nasabs* are ambiguous, carrying with them various negative social stigmas, particularly since children born out of *zinā* (illicit sexual relations) and *li‘ān* (calumniation)³ have no paternal *nasab* and must therefore use their maternal *nasabs*.

This paper investigates the ambiguous institution of the maternal *nasab* by going through historical examples of individuals called by their maternal *nasab* (matronym), and the various positive and negative aspects of its use. We also examine the way the jurists—in particular Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Sarakhsī (d. c. 483/1090), a prominent Central Asian jurist of the Ḥanafī school—have constructed the maternal *nasab* as part of the child’s right. We begin, however, with an exploration of the various roles genealogy and filiation have played in Islamic societies broadly.

2.1 *Nasab as Genealogy and Lineage*

Many scholars have commented on the importance of genealogy for the early Arabs, both before and after the advent of Islam.⁴ *Nasabs* played key roles in the practical matters of identifying and differentiating people. In the Umayyad period, for example, administrative exigencies including the payment of stipends and the allocation of land made the identification of

3 With *li‘ān*, a man who does not believe that he fathered a child born to his wife can swear that the child is not his, whereby the child is stripped of his or her *nasab* to the man. For more, see “Li‘ān” in *EP*.

4 See Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* (trans. by CR Barber and SM Stern) (New Brunswick: Aldine, 2006), 1:164-190; AA Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 50-4; Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought in the classical period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 49-61; Franz Rosenthal, “Nasab” in *EP*; MJ Kister and M Plessner, “Notes on Caskeel’s Gamharat an-nasab,” *Oriens* 25/26 (1976): 48-68.

individuals necessary, leading to a rising interest in genealogy and genealogists (*nassābah*).⁵

Besides helping identify individuals, the institution of the *nasab*—stretching back numerous generations—also affected the way Arabs organized and periodized history. Tarif Khalidi, interested in the development of historical thought in Islam, argues that for the early Arabs, “*Nasab* must be thought of first as an organizing principle, an epistemic instrument which relates history by arranging it in a family-tree structure.”⁶ Accordingly, *nasabs* that stretch back generations were analytical tools that colored the way early Arabs understood and narrated their history.

Nasabs also played an important role in social organization and differentiation, as exemplified by the well-attested trope of ‘*ḥasab wa-nasab*.’ In pre-Islamic Arab societies, great pride was taken in establishing that one’s *nasab* was free of blemish, while the parallel *ḥasab* (noble, acquired qualities) of ancestors combined to create a glorious pedigree. After the advent of Islam, the two terms started to contrast, with the *ḥasab* being a way for those with unremarkable *nasabs* to also establish a name for themselves by accomplishing noteworthy feats.⁷

Khalidi argues that as the early Islamic empire came to include non-Arabs and the old Arab tribal aristocracy lost its importance especially in the ‘Abbāsīd period, genealogy also fell in importance. Eventually, genealogy’s place was relegated, according to Khalidi, for the pious purpose of “know[ing] the *nasab* of Muḥammad and for marriage and inheritance purposes.”⁸ This seems to be an exaggeration on the part of Khalidi, for it is clear that *nasab* remained a very integral form of social organization, even well after the ‘Abbāsīd revolution. Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (d. 328/940) dedicates a chapter in his *al-Iqd al-Farīd* to *nasab*, saying that “whoever does not know lineage does not know people, and whoever does not know people is not considered one of mankind.”⁹ In other words, “ignorance of *nasab* ultimately means exclusion from humanity.”¹⁰ The *nasab*’s important stretched beyond the goal of mere identification—it was a fundamental part of individual’s participation in society, a key consideration in the way society was organized.

5 Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, p. 50.

6 Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought*, 49.

7 Rosenthal, “*Nasab*” in *EP*; “*Ḥasab wa-Nasab*” in *EP*; cf. Marlow, “Ḥasab o Nasab” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

8 Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought*, 50.

9 Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-Iqd al-Farīd*, trans. Issa J. Boullata, *The Unique Necklace* (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2011), 3:227.

10 Rosenthal, “*Nasab*” in *EP*.

This is not to say, however, that *nasab* was not viewed with suspicion for its capacity for insult; the *nasab*'s power could be as negative as it was positive. Before Islam, *al-ṭaʿn fī-l-ansāb* (criticism based on *nasabs*) was not uncommon, especially in poetry; with the advent of Islam, the Prophet¹¹ forbade this type of criticism, and the practice of calling a convert 'ibn 'Abd Allāh was part of this attempt to eliminate genealogical criticism.¹² Yet despite pious attempts, *al-ṭaʿn fī-l-ansāb* continued. Ibn 'Abd Rabbih narrates a short but illuminating anecdote about the negative power of the *nasab*: "Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib (d. 94/715) was a genealogist, and a man said to him, 'I want you to teach me genealogy,' and he said, 'You only want to exchange insults with people.'"¹³ As we shall see below, this capacity for insult embodied in the *nasab* is an important dimension to understanding the practice of *intisāb ilā al-umm*, or giving a child *nasab* to its mother.¹⁴

2.2 *Nasab as Filiation*

The early Islamic legal doctrine surrounding filiation is built around the maxim '*al-walad li-l-firāsh (wa-li-l-ʿāhir al-ḥajar)*,' 'the child belongs to the [marriage] bed (and the fornicator is stoned).'¹⁵ This maxim states that the *sine qua non* of a child's filiation is the existence of a legitimate sexual relationship between the child's mother and its genitor. Joseph Schacht has attributed this maxim to the frequency of re-marriages without waiting the 'iddah (waiting period) of the divorcée, a practice—according to Schacht—common among the Arabs even after the coming of Islam; thus, the fact that immediate remarriages are already banned in the Qurʾān leads him to conclude that "the maxim is, strictly speaking, incompatible with the Koran," adding that "in the time of Shāfiʿī, there are no legal scholars who take the maxim at its face value."¹⁶ Uri Rubin has argued instead that the issue of re-marriages is irrelevant to the maxim; *al-walad li-l-firāsh*, he maintains, is part of an early

11 Peace be upon him

12 Schimmel, *Islamic Names*, 8.

13 Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-Iqd al-Farīd*, 3:240.

14 See "*Intisāb*" in *al-Mawsūʿah al-Fiqhiyyah* (Kuwait: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shuʿūn al-Islāmiyyah, 1986).

15 al-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-Mabsūt* (Beirut: Dar al-Maʿrifah, 1986), 17:154; the original Prophetic *ḥadīth* in Bukhārī is *al-walad li-sāhib al-firāsh* but this abridgement is common. The latter part of the statement, *wa-li-l-ʿāhir al-ḥajar* is often appended to the maxim and also attributed as part of the *ḥadīth*. See Uri Rubin, "Al-walad li-l-firāsh' on the Islamic campaign against 'zinā'," *Studia Islamica* 78 (1993): 5-6.

16 Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 181-2.

Islamic attempt to respond to contested paternity claims, called *di'wah*, made over the children of prostitute slave-women.¹⁷ Another Prophetic narration, “He who claims a father in Islam who is not his [real] father, knowing that the latter is not his father, shall be barred entrance to Paradise,” must also be seen as part of the Islamic position against false filiations.¹⁸

The *nasab* was a key mechanism of social organization, whose establishment was instrumental in identifying and establishing the rights of the individual and his/her relationship to his/her family and society more broadly. Importantly, however, the *firāsh* doctrine is only useful in establishing filiation of children to their ‘true’ fathers¹⁹ insofar as the ideal situation exists where no woman has illicit sexual relationships; otherwise, a consequence of the *firāsh* doctrine is the establishment of filiation of children to other than their ‘true’ fathers, as in the case of a married woman whose child is given filiation to her husband while the child’s genitor is someone else. This has led one scholar to put it bluntly that “the *firāsh* principle was not concerned with genuine paternity.”²⁰

It is evident then that *nasab*’s mandate—particularly as established through the *firāsh* doctrine—was not merely giving children filiation to their true *genitors*; it was a means of organizing society by creating an instrument to establish paternity where functionality was as much a goal as was ‘correctness’ in filiation. This is evident in the opinions of the preeminent Ḥanafī jurist Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Abī Sahl al-Sarakhsī (d. c. 490/1097), where he holds that in the case that two men bring equally strong evidence that they fathered the child of a slave-woman, the child should be given filiation to both, since:

nasab to a man is established by considering the *firāsh* [principle], not through the reality of [the child’s] creation from his sperm; this is because there

17 Rubin, “‘Al-walad li-l-firāsh,’” 6, 10; this view is corroborated by Ella Landau-Tasseron, “Adoption, acknowledgement of paternity and false genealogical claims in Arabian and Islamic societies” *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies* 66.2 (2003): 169-192.

18 ‘*Man idda ‘a abm* fi-l-islām ghayr abīhi ya‘lamu annahu ghayr abīhi, fa-l-jannah ‘alayhi ḥarām.’ See Rubin, “‘Al-walad li-l-firāsh,’” 15. Ibn Baṭṭāl (d. 449/1057) commented that the reason for the gravity of this claim is that the person lies about God by saying the He created the man from the sperm of someone other than his real father. See Landau-Tasseron, “Adoption, acknowledgement of paternity,” 178.

19 Throughout this paper, I use ‘true *nasab*’ to refer to the establishment of a *nasab* to the child’s genitor, i.e. the man who impregnates the child’s mother, the ‘true father.’

20 Landau-Tasseron, “Adoption, acknowledgement of paternity,” 178-9.

is no way to know this. Nor [is *nasab* established] by considering [who engaged in] sexual relations, since this is unknown to all but the sexual partners. Thus, the Law gave to the *firāsh* [principle] the place of [considerations of whose sperm impregnated the woman and who engaged in sexual relations], to make it easy.²¹

Paternity, as articulated above, is a *legal* relationship, not a strictly biological one; thus, according to Sarakhsī, the child born to a woman whose husband is a great distance away (making sexual intercourse physically impossible) will still be given filiation to the man since the child is born to the *firāsh*.²²

3. Maternal *nasabs*

Discussions of *nasab* often focus on the establishment of paternity,²³ as if the *nasab* is only relevant vis-à-vis the father; however, the establishment and use of the maternal *nasab*, I argue, is an important if understudied dimension to the institution of the *nasab* in general. In what follows, we look at the usage of matronyms as evident through various biographical sources, then examine discussions surrounding the appropriateness of using matronyms, and finally explore legal literature about the establishment of maternal *nasabs*.

3.1. Prevalence and Examples of Maternal *nasabs*

The question of the prevalence of maternal *nasabs* is complicated by two methodological factors. First, it is difficult to come up with statistics about the occurrence of maternal *nasabs*—a future project might try to answer this question by systematically reviewing the biographical dictionaries. Secondly, people were often referred to by multiple *nasabs* in the biographical dictionaries and reports, sometimes being called by both the *nasab* of their father and their mother. For example, among the Companions, ‘Ammār b. Yāsir (d. 37/657)

21 al-Sarakhsī, *Mabsūṭ*, 17:70; translation based on Johansen, “Gendered Spheres,” 10; the Ḥanafī position as articulated by Sarakhsī is different than the Shāfi‘ī position, which is concerned with the biological relationship between the father and the child. Thus, they rely on physiognomists in some cases of contested paternity (e.g., *Ibid.*, 17:69).

22 *Ibid.*, 17:156. “[The *nasab*] is not conditional upon the ability to have sexual intercourse.”

23 For example, one scholar—interested in succession—argues that “although maternal relatives do have rights of inheritance, the main emphasis lies on the paternal connection; and indeed the primary significance of the word *nasab* is that of paternity.” NJ Coulson, *Succession in the Muslim Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 22.

is also called ‘Ammār b. Sumayyah;²⁴ the famed Companion and reciter best known as ‘Abd Allah b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/653) is also called ibn Umm ‘Abd after his mother.²⁵

Despite these difficulties, we can safely conclude that the practice of using maternal *nasabs* was not uncommon, especially in the early generations of Islam. Many of the Companions were known by their maternal *nasabs*, and we have individual examples of the practice throughout the medieval period. So prevalent is the practice among early generations that al-‘Irāqī (d. 806/1403) dedicates several lines of his famous *Alfyyah* poem on the *ḥadīth* (Prophetic tradition) sciences to those who are given filiation to other than their fathers:

*They were given nasabs to other than their fathers | | either to the mother, like the sons of ‘Afrā*²⁶

[Or] the grandmother, like ibn Munyah,²⁷ [or] the grandfather | | like ibn Jurayj²⁸ and others.

Students of the *Alfyyah* are told to be aware of these *nasabs*, in order to properly identify narrators and avoid confusion in the chains of transmission. In al-Sakhāwī’s (d. 902/1497) commentary on ‘Irāqī’s *Alfyyah*, he presents the names of several additional early narrators—including a dozen among the Companions—who are called by their maternal *nasabs*. Worth mentioning is the fact that these *ḥadīth* scholars treat *nasabs* to mothers, grandmothers, and grandfathers together, which seems to indicate that for their purposes, maternal *nasabs* are noteworthy only because they are tags of identification, something that students should be cognizant of for the sake of clarity in identifying narrators. Insofar as *ḥadīth* transmission goes, maternal *nasabs* are neutral;

24 al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risālah, 1996), 1:416; his mother Sumayyah is counted as the first martyr in Islam.

25 Ibid., 1:462.

26 ‘Afrā’ had three sons who were Companions—Mu‘ādh, Mu‘awwidh, and ‘Awdh (or ‘Auf)—all of whom participated in the Battle of Badr, with the latter two being killed on the battlefield. See al-Sakhāwī, *Faṭḥ al-Mughīth bi-Sharḥ Alfyyat al-Ḥadīth* (Riyadh: Maktabat Dār al-Minhāj, 1426), 4:329; cf. al-Anṣārī, *Faṭḥ al-Bāqī bi-Sharḥ Alfyyat al-‘Irāqī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2002), 2:290; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Ṭādhkirah fī ‘Ulūm al-Ḥadīth* (Damascus: Maktabat al-Fārābī, 1998), 341.

27 Ya‘lá b. Munyah was a Companion, and some report that Munyah was his maternal grandmother; see al-Sakhāwī, *Faṭḥ al-Mughīth*, 4:332.

28 One of the Successors’ Successors, and Jurayj was his grandfather. See Ibid., 4:335.

the issues otherwise implicated by maternal *nasabs*, including the possibility for family embarrassment, are not relevant for the purposes of *isnād* criticism. What we can safely conclude from the *Alfiyyah* and its commentaries is that non-paternal *nasabs* were a normal part of early Islam.

Another indispensable source addressing the prevalence of matronymics comes from the well-known litterateur Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb (d. 245/860), who wrote a short pamphlet entitled *Kitāb man nusiba ilā ummihi min al-shu'arā'*, 'The book of poets with *nasabs* to the mothers.'²⁹ It is possible that his interest in the phenomenon came from his own maternal *nasab*, as Ḥabīb was the name of his mother.³⁰ The document lists the names of 37 poets—some famous and others obscure, seemingly chosen at random—all called by their maternal *nasabs*, along with a few lines of poetry penned by each respectively. Ibn Ḥabīb's interest in the matronymics of poets was not unique: both Abū 'Ubaydah (d. c. 209/824) and al-Madā'inī (d. c. 228/843) before him and Abū Sa'īd al-Sukkarī (d. 275/888) after him wrote similarly themed pamphlets, though these are lost.³¹ The practice of matronymics among early Arab poets was, while worthy of special classification, clearly not alien. G. Levi Della Vida, who edited ibn Ḥabīb's pamphlet, writes about matronymics:

The custom of calling somebody 'the son of such a mother,' instead of giving him his actual name, was not at all uncommon among the early Arabs. Sometimes, it was due to the high reputation of one's mother, when she was a member of a prominent family; but it could be, too, a term of abuse and point towards some unpleasant fact in one's family history.³²

Here, we are reminded of the ambiguity in the practice of matronymics: maternal *nasabs* have both the positive potential of drawing attention to a noteworthy mother while also carrying the negative threat of revealing some embarrassing detail of one's family history.

The positive power of the maternal *nasab* is evident in several examples where men are filiated to their mothers because of some exceptional quality. Abū Bakr b. al-Qūṭīyyah (d. 367/977), a prominent Andalusian historian, was

29 G. Levi Della Vida, "Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb's 'Matronymics of Poets,'" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 62.3 (1942): 156-171. The short, monographic pamphlet listing poets was not an uncommon genre, and there are records of other pamphlets with such names as 'The book of poets who are named after a verse of poetry they penned.' See *Ibid.*, p. 156

30 al-Sakhāwī, *Fath al-Mughīth*, 4:331.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 156-7

32 *Ibid.*, p. 157

filiated to his mother Sārah al-Qūṭīyyah, who was from the royal family of the Visigoths (Qūṭ) that ruled parts of Spain before the Muslim conquest.³³ The famous Shāfiʿī jurist Tāj al-Dīn b. Bint al-Aʿazz (d. 665/1267) was named as such because his mother was the daughter of the noted jurist al-Aʿazz Fakhr al-Dīn b. Shukr.³⁴ The Persian chronicler, Ibn Bibī al-Munajjamah (d. after 684/1285), is referred to by a maternal *nasab* because his mother was a prominent and well-known astronomer.³⁵

Alternatively, the maternal *nasab* could be used to differentiate between the sons of a prominent man with many children, in which case the maternal *nasab* would be primarily for identification and differentiation. The caliph Marwan I (d. 65/685), besides his usual *nasab* Marwan b. al-Ḥakam, is sometimes called Marwān b. al-Zarqāʾ, after his blue-eyed mother.³⁶ The son of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyyah, is named after his mother, Khawlah, who came from the Ḥanīfah tribe.³⁷ It is not an exaggeration to say that as the son of ʿAlī, Muḥammad’s paternity and lineage are beyond suspicion; clearly, then, maternal *nasabs* were used even in the event that one’s paternity was clearly established and one’s father was well respected—the maternal *nasab* need by no means be negative.

Yet it is part of the ambiguity of the maternal *nasab* that it carries the potential for insult. As seen above, the institution of the *nasab* was often more than a mere tool for identification—it was used to classify someone’s place in society, and could as such be used as a form of criticism. One who is the child of *zinā* (illicit sexual relations) or *liʿān* (calumniation) no longer has filiation to his or her father, and therefore must resort to maternal filiation.³⁸ This classification had potential legal consequences, since a child of *zinā* could be barred from leading the prayers, giving testimony in certain cases, and even—according to some Twelver Shīʿī jurists—was ritually impure.³⁹ Yet, in trying to

33 al-Dhahabī, *Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ*, 16:219-20; Schimmel, *Islamic Names*, 9.

34 Sherman Jackson, *Islamic Law and the State: the Constitutional Jurisprudence of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfi* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 54-5; Schimmel, *Islamic Names*, 9.

35 HW Duda, “Ibn Bibī,” in *EF*; Schimmel, *Islamic Names*, 9.

36 Schimmel, *Islamic Names*, 9.

37 Frants Buhl, “Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyya” in *EF*; Schimmel, *Islamic Names*, 8-9; al-Sakhāwī, *Faṭḥ al-Mughīth*, 4:332.

38 Mohamad Sujimon, *The Problems of the Illegitimate Child (Walad al-Zinā) and Foundling (Laqīṭ) in the Sunnī Schools of Law* (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia Press, 2010), 21, 26-7.

39 See Etan Kohlberg, “The position of the ‘walad zinā’ in Imāmī Shīʿism,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48.2 (1985): 243 which discusses the issue of *tahārah* in Imāmī law; *Ibid.*, 256-9 discusses other issues in the Sunnī schools; on leading the prayer, Sarakhīs has argued that it is better not to have a *walad*

understand the social realities of children born without legitimate fathers, we run into a problem of sources, and as such this aspect of social history remains largely unexplored; as one scholar of medieval Spain has put it, “we know very little about the way in which individual or collective awareness that someone had no recognized father influenced the life conditions of that person and his or her family and social relations.”⁴⁰ At best, lacking a legitimate father—and thus having to resort to a maternal *nasab*—was a neutral social marker; yet it could also result in social exclusion or worse.⁴¹

While we might not know much about the social stigma of being an illegitimate child, the maternal *nasab* could be used to hint at some sort of impropriety in a person’s family history. This is evident in the example of Ziyād b. Abīhi (d. 53/673), a prominent administrator in the Umayyad bureaucracy and the son of a woman named Sumayya. The then caliph Mu‘āwiyah announced in 44 A.H. that Ziyād—until then filiated to Sumayya’s husband, ‘Ubayd—was actually his half-brother, the son of Abū Sufyān, and gave to him the new *nasab* Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān. Ziyād was mocked by many for this abrupt change in *nasab*, but al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī’s criticism stands out in our analysis: in one of their aggressive exchanges, al-Ḥasan—whose family and supporters Ziyād was persecuting—angrily sent an epistle addressed to ‘Ziyād b. Sumayyah.’⁴² By using Ziyād’s maternal *nasab*, al-Ḥasan points out the doubts in the former’s lineage; he uses the maternal *nasab* because, in his view, there is no certainty in identifying Ziyād’s father. Without a doubt, it is meant as an insult.

Perhaps the most interesting example of the negative power of the maternal *nasab* that I have come across is the case of the early scholar Ismā‘īl b. ‘Ulayyah (d. 193/809). His mother, ‘Ulayyah, was a prominent, intelligent, and noble woman, who owned a house where prominent men and scholars from Basra would call on her (*yadkhulūn ‘alayhā*), and with whom she would

zinā lead the prayer since “he has no father to teach him and thus he is often ignorant.” *Mabsūt*, 1:41.

40 Delfina Serrano, “Paternity and filiation according to the jurists of al-Andalus: legal doctrines on transgression of the Islamic social order,” *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum* VII (2013): 72.

41 It could even result in infanticide: for example, there are reports of mothers killing illegitimate children in medieval Spain. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) includes warnings against such types of killing in his *Kitāb Ahkām al-Nisā’*. See Avner Giladi, “Some Observations on Infanticide in Medieval Muslim Society,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22.2 (1990): 191.

42 Rubin, “‘Al-walad li-l-firāsh,” 13-7.

speak and ask questions.⁴³ Despite this, however, Ismāʿīl is reported to have said: “Whoever says ‘ibn ‘Ulayyah’ has slandered against me (*ighṭābanī*).”⁴⁴ It is clear that Ismāʿīl is referring here to his matronymic, for al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1374), who is reporting this, is quick to comment that this is “bad etiquette (*sūʾ khulq*)” on the part of Ismāʿīl because “the Prophet called multiple Companions with names referring to their mothers, like Zubayr b. Ṣafīyyah and ‘Ammār b. Sumayyah.”⁴⁵

What is puzzling is why Ismāʿīl has this reaction to being called by his maternal *nasab*, considering that his mother was a prominent and respectable figure. The question of his paternity is never up for question, as all the reports agree that his father, Ibrāhīm, was a respectable trader from Kufa.⁴⁶ Instead, I believe that this case points to another dimension of the maternal *nasab*, which is the issue of private and public information. It is possible that Ismāʿīl was uncomfortable with a maternal *nasab* because he preferred the name and identity of his mother be kept in the private sphere; Annemarie Schimmel’s observation that “to know someone’s name means to have power over that person” and the “names must not be mentioned in the case of great people and women” might be relevant in explaining Ismāʿīl’s apprehension at the use of his mother’s name in public.⁴⁷

3.2 Discussions on the Appropriateness of Calling People by Their Maternal Nasabs

We might expect the starting point for discussion of maternal *nasabs* in general, and matronymics in particular, to be the Qurʾānic command *idʿūhum li-ābāʾihim*, “call them by their fathers’ [names].”⁴⁸ This injunction is indeed invoked by ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) as part of his argument that a child be “called after his father and not after his mother.”⁴⁹ This paternal prerogative, to ibn al-Qayyim, is linked with the unilateral right of the father to choose the name (*tasmīyyah*) of the child. Yet in the classical *tafsīrs* (Qurʾānic exegeses), this verse is not constructed to be referring to the question

43 As reported by Muḥammad b. Saʿd al-Kātib (d. 230/845), in al-Dhahabī, *Sīyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ*, 9:113

44 Ibid., 9:108.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 9:113.

47 Schimmel, *Islamic Names*, ix.

48 Qurʾān 33:5.

49 ‘*annahu yudʿā li-abīhi lā li-ummīhi*’ in ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Tuḥfat al-Mawdūd bi-ʾAḥkām al-Mawlūd* (Jedda: Dār ‘Ālim al-Fawāʿid, n.d.), 197.

of maternal *nasabs*;⁵⁰ rather, it is taken to refer to the practice of giving false *nasabs* to children, in conjunction with the previous verse, “He has not made those you [falsely] claimed as your children (*ad‘iyā‘akum*) to be your [actual] children.”⁵¹ The exegetes understand this verse in specific reference to the slave of the Prophet, Zayd b. Ḥārithah (d. 8/629) who had been previously called Zayd b. Muḥammad.⁵²

While the Qur’ānic injunction is not usually understood as a mandate against maternal *nasabs*, there is evidence in the Prophetic *ḥadīth* to this effect, at least in matters of the Hereafter. Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889) narrates: “On the Day of Judgment, you will be called (*tud‘awna*) by your names and the names of your fathers; so make your names beautiful.”⁵³ Ibn al-Qayyim dedicates a full chapter to arguing that people on the Day of Judgment will be called using their fathers’ names in his manual on child-rearing, *Tuḥfat al-Mawdūd*;⁵⁴ however, the purpose of the book indicates to us that Ibn al-Qayyim is interested in more than just naming protocol in the Hereafter, and that his argument has implications for this-worldly naming too. Yet the issue of naming in the Hereafter is important: what *nasab* we will be called by in the Hereafter tells us how God, with His infinite knowledge, identifies human beings and organizes them. It also addresses the question, though in other-worldly circumstances, of what place one’s name and *nasab* have in the public sphere: after all, the name and *nasab* by which one is called on that Day are public, revealing whatever potentially unsavory family history is embedded in them.

This point is exemplified in a contradictory *ḥadīth* in the collection of al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971), later criticized by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) as fabricated (*mawḍū‘*): “On the Day of Judgment, surely God calls people by their mothers’ [names], to protect (*saṭr^{am}*) [the reputation] of His servants.”⁵⁵ One

50 al-Ṭabarānī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1994), 6:158-9; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm* (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayyibah li-l-Nashar wa-l-Tawzī‘, 1999), 6:377; al-Zamakhsharī, *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifah), 848.

51 ‘*wa-mā ja‘ala ad‘iyā‘akum abnā‘akum*,’ Qur’ān 33:4; what exactly the term *ad‘iyā‘* (pl. *ad‘iyā‘*) means has been contested in the scholarship, though it is generally understood to be pejorative. See Landau-Tasseron, “Adoption, acknowledgement of paternity,” 184-6.

52 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, 6:377; al-Ṭabarānī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 6:159.

53 Muḥammad al-‘Azīm Ābādī, ‘Awn al-Ma‘būd ‘Alā Sunan Abī Dāwūd (Amman: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawliyyah, n.d.), 2128.

54 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Tuḥfat al-Mawdūd bi-l-Aḥkām al-Mawlūd* (Jedda: Dār ‘Ālim al-Fawā‘id, n.d.), 214-5.

55 al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muḥam al-Kabīr* (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, n.d.), 11:122; cf. Marā‘i b. Yusūf al-Karmī al-Maqdisī, *al-Fawā‘id al-Mawḍū‘ah fī-l-Aḥādīth*

who, throughout his or her life, has been called by a false paternal *nasab* will be shamed if it is revealed that his or her ‘real’ father is someone else; thus, the mother’s *nasab* is used according to this narration, since there is less possibility for misattribution. The historian al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 345/956) adds that ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and his family will be exceptions and will be called by their fathers’ names, since their paternal *nasabs* are untainted.⁵⁶ The considerations of functionality mentioned above, by which the *firāsh* doctrine has the potential of assigning ‘false’ paternal *nasabs*, sees its limitations in the Hereafter when God’s infinite knowledge can decide questions of paternity.⁵⁷ It is only in the absence of infinite knowledge that the law provides a functional solution—the *firāsh* doctrine. Yet in the two contradictory *ḥadīth* we see that the choice between calling people by their maternal or paternal *nasabs* on the Day of Judgment involves more than just the proper identification of the person; the *nasab* has the potential to reveal shameful details about one’s lineage, something which filiation to the mother can minimize. Thus, while the use of the maternal *nasab* in this world runs the risk of revealing embarrassing details of one’s family history, its universal use in the Hereafter can redeem one from that shame.

There exists another *ḥadīth*, collected by al-Ṭabarānī, in which the Prophet urges the believer to go the grave of his brother and call to the deceased using his matronym, *fulān bin fulānah*; when asked what to do if his mother’s name is unknown, the Prophet answers that the person should be filiated to Eve, *fulān bin Hawā’*.⁵⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, who is not in favor of the use of maternal *nasabs*, discounts this *ḥadīth* as weak (*da‘īf*). But this narration does point out something of the stability that the maternal *nasab* can provide, such that even the person with an unknown mother is filiated to his ancestral mother, Eve.

3.3. Maternal Nasabs in the Legal Literature

Legal discussions of maternal *nasabs* occur mainly in the context of children born from *zinā* (illicit sexual relations) and *li‘ān* (calumniation). The basic ruling in these cases is that the child is not given filiation to its father and instead its *nasab* is given to the maternal relatives.⁵⁹ This is a key reason why,

al-Mawḍū‘ah (Riyadh: Dār al-Warrāq, 1998), 140-1.

56 From Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille’s French translation of al-Mas‘ūdī’s *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma‘ādin al-jawhar*, quoted in Jacqueline Sublet, *Le voile du nom: essai sur le nom propre arabe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 15-6.

57 Cf. Qur’ān, 31:34 ‘He knows what is in the wombs’; Sarakhsī, *Mabṣūṭ*, 17:70.

58 al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘jam al-Kabīr*, 8:298-9.

59 *al-Mawṣū‘ah al-Fiqhiyyah*, 6:295-6; Sujimon, *The Problems of the Illegitimate Child*, 21, 26-7.

as we have argued above, matronymics have negative power: the capacity to announce impropriety in one's lineage. In what follows, we will focus on the major *fiqh* (legal) work—the *Mabsūṭ*—of the 5th/11th century Ḥanafī jurist from Central Asia, Sarakhṣī, introduced above.

According to Sarakhṣī, filiation to the mother is the product of the legal cause (*sabab*) of birth (*wilādah*, also *infisāl*),⁶⁰ a process that can be visually established (*mu'ayyan*) by the midwife.⁶¹ Conversely, the cause of filiation to the father is his insemination of her womb, a process that is concealed (*khafīy*).⁶² Thus, filiation to the father must be established by the *firāsh* doctrine—and any child born to a valid *firāsh* must be filiated to the *ṣāhib al-firāsh* (the owner of the *firāsh*) unless the latter does *li'ān*.

Li'ān has the legal effect of negating (*naḥy*) the child's paternal *nasab*, leaving the child to be attached (*ilḥāq*) to its mother, resorting to his or her maternal *nasab*.⁶³ The paternal *nasab* is stripped because the father swears that the child is not his. Sarakhṣī is explicit by saying that when there is a valid *firāsh*, the paternal *nasab* of the child can only be cut through *li'ān*; even the child of a marriage where the man accuses his wife of *zinā* and the wife acknowledges it still retains his or her paternal *nasab*, since in the accusation and acknowledgement of *zinā* no *li'ān* has occurred.⁶⁴

As for *zinā*, the reasoning behind denying the paternal *nasab* to the *walad zinā* (the child born out of *zinā*) is twofold: first, to discourage the man from engaging in *zinā* in the first place by making sure that his 'sperm is lost'; and second, that an adulterous woman is likely to have multiple partners, making it possible that even if a paternal *nasab* were to be given, that it would be incorrect.⁶⁵ Yet, the child would still maintain his or her maternal *nasab*, even though this would entail giving the woman the fruit of her illicit relationship; Sarakhṣī responds that it is the doubt (*ishtibāh*) which makes paternal filiation untenable, a doubt obviated in the mother's case by the observable legal cause of birthing, which establishes maternity.⁶⁶

60 "Surely, the *nasab* of a child is not established to a woman except through being separated from her (*infisāl 'anhā*)," Sarakhṣī, *Mabsūṭ*, 17:112.

61 Ibid., 17:154-5

62 Ibid., 17:119

63 al-Mawṣilī, *al-Ikhtiyār li-Ta'līl al-Mukhtār* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1998), 3:185; cf. al-Kasānī, *Badā'ī' al-Ṣanā'ī'* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1997), 5:25.

64 Sarakhṣī, *Mabsūṭ*, 17:155

65 Ibid., 17:154; 4:207

66 Ibid., 17:155

The jurists construct the paternal *nasab* as a right of the child (*ḥaqq al-walad*). For example, once the *nasab* has been established to a father by his acknowledgement (*iqrār*), this *nasab* can never be revoked or transferred to another person.⁶⁷ One of the functions of the *nasab*, as evident in the law, is to protect the child from social stigmatization that might come from the absence or changing of a *nasab*. Yet it is worth noting that paternal filiation is not necessarily in the interest of the child, since it is sometimes better to deny paternal filiation, namely to the man who committed *zinā*:

Denying the child's *nasab* to the person who commits *zinā* is for the right of the child (*ḥaqq al-walad*). Attaching (*ilhāq*) the child to the person who commits *zinā* is a shame (*ʿār*) and an announcement of abomination (*ishāʿat al-fāḥishah*).⁶⁸

Whereas above we saw examples of the maternal *nasab* carrying the risk of revealing embarrassing details of one's family history, here it is filiation to the adulterous father that is constructed as a disclosure of such impropriety. The filiation of a *walad zinā* to his *genitor* can cause the child social stigmatization, such that the child's interests are better served if he or she is not filiated to the *genitor*.

Interestingly, Sarakhsī—and the jurists in general—do not construct the maternal *nasab* in this way; in other words, even in the case of the *walad zinā*, being the child of an adulterous mother does not substantiate cutting off the maternal *nasab*, even though one would presume that it would carry social stigma as well. In that case, we can only assume that the benefits accrued to the child by having *some* filiation outweigh the social harm done; in the eyes of the jurists, having a maternal *nasab* even to an adulterous woman is in the interest of the child.

The idea that maternal *nasabs* serve the interest of the child is made clearer in a case where a woman claims to have given birth to a child and a second woman testifies to that effect; however, for whatever reason, this testimony is not accepted and the child is not given filiation to the first woman. The second woman then claims that the child is in fact her own, bringing the requisite witnesses; but Sarakhsī holds that the second's claim should be rejected, because her initial testimony bars her from future claims to maternity. This ruling, however, does not prevent the child—now without a maternal filiation—from alleging when he gets older that the second woman is his mother:

67 Ibid., 17:98-9

68 Ibid., 17:154

If the child gets older and alleges that he is her son, and brings two witnesses, then the *qāḍī* should order his *nasab* to her—because the son is claiming his right (*ḥaqq*). Even if his *nasab* is [already] established to his father, if his *nasab* is established to his mother, he will be noble on both sides (*karīm al-ṭarafayn*).⁶⁹

The statement is very striking, because here the maternal *nasab* is constructed as part of the child's right; furthermore, Sarakhṣī states that this right persists even if his paternal *nasab* is already established. Thus the *nasab* to the mother contains positive power, for social standing is not merely given by paternal filiation, but also maternal filiation.

Moreover, the right to a *nasab* as constructed by the jurists is not limited to one's immediate parents. This is exemplified in the case of a greedy man who, when the child of *li'ān* dies, realizes that he could stand to inherit from the child's estate and thus recants his *li'ān*. Sarakhṣī is not in favor of reestablishing the *nasab* of the child in this case, since "the dead child does not need a *nasab*." But the answer is different if the child is a son who himself has progeny: "If the son dies and leaves behind a male or female offspring [of his own], then the *nasab* to the claimant [i.e. the grandfather] is established, and the [grand]father inherits, because the remaining child [i.e. the grandson or granddaughter] is in need (*muḥtāj*) of a *nasab*."⁷⁰ Considering the need of the grandchild to have filiation to a paternal grandfather outweighs the harm of allowing this greedy and self-admitted liar to inherit.

However, the answer in the case that the child of *li'ān* is female elicits divergent opinions:

According to [Muḥammad al-Shaybānī (d. 189/805) and Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798)], the *nasab* is not established in this case since the remaining child's [i.e. the grandchild's] *nasab* is through his father and not through his mother... But Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/772) said: the absence of maternal *nasab* reviles (*yata'ayyar*) the child, just like the absence of the paternal *nasab* reviles the child. Thus, the child needs the establishment of his maternal *nasab*, so that he can become noble on both sides (*karīm al-ṭarafayn*).⁷¹

We find here that the establishment of a child's *nasab* to his or her maternal grandfather is less straightforward; Abū Ḥanīfah holds that this *nasab* is as

69 Ibid., 17:113

70 Ibid., 7:52

71 Ibid., 7:52-3

important to the child's social status as is his paternal *nasab* is, invoking the *karīm al-ṭarafayn* (noble on both sides) argument we have seen before. The absence of this maternal *nasab* is grounds for that child's defamation, and as such this *nasab* has the power of removing that stigma. Conversely, Abū Ḥanīfah's two students, Muḥammad al-Shaybānī and Abū Yūsuf, hold that the *nasab* to the maternal grandfather is not important enough to permit the greedy grandfather to recant his *li'ān*.

Notwithstanding the issue of the maternal grandfather, it is clear that the jurists see the *nasab*—both paternal and maternal—as part of the child's right. In constructing the *nasab* in this way, they recognize that the child's *nasab* protects it from social stigma; in this regard, the maternal *nasab* is no different than the father's *nasab*.

4. Conclusion

The *nasab* is an important legal tool, as it establishes relationships whose importance is obvious in the law of inheritance, child custody, the payment of blood-money (*diyyah*), etc. More generally, however, the *nasab* as an institution is used to organize society, to identify the individual's place vis-à-vis his or her relatives and society in general. This is no less true for the maternal *nasab* than it is for the paternal *nasab*. Having constructed the maternal *nasab* as part of the right of the child (*ḥaqq al-walad*), the jurists recognize the harm that the absence of a maternal *nasab* can do to a child. Yet, as we have seen above, the maternal *nasab* is an ambiguous entity, for though its legal establishment serves the interest of the child, its public usage (i.e. the use of the matronym) can carry with it unsavory implications—insinuating, for example, that the child is born from *zinā* or *li'ān*. The ambiguity of the maternal *nasab*, alongside its routine usage in early and medieval Islamic society, make discussions of *nasab* that focus on paternity to the exclusion of maternity miss an important dimension to the legal and social structuring of Muslim societies.

ENACTING THE PROMISE OF GOD:

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE STUDY OF THE SACRAMENTS

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I. Introduction: The Sacraments, Christian Ethics, and the Pedagogical Method

In Christian theology today, to state that the sacraments and ethics are linked, or at least that they ought to be linked, is no longer to make a novel claim. The rediscovery of sacramental theology as a resource for moral reflection after the Second Vatican Council, visible in an array of theological sectors, has furnished us with diverse approaches to understanding the connection between liturgy and life, between what we do in the sacramental program of the Church and what we do in the world.¹ No longer imagined simply as pipelines of grace or instruments of individual salvation, the sacraments have moved into place

1 This paper will discuss a handful of significant contributions to the study of sacramental ethics, but a number of important works should be mentioned here. For an entry into the thought of Karl Rahner, see for instance, "The Eucharist and Our Daily Lives," *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 7, *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. K.H. Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1963). A helpful interpretation of Rahner's sacramental theology in its ethical dimension is available in Michael Purcell, "The Ethical Signification of the Sacraments," *Gregorianum* 79.2 (1998): 323-43. Major contributions from the perspective of liberation theology include Juan Luis Segundo, *The Sacraments Today*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1974); and Leonardo Boff, *Sacraments of Life, Life of the Sacraments*, trans. John Drury (Washington: Pastoral, 1987). From feminist theology, see Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum Press, 2001), especially chapter 6. The work of Don E. Saliers on the relationship between liturgy and ethics is noteworthy, Don E. Saliers, "Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7.2 (1979), 173-89. Some interesting explorations in applied ethics include Monika Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976); William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and the Eucharist* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998); and Amy Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014). An older, though foundational,

as a center of gravity for the ethical life and become a key source of insight into the moral realities of Christian existence. Of course, the longstanding conceptual and institutional division between sacramental and moral theology is not easily surmounted. Perhaps as a consequence, it is possible to observe in contemporary ethical examinations of the sacraments a certain failure to account for the moral significance of sacramental practice beyond its relation to the broader perception of sacramentality, or beyond its relation to liturgy as the enactment of Christian values that should be embodied publically. The corresponding tendency to reduce the sacraments to the pedagogical role of exercises for training sacramental vision or shaping Christian desire through ritual performance is almost entirely pervasive in current methodology.²

To some extent, what I am describing represents a delay between the insights of sacramental theology developed in the past fifty years and their application to the discipline of Christian ethics. The Christological and linguistic turns as they came to influence the study of the sacraments have still not robustly manifested in sacramental ethics, resulting in a nearly ubiquitous reliance on the pedagogical notions of training in sacramental perception or the re-education of Christian character, rather than on the understanding of sacramental actions themselves as privileged sites of encounter with the eschatologically transformative promise of God in Christ. On the basis of this assessment of the field, the ultimate aim of this paper will be to gesture toward an interpretation of sacramental ritual as intrinsically important for Christian ethics. If a Christian theology of the sacraments is to be useful in grappling with the moral challenges of the contemporary world, then not only sacramental vision or sacramental character but also sacramental action will require closer consideration. The sacraments will need to function not only as perception and character building exercises but further as media of encounter with sanctifying grace, with the promise of God who through these signs of eschatological participation in Christ has promised to make us new.

contribution is that of Virgil Michel in the era of the liturgical reform movement, "The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration," *Orate Fratres* 5 (1934-35), 536-45.

- 2 The two approaches described here for linking the sacraments and ethics may be identified succinctly as (1) the phenomenological or aesthetic method, which describes the sacraments as practices for developing a sacramental way of seeing, and (2) the character-based method, which sees the sacraments as moments in the liturgical training of Christian desire, solidifying commitment to certain values across the private-public divide. In this paper, I refer to both methods somewhat interchangeably, responding to their shared pedagogical assumption that the ethical importance of the sacraments lies mainly in their belonging to a program of moral education.

In the arena of environmental ethics, the theologian John Haught has argued that in building a religious foundation for ecological responsibility, a sacramental approach is insufficient on its own strength.³ The premise of his contention is that a sacramental mode of perception, which “interprets the natural world as the primary symbolic disclosure of God,” is by itself morally naïve and fatally optimistic.⁴ Unswerving in its conviction that the world is transparent to the sacred, and indeed that a sacramental way of seeing is the most suitable mode of perception for the Christian, this approach to enforcing the intrinsic beauty and value of creation is unable to grapple with ambiguity. From the perspective of theology in general, the sacramental understanding struggles to make sense of natural evil. In relation to ecological responsibility, it runs the serious risk of trusting that the natural world, because it represents the primary medium of God’s revelation, can essentially take care of itself.⁵

None of this is to claim, of course, that the sacramental approach is entirely wrongheaded. Haught does in fact acknowledge that such a perception of nature is necessary for sustaining a Christian ecological sensibility. However, the dangers of an immoderate sacramentality, construed theologically as pantheism or idolatry and ethically as optimism or passivity, require the balancing influence of an eschatological consciousness. The future-orientation of Christian eschatology can undergird a more nuanced view of sacramentality because, in Haught’s own words, it recognizes

[...] that something is terribly wrong with the present world and that any sacraments based on the present state of nature inevitably participate in this imperfection. Pure sacramentalism, therefore, is not enough. Biblical faith looks less toward a God transparently revealed in present natural harmony than toward a future coming of God in the eschatological perfection of creation. It is especially this hopeful tone, and not just its sacramentalism, that can ground an ecological spirituality.⁶

Sacramental vision and eschatological aspiration require one another. Without the normative weight of expectation for the future, something like what J.B. Metz called the ‘eschatological proviso,’ the sacramental way of seeing

3 John F. Haught, *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1993), see especially chapter 4.

4 *Ibid.*, 94.

5 *Ibid.*, 107.

6 *Ibid.*, 105.

is morally impotent.⁷ In turn, without the perception of the sacred at work in the present world, the eschatological orientation deteriorates into pessimism and escapism.

For the Christian theologian or ethicist who wishes to locate the sacraments at the center of moral existence, a critique like that of Haught should be disquieting. Surely, it is easy to dismiss his warnings about the 'sacramental approach' to environmental ethics by observing that his doubts are not so much about the moral significance of the sacraments as about the narrow conception of sacramentality operative in creation-centered works on ecology. His concern for the excesses of the sacramental understanding is attached most directly to the musings of deep ecology, eco-feminism, and the cosmic spirituality of Thomas Berry and Michael Fox.⁸ Moreover, his extraordinarily slender definition of a sacrament as "any object, person or event through which religious consciousness is awakened to the presence of sacred mystery," is evidence that Haught's assessment concerns not the Christian sacraments themselves but rather a diffuse kind of sacramental vision as a basis for ethics.⁹

While such an account of Haught's material sources would be correct, it does not insulate the study of sacramental ethics from the challenge that his argument proposes. Sacramental vision on its own strength is not an adequate foundation for Christian ethics, environmental or otherwise, unless it is complemented by an eschatological awareness. As a result, if we make of the sacraments themselves into mere pedagogical occasions for developing our ability to perceive the world as transparent to the sacred, we have failed give an adequate (and realistic) basis for ethical reflection and action. It is further necessary, I argue, to look to sacramental rites themselves as privileged sites of encounter with the morally formative promise of Christ, as practices that not only disclose the sacramentality of the created world but also unveil the reality of suffering, drawing us prophetically into the future promised by God and transforming the shape of our lives.

In view of that thesis, the argument of this paper will proceed in two stages. In the following section, I will endeavor to demonstrate the necessity of examining the sacraments themselves, rather than merely the sacramental dimension of the Christian imagination, as privileged sites of encounter with the

7 A short but helpful discussion of the 'eschatological proviso,' specifically related to the differences between political theology and liberation theology, can be found in James C. Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Modern Christian Thought*, vol. 2, *The Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 291-93.

8 *Ibid.*, 94.

9 *Ibid.*, 76.

transformative promise of God. The basis of my discussion around this theme will be a critical assessment of Matthew T. Eggemeier's recent book, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision*, which I take to typify the aesthetic or phenomenological approach to linking the sacraments and the moral life.¹⁰ Special attention will be given to his reliance on the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar and the position of his thought in relation to the insights of sacramental theology in the last fifty years.¹¹ On the basis of that discussion, I will contend that while it is useful to enunciate the ethical significance of the Christian vision and to examine the role of embodied practices in cultivating that vision, Eggemeier is wrong to cut short our ethical analysis of the sacraments by describing them only as training exercises for the Christian way of seeing. The theological claim that I wish to advance here, with decisive reference to the work of Louis-Marie Chauvet, is that in light of the Christological and linguistic turns in sacramental theology, it is insufficient to envision the ecclesial sacraments as mere intensifications of the sacramental principle present in all creation, or as liturgical expressions of quotidian grace that awaken us to its presence throughout life, without further examining how the sacraments as privileged signs, as a promissory language that refers our identity to the eschatological person of Christ, shape the totality of human life.

Having established the need for an examination of the sacraments themselves, I will next move to propose the rudiments of such an account. This stage of my argument will depart from the work of Bruce T. Morrill in *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory*, in order to propose that the Christian sacraments as performative, embodied signs engage us in the prophetic memorial of suffering which functions at the same time as the anticipation of freedom in the world to come.¹² Here I would wish to fuse the notion of the sacraments as *memoria passionis*, rooted in the thought of J.B. Metz, with the idea developed by Morna Hooker and Liam Bergin that the sacraments are prophetic actions grounded in the person and ministry of Jesus. By that approach, I hope to indicate how the sacraments as embodied acts of signification mediate God's power to conform us to the future Kingdom, referring our identity to the corporate body of the Church and ultimately to our

10 Matthew T. Eggemeier, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision: Christian Spirituality in a Suffering World* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014.)

11 The guiding source for this review will be Regis A. Duffy, David N. Power, Kevin W. Irwin, "Sacramental Theology: A Review of Literature," *Theological Studies* 55.4 (December 1994): 657-705.

12 Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).

divine source, and enabling through grace the existential recognition that we receive our life from outside of ourselves. This latter element, much more than the mere perception of the world as transparent to the sacred, entails the tensive realization of our utter contingency before the reality of suffering alongside the realization that we are sustained in each moment by God and destined for his life. The sacraments as elements in a sort of promissory language, the symbolic setting in which we mature in the course of Christian life, mediate our contact with this dialectical reality and give rise to a way of being that, responsive to the suffering other in hope, struggles against the reality of suffering and evil without minimizing these realities against an eschatological grand narrative.

II. Beyond Sacramental Vision: The Sacraments as Privileged Sites of Encounter with God

As I have indicated, the aim of this section is to call for an ethical study of the sacraments beyond their relation to sacramental vision or the liturgical formation of desire. More precisely, I would like in the course of this reflection to demonstrate the necessity of interpreting the sacraments not only as training exercises for developing a Christian ethical worldview, but further as privileged sites of encounter with the morally transformative promise of God. This may be done, I will argue, on the basis of a Christological and linguistic interpretation of sacramental practice that need not slip into the traditional categories of causality discredited by postmodern analysis. In order to arrive at that stage of my argument, it is necessary to begin in a critical mode. As a typical incarnation of the aesthetic and hence pedagogical approach that I am proposing to challenge, I turn to the insights of Matthew Eggemeier in his recent book, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision*. It is my hope that a handful of pointed critiques concerning his particular project will serve the larger theological and ethical agenda of this paper. Notably, this discussion begins at the level of social critique and methodology, which I largely endorse in Eggemeier's work, and proceeds to his more specific treatment of sacramentality and finally of the sacraments themselves. It is here that I will raise concerns about the viability of the sacramental perception as a basis for Christian ethics without a theological view of the sacraments themselves as intrinsically powerful elements in the development of the moral life.

To appreciate the depth of Eggemeier's work, we should begin by reporting on his general social critique and ethical method, which may be summarized in several large points. First, following Charles Taylor's description of the social imaginary, Eggemeier wishes to establish the features of the contemporary cultural imaginary that governs the moral consciousness

of the modern Western subject, regulating value and meaning through a variety of narratives and images in order to suppress ethical resistance. This regnant imaginary, presenting itself as self-evident, universal, and normative, is technological and consumerist in its logic, producing a system of values that by idolizing self-interest, competition, and acquisition of wealth, displaces God as the ultimate reality around which human life should be organized.¹³ Second, departing from a hermeneutics of resistance that entails suspicion, retrieval, and renewed praxis, Eggemeier recommends a conversion to the sacramental-prophetic imagination of Christianity. The sacramental aspect of this imagination is grounded in a vision of the relationship between God and creation that perceives with gratitude the world imbued with divine grace and beauty, standing in direct opposition to the ruling technological morality of commodification.¹⁴ Finally, with attention to the work of Foucault on social discipline and Bourdieu on habitus, Eggemeier assesses the mechanisms whereby the social order imposes itself on bodily dispositions and practices. Seeing the instruments through which the governing structures regulate desire and generate moral subjectivity, he proposes to follow Foucault in turning to askesis as a counter-discipline. Of course, rather than characterizing the Christian vision as another form of ideology, in the style of Foucault, Eggemeier embraces the Christian aspiration to the transformation of desire and self that is realized through kenotic practices of attention.¹⁵ Among these 'ascetic' exercises, he treats those of liturgy, memoria passionis, embodied encounter, and contemplative prayer.

Although the sacraments may contain elements from every kind of exercise he mentions, Eggemeier places them within the first and second categories of practice. Still, his contention remains essentially the same: the sacraments are ascetic practices that help us to cultivate a Christian vision of reality as bearing the presence of God, educating us in the discipline of grace and reshaping our desire. In Eggemeier's own words, "the reception of the sacraments represents a type of spiritual formation or askesis that serves to reeducate desire and transform the senses."¹⁶ According to this kind of analysis, the sacraments are several among a variety of Christian exercises that facilitate the deconstruction of our cultural imaginary, with its perverse technological norms, and enable us to replace that structure of perception with a faithful way of seeing the world. The result is a new kind of moral character, one that is sensitive to the beauty of

13 Eggemeier, 5.

14 Ibid., 10.

15 Ibid., 26.

16 Ibid., 31.

the world as imbued with grace and unwilling to exploit persons and resources according to the rule of commodification. The link between the sacraments and Christian ethics lies, therefore, in their pedagogical function, conceived both phenomenologically and in terms of character. They are moments in the practical expression and crystallization of Christian moral identity, founded in special way of seeing and desiring reality, one that uproots the regnant cultural imaginary in favor of perceiving the grace of God in the world.

The integration of social-critical analysis and Christian phenomenology that Eggemeier has performed in the course of his methodological argument is extremely instructive. Of course, he is not the first to point out that there is little hope of developing an effective Christian ethics today without understanding the features of the Christian vision as constituting an alternative to the ruling cultural imaginary. But Eggemeier's work is distinctively helpful in its sustained attention to the ways in which embodied practices can function in the transformation of moral identity.¹⁷ And his explicit attention to the sacramental and the prophetic as the key dimensions of a Christian imaginary, which ascetic practices effectively cultivate, is really quite valuable. If we are to forge a connection between the sacraments and ethics, we cannot fail to account for the questions of vision and imagination, as well as desire and embodied practice, that Eggemeier's argument underscores.

Nevertheless, we must register a critique regarding Eggemeier's treatment of the sacramental. In describing this crucial aspect of the Christian imagination, Eggemeier turns very quickly to the analogy of being as the classical foundation of the sacramental imagination, a move which leads him immediately to an aesthetic analysis. From his interpretation of von Balthasar, he defines Christian sacramental piety as essentially a way of seeing the world, a kind of vision that perceives all creation as imbued with the grace and glory of God.¹⁸ The ethical consequence of that outlook is a posture of gratitude for grace and appreciation for the beauty of the earth that radically disrupts the values of consumerist ideology. In the eyes of Christian faith, the world and its inhabitants are not just matter for exploitation but icons of the divine. To that extent, the Christian sacramental perception of the world and its inhabitants is morally revolutionary. This kind of approach, founded on a scholastic metaphysics and the aesthetic in modern theology, is certainly useful in building a Christian ethical consciousness. However, it fails to account for currents in

17 For a more philosophically developed account of embodied practice and the formation of moral vision and character, see James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2009).

18 *Ibid.*, 9.

sacramental theology of the last five decades that, while committed to the idea of a sacramental worldview demand, that we expand this phenomenological analysis in light of Christological and linguistic frameworks. The sacraments are not simply intensifications of the sacramental principle inherent in all creation that awaken us to the presence grace that moves throughout life. They are, moreover, privileged places of encounter with Christ and elements in a special kind of language that mediates our engagement with the morally transformative promise of God. In order to deepen our understanding of this idea, let us consider some major contributors to the postconciliar discourse on sacramental theology.

Beginning with Hans Urs von Balthasar, whom Eggemeier relies upon as a principal source of support, we find that the sacraments are much more than expressions of universal grace or moments in a Christian pedagogical program. While it is true that von Balthasar situates the sacraments within his aesthetic approach to theology, that move does not refer their meaning or their function to the beauty of creation as the place in which God is revealed.¹⁹ In fact, his aesthetic theology, though it surely appreciates the materiality of the world as a manifestation of God's glory, is founded not on the sacramentality of all creation but on the sacramental person of the Word made flesh, his passion on the cross, and finally his descent into hell.²⁰ The sacraments are rooted in Christ as the definitive manifestation of the inner life and love of the Trinity, the glory of God revealed and yet concealed in the divine kenosis.²¹ Properly speaking, therefore, they are not simply expressions of the grace and glory of God that appears throughout our life in the world, given to us only in order to open our eyes to that reality. Rather, the sacraments are special places of encounter with the grace and glory of God made visible through the Incarnate Word, given to us so that through these mysteries we might commune with that mystery and share in the life of God that is made available in Christ.

This latter proposition does not at all foreclose the sacramentality of the world and ordinary human life, but it does refer that principle to an essentially Christological basis in the sacraments themselves. Eggemeier alludes to the special role of Christ when he cites von Balthasar's description of Jesus

19 For an overview of von Balthasar's sacramental theology, see Mark Miller, "The Sacramental Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Worship* 64 (1990), 48-66. The relevant primary texts include Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989); and *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. III, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

20 Duffy, et al., 663.

21 *Ibid.*, 664.

Christ as “the definitive expression of the analogy of being.”²² By supposing, however, that revelation in Christ is therefore equivalent to the sacramentality of creation, rather than its very condition and most perfect source, Eggemeier completely loses sight of the sacraments as privileged media of encounter and communion with Christ. He reduces them to the function of “concrete communal celebrations of the presence of God in all creation,” a formula that serves his pedagogical approach the liturgy and the other ascetic exercises that train human being in the Christian vision.²³

We can make a similar set of observations in relation to the more influential theology of Karl Rahner, who differs from von Balthasar in adopting an anthropological starting point but converges in his Christological emphasis. Admittedly, Rahner’s earliest reflections on the sacraments in relation to ethics appear to be limited by the pedagogical model that I wish to critique. This would seem to be the case, at least, in the interpretation developed by Timothy M. Brunk, who characterizes the Rahnerian integration of the sacraments and ethics in terms of two features.²⁴ First, Rahner insisted that the experience of grace is not restricted to the seven official sacraments of the Church, arguing in light of the universality of transcendental experience that grace exists in the mere possibility of the salutary existential decision.²⁵ Therefore, even beyond the visible frontiers of the Church, life in the world is replete with ‘grace-giving events’ and along with every morally good act as the acceptance of grace, these possess a quasi-sacramental structure.²⁶ Rahner would eventually call these extra-liturgical structures of divine grace the ‘liturgy of the world.’²⁷ Second, in associating them with the larger experience of grace, Rahner describes the sacraments of the Church as visible means of proclaiming and celebrating the gracious presence of God throughout the world. As such, they express and empower the Christian obligation to bear witness to grace both inside

22 Eggemeier, 8-9.

23 Ibid.

24 Timothy M. Brunk, *Liturgy and Life: The Unity of the Sacraments and Ethics in the Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), see here chapter 1.

25 Karl Rahner, “Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 179-80.

26 Brunk, 20.

27 See especially, Karl Rahner, “Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, *Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976). For a helpful investigation of the Rahnerian idea of the ‘liturgy of the world,’ see Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner’s Theology of Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

and outside the Church through sacramental worship and ethical living.²⁸ According to that view, the sacraments are a kind of re-commissioning for the Christian way of life undertaken at baptism. In summary, says Brunk, Rahner believes that Christian ethical duties flow from participation in the sacramental life of the Church, and so that every morally good action has a corresponding quasi-sacramental character.²⁹

However, this condensation of the matter misses the deeper Christological basis of Rahner's thought about the sacraments, which Brunk himself mentions. According to Rahner, the sacraments of the Church are not the foundation of a Christian mode of life simply inasmuch as they sustain and in some sense 'reactivate' our ethical response to universal grace. For insofar as that notion is accurate, this function is a consequence of the fact that we are drawn by the sacraments into the very life of Christ, complete with its joys and sufferings, becoming subject thereby to the law of that life, which requires that we build up the Church through love of neighbor.³⁰ The ethical duties that flow from the sacraments flow from our life in the Body of Christ, which the sacraments themselves bring about. On this point, Brunk observes that Rahner gives no account of how sacramental ritual as such actually generates communion, or how sacraments bring us to participate in the sacrificial priesthood of Christ that is the source and archetype of the moral life.³¹ Perhaps he simply wished to avoid getting tangled in the knots of debate about causality typical of sacramental theology in the era before the Second Vatican Council. Whatever the case, the point remains that Rahner's integration of the sacraments and ethics is at its base Christological. Thus, while he may appear to endorse the thoroughly pedagogical approach, Rahner is reaching for something more.

To a certain degree, that something more begins to emerge in Rahner's later treatment of the sacraments under the notion of Realsymbol. Though it would serve as the methodological basis for all of his theology, his robust theory of symbol was especially relevant for his thinking in sacramental theology.³² In short, Rahner's insight was that symbolic actions are an essential means of revealing and actualizing human nature, the means whereby we express and become what we are as beings situated in relation to others and to the transcendent. Because our existence is fundamentally shaped by symbolic

28 Brunk, 20-21.

29 Ibid., 22.

30 Rahner, "The Eucharist and Our Daily Lives," 219-20.

31 Ibid.

32 Karl Rahner, "The Theology of Symbol," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smith (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 221-52.

activity, even our encounter with God draws on the symbolic possibilities of reality.³³ The sacraments, in this respect, are symbolic actions of the Church that extend the presence of Christ as the primordial symbol of God's loving action, whereby we are invited into the freedom of eternal life with God and embrace that destiny as our final end. Rahner enunciates this vision beautifully in the language of sign, equivalent to what we have just been calling symbol:

In Christ Jesus, the Crucified and Risen One, it has become manifest in an historically perceptible way that what has always and everywhere been brought about by grace [...] can no longer fall short of its goal. [...] That is why Jesus Christ is called the primordial sacrament of salvation. [...] The Church, as the socially constituted presence of Christ in every age up to the end, can therefore rightly be called the basic sacrament of salvation of mankind [sic]. By this we mean that it is the sign which perpetuates Christ's presence in the world, the permanent and unsurpassable sign that the gracious entelechy of the whole of history, which brings this history into God Himself, will really be victorious [...] When the Church as the basic sacrament, in situations of human life which are decisive for the individual or for the group, pledges itself to man [sic] with an absolute commitment of a being as the basic sacrament of salvation, and does so historically and palpably, that is, in word and deed, and when man [sic] in turn accepts this the Church's pledge of salvation and acts it out as the manifestation of the acceptance of his interior grace-dynamic, then we have what we mean by the sacraments of the Church.³⁴

It is clear here that Rahner does not in fact wish to avoid the question of sacramental causality, but rather that he grounds the efficacy of the sacraments in their ecclesial and Christological foundation. The sacraments 'effect what they signify' insofar as they are signs of God's plan of salvation realized by its very manifestation in Christ and his Church.³⁵ Moreover, they change the shape of human life, they transform moral identity, because they are symbolic actions in which God through the basic sacrament of the Church invites us to new life and we by participating in them accept that invitation. That action of acceptance, incorporated into the same action of God in Christ,

33 Duffy, et al., 663.

34 Karl Rahner, *Meditations on the Sacraments* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), xv-xvi. The view summarized in this quotation is developed more completely in Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, trans. W.J. O'Hara (Freiburg: Herder, 1963).

35 For a more technical discussion of this view, see Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 34-40.

does not terminate in the performance of the liturgical rite but follows the path of grace into all the world, manifesting in a 'quasi-sacramental' fashion in a life of moral goodness that attests to the grace of God. Far from a merely pedagogical view of the sacraments as exercises for educating Christian moral perception and character, Rahner envisions the sacraments as our point of encounter with the promise of salvation made actual in Christ and hence as the axis and origin of Christian ethical existence.

The Christological emphasis in sacramental theology that I am trying to magnify takes a truly distinctive form in the groundbreaking work of Louis-Marie Chauvet. To speak modestly, there are two conceptual frameworks that Chauvet combines in his effort to link the sacraments and ethics. In the first place, wishing to conceive of grace not as a static object to be produced mechanically but as a gift, he turns to the linguistic philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Just as a language is constitutive of human subjectivity and mediates human contact with reality, so do the sacraments as elements in the language of the Church constitute Christian subjectivity and mediate contact with grace.³⁶ In order to associate that analysis with ethics, Chauvet employs the theory of gift developed by Marcel Mauss and Georges Duby.³⁷ Within the dynamics of social relation and social identity formation, every gift creates the obligation of a return-gift. Accordingly, in the symbolic order of the Church, the gift of God's grace is attested in scripture, received in the sacraments, and answered by witnessing to the gift through ethical living.³⁸ Importantly, for our purposes, the real subject of this linguistic exchange is the person of Christ, present under each of his three 'bodies.'³⁹ The historical and glorified body of Christ is proclaimed in the word, the sacramental body of Christ is received in the Eucharist as the culmination of the sacramental program, and the ecclesial body of Christ is the reality in which Christians are bound as brothers and sisters to act in charity. Now in a distinctively linguistic key, the connection between the sacraments

36 See Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 3-42.

37 Brunk, 86.

38 Chauvet describes the model most clearly in his discussion of the Eucharist. See Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 138-147. Elsewhere, he discusses the relation between the sacraments and ethics against the background of Jewish ritual sacrifice. *Ibid.*, 54-65.

39 This model of Christ in relation to three 'bodies' is developed most thoroughly in Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simonds, et al. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010). Notably, as a temporal framework, it corresponds roughly to the threefold model of sacramental signification (*sacramentum tantum, res et sacramentum, res tantum*) applied most especially to the Eucharist by Thomas Aquinas. See, for example, *Summa Theologiae* III, Q. 73, Art. 6.

and ethics is once again founded in Christology. The sacraments do not just habituate Christian moral dispositions, nor do they simply serve to develop a sacramental imagination. More than this, they enable us to receive the reality of Christ as the linguistic-symbolic creatures that we are, and while living newly in him as members of the eschatological body of the Church, to witness to that grace through a life of moral goodness.

By now, I hope it is clear that Eggemeier's understanding of the sacraments as "concrete communal celebrations of the presence of God in all creation" and his corresponding claim that it is ethically unhelpful to discuss the "specific ecclesial sacraments" are theologically inadequate.⁴⁰ While his phenomenological approach to sacramentality as a basis for Christian ethics is an important beginning, Eggemeier's exclusive concern for a broadly construed sacramental perception premised on the analogy of being leads him to neglect requisite appreciation for actual sacramental practices as ethically significant. It is no surprise, therefore, that in the later chapters of his book, Eggemeier sees liturgy and sacramental rites as little more than a training ground for the already established Christian way of seeing. The weakness of such a basis for Christian ecological ethics is evident from Haught's critique, mentioned earlier. The sacramentality of the natural world and life in creation, unmoored from the Christological and eschatological aspiration at the heart of sacramental ritual, is at best an occasion for excessive ecological optimism and at worst an excuse for self-consolation and inaction. Moreover, an exclusive focus on the sacramental principle, assumed to be ontologically prior to the sacraments themselves, fails to acknowledge the unique "cosmic" dimension of sacramental liturgy as a manifestation of creation not only in its present transparency to God but also in its future perfection not yet realized, the eschatological promise of grace which alone can explain its absence in a world of suffering that is nonetheless destined for perfection.⁴¹

40 Eggemeier, 8-9.

41 I am thinking here of Alexander Schmemmann, who describes the uniqueness of the Eucharist as a manifestation of the sacramentality of creation, but *as it was* before the Fall and *as it will be* at the eschaton: "[...] in Orthodox experience a sacrament is primarily the revelation of the *sacramentality* of creation itself, for the world was created and given to man for conversion of creaturely life into participation in divine life [...] if, to put it briefly, everything in the world can be identified, manifested and understood as a gift of God and participation in the new life, it is because all of creation was originally summoned and destined for the fulfillment of the divine economy – 'then God will be all in all.' *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 33-34. For an illuminating analysis of Eucharistic liturgy as an engagement with creation, the beginning of its eschatological fulfillment, and hence

I do not mean to imply that we can entirely dispense with a phenomenological analysis. For as I have already said, an effective Christian ethics requires us to acknowledge critically the ways in which the dominant cultural imaginary shapes our encounter with the world and how the Christian alternative might be actualized. We cannot, however, afford to leave behind the meaning of the ecclesial sacraments themselves, and so our ethics in addition to drawing on pedagogical language must account for Christology and linguistic analysis. Bringing the insights of modern sacramental theology to bear on Christian ethics, the sacraments may appear not just as training opportunities for the internalization of the Christian worldview in general but as privileged sites of encounter with the morally transformative promise of God. Through the sacraments, the sacramentality of the world is apprehended most truthfully in the mode of promise and possibility, as the fullness of the future in Christ for which we are destined. They are not, as such, mere intensifications of the sacramental principle but rather its source and goal. As a kind of promissory language, they are the beginning of the world to come and the birth of an eschatological Christian moral identity.

III. Enacting the Promise of God: The Sacraments as Memorial and Prophetic Action

Given the argument that I have presented, it remains now to consider what an account like the one recommended might actually look like. Moving forward from the ideas that we have seen, how can an examination of sacramental practices themselves inform Christian ethics? Obviously, it is not possible in the space of this section to give a comprehensive answer to that question, nor even to link the sacraments and ethics in the theoretically robust fashion of the theologians mentioned above. Nonetheless, it may be helpful to provide a suggestion. According to my approach, there are two theological elements that must be integrated in our understanding of the sacraments in relation to ethics. First, the sacraments are a form of embodied remembrance. They are practices in which human beings physically enact the memory of Jesus Christ, inclusive of his entire life and death. As acts of embodied memory, they bring about our participation in his body, making present in us the gift of freedom and renewal that has been realized in him. Of course, the memorial of Christ is always also the remembrance of his suffering, the consequence

the birth of Christian ecological consciousness, see Denis Edwards, "Eucharist and Ecology: Keeping Memorial of Creation," *Worship* 82, no. 3 (2008): 194-213. Edwards developed these arguments in the context of a larger ecological theology in his book, *Ecology at the Heart of the Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

and culmination of his ministry, carried out under the rulership of God and expressed in his prophetic identity. Secondly, therefore, the sacraments are prophetic actions. They are continuations of those words and gestures of Christ wherein he revealed that the freedom and renewal coming about through him is real but not yet complete, for it is anchored in the future. In that regard, the sacraments as sites of encounter with the morally transformative promise of God forbid at the same time that we should become morally complacent. The reality of new life that is realized in us through these mysteries, because it is always involved in the reality of suffering, is apprehended in eschatological hope. From this perspective, the sacraments comprise a language promise. As a memorial of the past, they are signs of the future that God has promised, not yet fully achieved but already beginning to change the shape of the present.

In a certain sense, what I am proposing is a view of the sacraments that can appreciate the dialectical integrity of sacramental optimism, which perceives the grace of God expressed in reality now, and prophetic realism, which acknowledges historical ambiguity and aspires to the fullness of grace yet to come. For his part, Eggemeier was seeking the very same balance, but his sole reliance on the notion of sacramental vision seems to have limited his effectiveness. Although he alludes frequently to the integrity of the sacramental and the prophetic as dimensions of the Christian imagination, insisting quite rightly on the use of a hyphen to associate the terms, his final contention appears to be that the sacramental perception is properly the solution to the crisis of ecological devastation whereas the prophetic perception helps to remedy the crises of global poverty. Surely, he would not wish to state the matter so categorically, but still the structure of his argument allows for little reflection on how the sacramental and the prophetic interact. These two dimensions of Christian experience, though certainly in tension, must be brought together. And we need something more than Eggemeier's gesture toward their common criticism of the market imaginary.

My contention is that it is possible to accomplish this encounter between the sacramental and the prophetic by studying the Christian sacraments. We need to consider from an ethical point of view not just the sacramental principle that renders all of creation a window onto divine glory, not just the sacraments as emblems of divine grace in the world, but the sacraments as concrete, embodied practices that, performed on the eschatological horizon of divine promise, are privileged sites for the conversion of moral identity. The reduction of the sacraments and liturgy to a training ground for the Christian sacramental imagination, sites where the sacramentality of the world is concentrated and so revealed, cuts the meaning of these mysteries short, and so we fail to

appreciate their full significance for the moral life and the global ethical crises of the present. It is necessary to transgress the boundaries of a theology that renders the sacraments only against the sacramental background of creation. That sort of account is foundational, and I would contend indispensable, but the privileged character of the sacraments demands something more. That something more will account for the sacraments not just as ascetical or kenotic practices that educate us in Christian perception and desire toward creation, but also as prophetic remembrances of God's promise through which we are taken up into a sacred signification that also sanctifies us, leaves us renewed. And while that renewal will certainly involve a shift in worldview and character, it will be moreover a total existential referral of our corporate identity to the future Kingdom of God, where the reality will be fully apprehended that we receive our life from outside of ourselves, from our fellow human beings, from the earth, from other species, and finally from our God in Christ.

For support of my claim that the sacraments are both embodied acts of remembrance and also prophetic actions, I turn to the work of Bruce Morrill in *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory*. The dialogue that he generates in this study between the political theologian J.B. Metz and the liturgist Alexander Schmemmann culminates for him in the thesis that liturgical practice, precisely as the commemoration of Christ, is oriented toward his future advent in the mode of expectation. To illustrate this point, Morrill follows Geoffrey Wainwright's observation that the Eucharistic phrase *maranatha* expresses the double meaning, depending upon its grammatical breakdown, of belief that the Lord has come and supplication for the Lord to come again.⁴² At the very heart of sacramental practice, then, is the integral acknowledgment that in remembering Christ and encountering him sacramentally in the present, we likewise experience the sting of his absence and long for his eschatological return. The *memoria passionis* that Metz describes as the center of Christian faith experience is the substance of a sacramental liturgical remembering of the cross, whereby the grace of God experienced in the present is also the grace of God that has not yet come to fullness in a suffering world. To that extent, the sacraments as acts of remembrance are also prophetic actions, performances in continuity with the ministry and passion of Christ that bring about the rule of the Kingdom among us in the present but also attest to its eschatological futurity.⁴³

42 Morrill, 197-98.

43 For more on this approach to sacraments as prophetic actions, see Morna D. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010). Liam Bergin has applied the model in *O Propheticum Lavacrum: Baptism as*

But how do the sacraments both as acts of remembrance and also as prophetic acts actually give rise to ethics? In his endeavor to apply the notion of dangerous memory to Christian liturgy, Morrill has observed that, for Metz, the memorial of Christ's passion together with the glory of the resurrection implies a remembrance of the history of suffering precisely as the history of freedom. Within the tension of that dialectic, between suffering and freedom, there emerges negative critique of those narratives and power structures that cause needless human pain and a positive hope that sustains the struggle against forces of oppression.⁴⁴ In laying claim on each of our lives, however, the *memoria Iesu Christi* does not only thrust the Christian person in the direction of individual freedom. It is a socially transformative remembering, grounding "a promise in which believers understand their freedom as related to the future freedom for all, which requires first, that they consider the promise of salvation not in terms of their individual personal histories but in terms of all of human history, that their belief in that promise fashion a life of solidarity with those now threatened by deadly oppression."⁴⁵ Like the practice of remembering that motivates and gives it shape, Christian political praxis is eschatologically oriented, and indeed, it is decidedly apocalyptic, emerging from a posture of imminent expectation of the freedom that God has promised and urgently working to realize it in the course of human history.

For Morrill, of course, it is through liturgy and the sacraments that this morally and socially revolutionary practice of remembering takes place. To understand more precisely how this happens, he turns to the work of celebrated liturgist Alexander Schmemmann. There are at least two elements of Schmemmann's thought that Morrill considers especially useful: (1) his theological understanding of the eucharistic liturgy as a commemorative practice that by remembering God's salvific action in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus also anticipates the final deliverance, and (2) his interpretation of Christian liturgical experience in the terms of evangelical joy and gratitude. In relation to the first point, Morrill cites the Schmemmann's well-known image of ascension wherein the people gathered at table are raised to participate in the heavenly banquet. The liturgy as remembrance also becomes the site for the manifestation of a realized eschatology. This is an essential experience of faith in which a definitive apprehension of our life in Christ changes our life in the

Symbolic Act of Eschatological Salvation (Rome: Gregorian University, 1999), and also in "From Breaking Jars to Breaking Bread: Eucharist as Prophetic Act." *Worship* 89 (2015): 331-350.

44 Morrill, 31

45 *Ibid.*, 33.

world.⁴⁶ The second point is then clarified with reference to the idea of sacrificial love. The supernatural joy and gratitude that emerge from the experience of liturgy as a feast of sharing in the life of God find expression in an attitude of self-sacrificing love amidst the adversities of the present world.⁴⁷ Does either of these options for articulating the ethical significance of liturgy succeed? Morrill appears to believe that they move in the right direction, but missing from Schmemmann's theology is a substantive account of what the ethical life lived in light of the liturgical reality actually looks like, and especially an explanation of the ways in which liturgical remembering actually shapes moral subjectivity.

Hence, Morrill is unwilling to let Schmemmann off the hook. These largely ahistorical and abstract symbolic assurances will not do. We require, according to Morrill, a stronger account of "how the communal experience in the eucharistic liturgy, the 'realized anticipation' of the kingdom, can indeed convert its participants not just to (individual) self-responsibility but to forms of praxis in (social-political) solidarity with others."⁴⁸ The next step, therefore, is return critically to the notion of memory, so as to determine if anamnesis can really do the work of linking liturgy and ethics. Thus far, the dialogue between Metz and Schmemmann has located the essence of faith in the memory of Christ's death and resurrection, and both thinkers have assured us that this memory must be the controlling factor for Christian praxis. Still needed, however, is an analysis of memory that describes that central function, its transformative relationship to moral subjectivity.

Diving into a series of biblical and historical analyses, which I cannot rehearse in any detail here, Morrill surfaces a variety of dimensions pertinent to eucharistic anamnesis: its noetic quality, its relation to other forms of ritual remembrance, its Jewish symbolic heritage and covenantal context, its interruptive character in time, and its personal element.⁴⁹ Taken together, his various reflections on these matters lead Morrill to a conclusion not unlike Schmemmann's:

A vision for praxis in the world comes from the joy and confidence experienced in the liturgical remembrance of Jesus, who proclaimed and enacted a kingdom of God, which in this world and its history is ever a seed awaiting the full yield of its eschatological harvest.⁵⁰

46 Ibid., 113.

47 Ibid., 121.

48 Ibid., 131.

49 Ibid., 163-80.

50 Ibid., 186.

Liturgy changes us morally, it gives new meaning to our lives and new shape to our behavior, because as a practice of remembrance it activates the living presence of Jesus, his life and his passion, which propels us forward in an anticipatory experience of the Kingdom of God, the transformative reality which orients and renews every facet of human existence. I would argue, moreover, that this living, eschatological presence of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom coming to life within him is activated in the mode of prophecy. The ecclesial sacraments as the remembrance of who Christ was and what he did are prophetic actions, embodied performances in which his deeds and ours become conjoined. We become, in him and with him, prophets of the world to come, already in joyful and confident possession of the future under the mode of promise. Thus, our moral existence as Christians is rooted in the ecclesial sacraments as the means by which we share in the eschatological existence of Christ himself.

In relation to moral formation, this view indicates that sacramental practice both consoles and goads the Christian moral subject. As the remembrances of Christ who brought the kingdom to life in his ministry and conquered death in his resurrection, the sacraments surely console us, guaranteeing that the grace of God is already given and already beginning to make us new. Yet as remembrances of Christ's death at the hands of those forces that still rule the world today, the sacraments become prophetic actions, goading us always to be dissatisfied with the conditions of the present, to challenge the powers of domination that crush humanity and the earth, and to aspire to live as children of God, because we know that the destiny which God has promised is still on its way. Holding fast to the sacraments, the Christian way of life, suspended between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of creation, is the way of ongoing moral formation nourished by the promise of future glory. That promise, we might say, encounters us in the promises that are the sacraments, or in the promissory language of the sacramental Church. What we learn in that symbolic atmosphere, or rather what we come to be, is a community of persons constituted by the existential realization of our utter contingency before the reality of suffering alongside the realization that we are sustained in each moment by God and destined for his life. Grounded in the future Kingdom, present in the sacramental identity of the Church, the sacraments allow us to know in the depths of our being that we receive all we are from outside of ourselves, that grace is already here and still on its way. The form of life that flows from this knowledge, from this sacramental sharing in Christ, is one that struggles against the realities of suffering and evil in hope

without pretending they are not real. It is here in the sacramental life where Christian ethics can begin.

THE MARKET AS GOD: AN INTERVIEW WITH HARVEY COX

Harvey Cox is Hollis Research Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School.

*A teacher at Harvard since 1965, he explores the relationship between religion, culture, and politics, focusing in particular on themes such as urbanization, Jewish-Christian relations, and Pentecostalism. During his long career Cox has integrated theory with practice, publishing widely while also being an ordained Baptist minister. Recently he had a conversation with Ryan Gregg about his new book, *The Market as God*, scheduled to be released this fall, and also about the 2016 presidential election, his friendship with Martin Luther King Jr., the Occupy Movement, nonviolent resistance, and other topics.*

Can you tell us a little about your book coming out this autumn, *The Market as God*, and why you wanted to write it?

Sure, I think I can tell you. It started a few years ago when a friend of mine suggested to me that if I wanted to really know what is going on in the world, when I read the New York Times, I should skip the front page and go directly to the business section. He said that what is really shaping the world now are corporations and business decisions. So I thought, ‘Well, it might be worth trying, but it’s going to be very unfamiliarly territory for me after so many years studying theology and religion.’ But I started reading it and I said ‘Hmm... this seems kind of familiar.’ I began to see that there is something like a religious system embedded in the whole consumer capitalist market economy and society. Michael Sandell, who teaches over in [Harvard] Yard, says “We no longer live in a market economy we live in a market society.” And I thought, ‘Yes, a market society with a market culture and maybe even a market religion.’

Then a couple years ago Pope Francis issued his first major pastoral statement, *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*), where he says that we are captives of a new idolatry of consumerism and of a deified market. And I thought, ‘Yes, a deified market.’ Because at the apex of the quasi or surrogate religious system is *The Market*—capital T, capital M—which, when you think about it, people often speak about and have attitudes towards *The Market* in a way reminiscent of how people used to think about and address the Almighty, the gods of

Olympus, or Zeus. The Market knows it all; The Market is wise; The Market reaches everywhere; The Market has our best and long range interests in mind. You have to trust the ups and downs of The Market... It's got everything.

So I started thinking about all that, and then thought: 'Look, in addition to this Market God there is a master narrative that you can find in any religion, similar to a myth of the Fall: where history is going, where we fit into it, what counts for good and evil, what you have to do to have a flourishing life, what a flourishing life means. And this system has a whole range of institution that supports it. It's got insurance companies, local banks, big banks, a priesthood... it's got everything. It has seers who look into the future and tell you what you ought to be doing if you want to be in the good graces of this Market God.

Anyways, I started spitting this out chapter by chapter, really just thinking about it at first. Then Harvard University Press heard about this and asked me if I wanted to redevelop it into a full book, and I said that I would. So I've been working on it for the past two or three years now, and at long last it is finished, and in fact will be out this fall.

Fascinating. To ask a follow-up question, then: it seems that human ideas of who God is can in turn be one of the basic ways that we come to a sense of who we are. Does The Market tell us who we are as human beings, as creatures who (perhaps implicitly) worship The Market God?

Well that's an easy one. The Market has a logarithm which is based on what you are worth, and this is pretty much a pecuniary statement. If you are a millionaire you are worth this much, if you are a billionaire you are worth that much, and if you are homeless person... You know, it is pretty clear that The Market assigns worth and worthlessness. And then what happens is that we tend to internalize and think of ourselves in these terms as well. If I'm worth \$50,000 a year on The Market for what I can contribute or the work I can do, then I begin to think of myself as \$50,000 worth of human being. The metric for how we understand ourselves gets to be very quantitative—quantitative in money terms. It's quiet simple, and unfortunately people do walk around with this kind of internalized understanding of who they are and what they are worth.

Does the term ‘Market’ for you basically connote capitalism?

Not entirely. I make a distinction in the book between The Market and markets with a small-m, since these latter have played a role since early human history. But these markets always played a role within a range of different institutions: family, tribe, community, religion, and later on, the state. They were both supported and constrained by other institutions. But my thesis in this book is that in the last, say, 150 to 200 years, The Market has become more and more central, and higher and higher. It has become what it wasn't before, which is the dominant cultural institution of the whole society. So I make a distinction between ‘market’ and capital-M ‘Market,’ and throughout the book the capital-M means The Market in its current Zeusian position at the top of the Olympic Pantheon of these other institutions which have lessened in their significance. But this is not a book to criticize or call for the abolition of The Market—not at all. But it does call for, let's say, the de-deification of The Market, in order to restore it to its proper function in a range of institutions.

Given the disproportionate concentration of wealth in the United State, would you say that The Market God is just a parochial deity, or is this really a global religion?

It's global. Just think of the Swiss bankers and the capitalist class in Russia. There was a time where it was more American or Western, but it has spread. “God” is supposed to be omnipresent, and the Market God has now become an omnipresent reality.

Do you see organized religion as complicit in some sense with the spread of this Market God? To borrow the biblical idiom, if this is like the ‘Baal’ of our time, how can organized religion resist kneeling down to it?

Well, first of all, it is complicit, and has been. Religions have been touched and shaped—I might even use the word infected—by market values from earliest times. The first thing that pops into my mind is the sale of indulgences in the medieval period, and there are all kinds of other examples one might give. And today there is the use of market techniques in religion—megachurches give a lot of market surveys to see what people like and don't like about going to church, and then reshape things according to that. Everyone knows there is an unattractive quest for power and money—but especially money—among

religious institutions and religious figures. So yes: of course religion is complicit, and that's nothing new. It's always been this way.

And I think that's too bad because as a Christian (and a theologian), I think The Market Religion and The Market Faith is a deadly rivalry to all traditional religions, including my own, because it undermines the main values: The Market does not reward compassion; The Market does not reward tenderness, or love... It uses love. It can sell perfume and things, but it certainly does not reward love of neighbor. It is competitive, and stimulates competitive instincts in human beings.

The major threat I see in The Market Religion is that it is built on a concept of limitlessness. It must constantly grow. If you're not growing you're going to die. So growth, 'growthism,' is part of The Market Religion. But we cannot have an economy based on infinite growth while we live on a finite planet, and we are finding that out in a startling way in recent years from ecological and climate change. So I think there is a fundamental contradiction here and I wish that the traditional religions would take notice of this. It is something we could have in common—it is a threat to all of us, not just one, and we could take some steps to respond to it.

That segues well to another topic I wanted to ask you about: Pope Francis' recent attention on the environment, which is often linked with the way the boundless pursuit of wealth despoils the planet. Can you talk about the two-sided nature of this issue, and share any ideas about whether it is best addressed from the economic side of things, or from the environmental side?

I think they are heavily tied in, and Francis is right to talk about both of them. I am enormously encouraged by Pope Francis' insight about this, and by his recognition that the defied market—that's his term not mine—is threatening, and that the resultant ecological disaster is most threatening to the most vulnerable people, the poorest people. There is a direct and irrefutable connection between the two, so we have to address both of them. And so far Francis has been very good about pointing this out, more so than any other religious leader—and of course he has the biggest bully pulpit of anybody. We need to have some concrete suggestions about how to move on from this. My last chapter of the book talks about this; I call it "Saving the Soul of The

Market”—not demolishing The Market but restoring The Market to its proper human function, as a servant of the whole society rather than its master.

As a Christian theologian, how do you see the words or example of Jesus as informing how The Market can be redeemed? Is the stance of Jesus toward wealth different in any significant sense different from what the rest of the Bible says?

There are number of different ideas in the Bible about this, but the overall message that I get from beginning to end, Genesis to Revelation, is that wealth is not in itself bad. It is the reward for work, the reward for creativity. But wealth also has enormous dangers. ‘Mammon’ is Jesus’ term for it. The religious quality of wealth is what you have to watch out for; you cannot serve God and mammon. We know from biblical studies that there wasn’t any deity or idol at the time called ‘mammon’; he was referring to a ‘religionized’ attitude toward wealth and the accumulation of wealth. It’s very clear. Think about the rich man not getting through the eye of a needle, and warnings in the Sermon on the Mount about people who have wealth. Think about the prophets, Amos and Isaiah, fulminating against people who grind the poor and accumulate wealth. I don’t think its ambiguous at all. I think it’s pretty clear. Even the final book of the Bible, in the ‘judgment on the merchants of the city on the seven hills,’ they are weeping because they can’t sell their products anymore. It’s there from beginning to end.

What has been lacking in most religious institutions (with some exceptions) is any counter-proposal, any way of injecting into the whole social system alternatives that could demote the centrality of The Market to its proper status. We are beginning to see some of that, though. I’ve been reading some of the material from a project called “The Next System Project,” which is centered in the University of Maryland. They are actually locating and documenting small programs (there are hundreds and hundreds all over the country) that present an alternative way of thinking about the economy, rather than seeing it as based on an all-powerful market and a consumerist culture. There are lots of them, and I devote my last chapter to that.

From your vantage as a divinity school professor, how do you think an institution that trains religious leaders can be part of speaking to this issue? (For example, I know you have been interested in collaborating with the

business school.) Can you talk a little bit about how students like myself or my peers could be engaging?

Sure I could. In recent years I have offered a course called “God and Money,” and one of the things I wanted to accomplish very early in the term was to demythologize the language and discussion about money and wealth, investment and inequality. A lot of people, especially people in the religious realm, find it so daunting, and they are afraid they don’t know enough about it and will say something stupid, so they stay away from it. They don’t want to appear to be ignorant. And my response is to note that a lot of language used within *The Market Faith* is purposely obscurantist. They want you to think it’s a lot more complicated and more resistant to discussion than it is. So I wanted to invite people to think about that more, and I’ve had some very good experiences in the last years as I’ve been writing this book, meeting people in churches.

Let me give one example that was particularly interesting to me. There’s a minister who has a church down in Stamford, Connecticut—it’s one of those very wealthy suburbs where a lot of people work in the banking industry—and he invited me to come down one afternoon and meet with some of his parishioners who are in finance. We had one of those typical after-church lunches where everyone sat around and introduced themselves, and these people were all in really high positions—in Wall Street, some of the big banks, trading companies. And I told them a little about the things you and I have been discussing now, and they were very intrigued. They wanted to talk about it. They said, “Why don’t we talk about this more?” Some also had a queasy conscience about some of the things they were doing. They believed—and I think rightly so—that a financial institution can serve a common purpose. But they saw many of these financial institutions veering off towards serving themselves, enriching themselves—just as we now know those big trading houses were doing before the 2008 collapse, betting against their own customers to make money. And they really wanted to talk about this.

So I think there is a lot of possibilities out there in churches, and not just at that high level, for serious discussion about the ethical, religious, and spiritual implications of money, wealth, investment, inequality, economy, consumerism—all things we dealt with in the course. They are all fair game, I think, for sermons, for church school programs, curriculum, in order to get people thinking and talking about this.

The notion of ‘demythologizing money’ implies that there is indeed a mythos surrounding it. I took your class, and remember you talking about the way the mythology of money often takes liturgical dimensions in our culture. For example, we talked about the way TV commercials are like little parables on how to live the good life. Can you comment on this liturgy, and make any suggestions about how we might more acutely perceive its symbolic language at work around us?

Virtually any TV commercial is a parable. You start off with a problem: I have itchy skin, or erectile dysfunction, my hair is getting thin, or whatever. There is a person who is kind of sad and grimacing. And then you introduce the answer, which is this bottle or this tube or whatever it is. Then it concludes with a happy person, fulfilled. They always seem to be running down a beach, you know. The beach seems to have become a symbol that says, “Now I’m free. I have all these friends, I’m out here playing with my children and frolicking with beautiful people.” One, two, three—they are morality tales, parables, that convey the message of The Market God, which is: in order to have a flourishing life, you buy this. And, of course, we know that behind this there is the notion that just buying the product is not going to do it; you’ll have to buy more after that. It doesn’t quite do it, but it gets you into the buying habit.

The other thing I ran into, speaking about liturgical: I think The Market God is now developing its own liturgical year. You’ve got Valentines Day: you have to go out and buy something for somebody. Black Friday: it’s solely invented by The Market God. Mother’s Day! It started as a religious holiday, actually, of Methodist women in West Virginia. It was Mothers Devoted to Peace Day. It was discovered by John Wanamaker (I have a chapter in the book dedicated to this), who said, “Hey, this could really go as a sales device.” So he started having Mother’s Day in the Wanamaker Stores (they were big department stores), and Mother’s Day became more and more like a Market God holiday: you have to take your mother out to dinner, certainly buy her something, and then the Mother’s Day sales lead up to Father’s Day sales.

Are you saying I shouldn’t buy something for my mother on this upcoming Mother’s Day? Is that my resistance? I don’t know if my mother will understand: “Mom, my professor told me it is idolatrous for me to buy you a gift!”

Ha! You know it used to be a custom both on Mothers Day and on Christmas to make something. Make a cake, make a pie, if you were a carpenter you could build something... but more and more The Market people didn't like that, they wanted you to buy things. So yes, give your mother something... Do you ever bake things?

Yeah!

Well there's an idea. That's appreciated when you give someone something you've made.

Now of course there is this whole titanic battle over Christmas. Is Christmas really anymore the celebration of this poor peasant child born in the stable? We hear sermons about it over and over again, but our festival of excess lasts longer and longer every year. Tommy Hilfiger, a style expert (I didn't know about this until I was doing research for the book) is now trying to take Ramadan, and make it into a kind of Muslim equivalent of the Christmas buying season, designing special Ramadan clothes and gifts and a special advertisement campaign. The problem he has with Ramadan, however, is that it occurs at a different time every year. It's based on a lunar calendar, so it's hard to do sales planning. But he is trying to do that, and is meeting with some success.

That would be ironic almost in the same way as the Christmas festival of excess, since Ramadan is a time of fasting.

Right! But with Ramadan you have fasting during the day, but feasting at night, so it could work out. Believe me, nothing escapes the notice of The Market God as a possible sales opportunity. It is all grist for the mill.

You touched on this a little earlier, but I'd like to hear more about the way all this shapes human identity. Augustine talks about the idea that we are what we love or desire. How does The Market God shape our love and desire, and so shape us?

Now that's the key question. To me that's really the theological heart of this whole discussion. And I am with Augustine on this one: it isn't what you know, and it's not even what you believe; you are shaped by what you love and desire. Desire is implanted by God—the reaching out, the need for the other, the need

for something larger. It takes various shapes. And the cunning of The Market God, is that it knows how to take that perfectly natural and good desiring quality of human beings and distort it—‘short circuit it’ would be the name for it—directing it towards items for sale that are not going to satisfy that desire, but which are presented to you as the fulfillment of desire. That’s why the sexual element in so much advertising is there, because sexual desire is a very basic human desire, and if you can take that and associate it some way with the product, that helps to redirect or distort desire toward the product rather than some other object of fulfillment.

So it’s fundamentally built on a lie. It promises something it does not and cannot deliver.

That’s right. Somebody once wrote that the main quality of an idol, which separates the idol from God, is that the idol cannot deliver. Remember the big story about Elijah and the prophets of Baal? They are having a contest with each other, and the prophets of Baal can’t bring the fire down from heaven. They lacerate themselves and dance around, but the sacrifice is still not burned. And then of course God does send the fire down for Elijah and burns the sacrifice. You know it’s a very simple story. The difference is the capacity to really deliver a flourishing life, blessedness, redemption, salvation, the full life.

Theology often articulates a partnership between, on the one hand, God’s genuine ability to deliver, and on the other hand, our own genuine responsibility to cultivate virtue. If someone is, so to speak, worshiping The Market God, what are the virtues he or she is trying to develop in order to partner with The Market God and achieve the good life?

Oh, that’s interesting. Well some of the virtues do, of course, coincide with some of things we call the Protestant ethic virtue. If you work hard, if you save your money, if you are thrifty, if you are punctual—if you do all these things, this will satisfy The Market God. You must have no compunction about beating out a rival; you really can’t get tender-minded in a contest with somebody who wants this share of The Market; you have to put mercy aside and be willing to be tough within a market environment. You also have to have a certain kind of imagination and creativity that will advance your particular goals within The Market realm. Yes, there are virtues, or at least qualities...

So perhaps part of the reason why it is such a persuasive counter-religion is because these virtues or qualities are not necessary bad. I mean creativity is good; even the drive to compete in some sense might be good...

Exactly. You could almost say that the devilish part is that it is the distortion of basically good things. And that's what Augustine says; his understanding of sin is that sin is a disordered good. It's not bad at its root, but it is disordered in some way. In that respect I am also an Augustinian.

Interesting. Another question I have in this arena—and it might be too big, or overly simplistic—is about the competing buzzwords ‘capitalism’ and ‘socialism.’ Could you talk a little about these political economies and what is at stake in their religious appeal?

You know, one of my friends says that what we need to do is find something beyond ‘capitalism’ and ‘socialism’ that incorporates the strengths of both without the weaknesses of either. And I think that's a nice insight—for a general statement.

One of encouraging things in this Next System Project is, for example, how many worker-owned corporations there are. There are hundreds and hundreds of them now. The owners decided they were going to retire or had other things they wanted to do, and they made arrangements for the employees to own the enterprise. There are just lots of them, all over. So in this case you are combining a sort of social ownership (which is certainly part of the socialist idea early on, before there were big socialist systems) with some of the juice that capitalism brings to it. If you are in a shoe factory, for example, and you are an employee that owns part of it, if there is another shoe factory in the other part of the state that is owned by stockholders, you still have to compete with them. You know when you are competing, however, that you are bringing a certain advantage to yourself as an employee because if you do better, the profits are not going to go out to stockholders or other people; they are going to accrue to you, the employee.

Then there are more and more consumer cooperatives. For various reasons, people are deciding that instead of buying their food in big chain markets they want to buy local. Of course there are health reasons for this, but still they are questioning the monopoly of the big capitalist enterprises.

There is a book called “America Beyond Capitalism” by Gar Alperovitz which is very good. And it doesn’t just prescribe; it actually describes literally hundreds of relatively small but fairly ambitious projects in which alternatives to an encompassing capitalist system are emerging, and can be further encouraged by national, state, and tax policy. But the larger enterprises are doing everything they can to prevent this; they have lots of money to cripple these new system emergences, which they see as a threat.

Interesting. And that reminds me of another question I have for you, and you don’t have to answer it if you don’t want to: Who are you going to vote for in the 2016 election?

Ha! Well, let’s see who is nominated. But I am a supporter of Bernie. Some of his ideas are the same ideas I have. I don’t deceive myself into thinking he is going to be the nominee, but I personally think he would do a hell of a lot better as the nominee than some other people think. But I don’t think he is going to be the nominee, so I’ll vote for the democratic candidate.

You know, it’s interesting to me how the label of socialist—which Bernie does not eschew, saying “Yes, I am a democratic socialist”—it is interesting how this label doesn’t seem to turn off hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people. It used to be that this was kind of a poison word; you didn’t use the word ‘socialist’ to describe yourself. You would say anything else: “I’m a communitarian,” etc. But it doesn’t seem to bother people, at least young people.

Yes. You know, I was at the airport last night, sitting in Starbucks on a layover, and this girl was sitting in the booth next to me, a political science student from NYU. We got to talking, and I asked her in jest who she is going to vote for. Trump probably? She said, ‘No, I’m a huge Bernie fan,’ and goes on to tell me how she convinced her Lyft driver on the way to the airport to also vote for him. This girl was like an evangelist for Bernie, really energized about it.

That’s very interesting. You know we had our big family Easter gathering recently. I have four children, and three of them are married and have children, and some of those children are now teenagers and in their early twenties. And we have this family custom where fifteen or twenty of us rent a big house and spend Easter weekend together, culminating with some really big Easter

morning celebration together. And all of the kids, 100% of them, are Bernie supporters.

There you go. And what do they say? What's so attractive about him? Is it the hair?

Well, they say various things. 'He keeps talking about the kind of country we really want to live in,' they say. 'He is not just trying to work the system, but suggesting an alternative system.' At our family gathering, however, most of the parent generation, except for me, were all very strong Hillary supporters. You know, the women over the age of thirty-five or forty remember more clearly the really bad old days when you didn't talk about a woman cop, a woman senator, a woman representative, a woman college president, or whatever. It's a recent victory, but the younger women don't have any experience with that. So saying, 'Look, Hillary will be the first woman president' is not a big deal to them. And I notice that Hillary herself is not saying much about that recently either. When she was running against Obama, she mentioned it frequently. Someone would bring their little girl up and say, 'See, you can be president someday too.' I haven't heard her say anything about that lately, though.

Great observation. I have another question for you, then, about American society and religion. You were friends with Dr. King, who remarked after the Albany Movement that they had made the mistake of attacking governmental structures instead of economic structures. Trained here in Boston and energized by a theological vision of what it means to be human, it seems King was increasingly convinced that economic injustice was at the bottom of things. Do you think the basic form of his theological and economic convictions still pertains today, or have things fundamentally shifted in some way in the fifty years since he was active?

Well, I have thought about that a good deal. I worked with Dr. King for ten years and knew him quite well. We were born the same year, we were both Baptist ministers, and had a lot in common.

Did you know him while he was here in Boston as a student?

No, I didn't. I met him after that, during the Montgomery bus boycott, when he was at his first church on Montgomery. He was the new kid on the block then, and was very young. You see, he was on a trajectory from the bus boycott,

to Albany, to the March on Washington, and in the last two or three years of his life he became quite convinced that the big obstacle to justice, to racial equality and other kinds of equality, was the economic institutions. And he looked back and said, 'We've made some mistakes in confronting government, with the March on Washington; why not a March on Wall Street?' Or think about his Poor People's Campaign, which tried to enlist (and did) poor people from across the racial and ethnic spectrum. When they were going to have the campaign, and again go to Washington and camp down there, two or three people in his staff said, 'No, we should go to Wall Street, and shut down Wall Street if we have to. You know—sit down in front of all those big banks and investment companies and occupy those. I think we could get as many people as we hoped to go to Washington to Wall Street.'

Well then the Occupy Wall Street movement came on three or four years ago now, and I thought that was really a continuation of King's work. But the problem with Occupy Wall Street is they didn't occupy Wall Street. They occupied a park! They were completely harmless! People could walk around and go to work as usual. There was no effort (as there was sometimes during the Vietnam War) to block the entrance to buildings and pay the price—you know, you get arrested. You do it nonviolently, but you get arrested and you get dragged off. I went down and spent a couple days at Occupy Wall Street, and the equivalent one they had here in Boston; it was symbolic only, in the worst sense of the word symbolic. It didn't really disrupt.

During the Boston Occupy Movement, a couple of people who were involved with it said, 'We ought to bring in some people from the King movement.' I know a guy very well named James Lawson who was on King's staff, a specialist in training people for nonviolence; he's a black Methodist minister who is now retired, living in California. So the Boston Episcopal Cathedral bought him a ticket to come in and talk to the Occupy Boston people. And he said, 'Look, what you are doing is fine, it's good, you're being non-violent. But what's the matter with going down to the steps of Bank of America and occupying that? Take a couple hundred people and occupy that. And be prepared. You have to be trained and ready, because at that point the police are not going to walk by you; they are going to start dragging you off. And you have to have more people to come in at that point. It has to be disruptive.'

Now King used disruptive tactics to some extent during the Civil Rights Movement; sometimes yes, sometimes no. For example, the march from Selma

to Montgomery, which I helped organize, was not obstructive at all. It formed in Selma peacefully. I mean, everyone got knocked around and beat up the first time they tried to do it, but it wasn't disruptive; it was a peaceful march along a public road and eventually did take place with police protection. But I think you have to interrupt—at least temporarily and visibly—the workings of the system in order to draw the kinds of attention you want. And that hasn't happened yet.

Let me ask you another question in that regard, sort of about your philosophy of history, or your philosophy of change. Sometimes, when thinking about the urgent challenges the world will face in my lifetime, I find myself struggling with a quiet pessimism that basically says: "We are creatures of the status quo, and things may have to get much worse until we have the collective impetus for meaningful change." In your class, then, you made a remark about 'creeping surrealism,' which is what happens when what is on our screen becomes more real than the objects themselves; you argued that this is just one symptom of the way The Market Religion spreads its paralyzing tentacles into the different parts of our communities and our planet. So, I am curious: How do you see things playing out? Do you have an optimistic outlook about all this? Pessimistic?

I am not either optimistic or pessimistic. Hope is a theological virtue, so in the long run I am hopeful, however long the run may be. You win some and you lose some, and sometimes you win and then you lose right away. I'm thinking, for example, of South Africa. Nobody ever thought there would be an even vaguely democratic multiracial democracy in South Africa; it's going to be a huge, bloody mayhem, they thought. But it wasn't. It was peaceful, largely because of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. The leadership there, after having tried some violence early on in the days of the African National Congress, decided to use other means, and they succeeded. Lech Wałęsa, and the solidarity movement in Poland opposing communism: they tried various things and then they became nonviolent. It was empowered by Christian religious ideas too. I've met Lech Wałęsa, he is one of my favorite characters; a devout Catholic. And I also think about the Egyptian movement that overthrew Mubarak—it was nonviolent, involved hundreds of thousands of people emulating King, even circulated a comic book which I have a copy of at home—the Montgomery story translated into Arabic, to help people organize. Now at the moment it has turned out to be a sort of bitter reversal for what those young people wanted. But they are still there. They're still around, and still have that vision. And they proved that you can achieve a certain kind of social change using nonviolent

measures. You have the terrible Tiananmen Square event that attempted nonviolence and was utterly crushed—by the way, Donald Trump says that was a really good example of strong leadership in Tiananmen Square. Think about that. It drove the tanks over people lying in the streets.

You win some you lose some in a nonviolent approach to social change. Gandhi! One of the most successful movements for independence from the British Empire— nonviolent. I mean, he would go to prison and fast if any of his followers began to show evidence of violence; he would fast in repentance. So, we have some currents that are going for us, but the currents on the other side are pretty strong too. But what King used to say, “The arc of history is long but it bends toward justice”—all I can say is that I hope he’s right.

Well maybe that’s a good place to end. That’s a lot of rich stuff. Thank you so much.

It is! Well, it’s some of the stuff I like to talk about. If you asked me about other things it would n’t have been as good...

