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EDITORS’ INTRODUCTION

In many ways, we publish this journal in mourning. We mourn for those we have lost to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the death count of which ranges somewhere between 3 million and 7 million people worldwide. We lament the time lost—our cumulative time lost with loved ones and time lost by those whose gendered roles forced them to provide childcare throughout the pandemic. We mourn for the budding ethnographers whose trips to field sites were canceled; we mourn for the letters of everyday people that lay in the archives untouched. So much scholarship—particularly by low-income students who felt the brunt of the economic crash—remains unwritten.

Yet, in these pages, we find much to be thankful for. These graduate student writers deliver complex and nuanced interventions in the study of religion, often with sharp wit and deep vulnerability. The articles showcased in this volume have inspired, amused, and enthralled us in the bleakest days of the pandemic. We hope that these pieces will invigorate and rejuvenate you as well.

In “Good Polygamist, Bad Polygamist,” Nicole Carroll analyzes a Utah State House bill designed to target only “criminal” polygamists, a tactic that exposes the limits of discourse on religious freedom.

Next, Rebecca Mendoza Nunziato’s visionary and innovative article “The Sacred Essence of Copal Incense” follows the smoke of copal through time to understand the survival and transculturation of ritual in Mesoamerica.

With a sharp pen and a penchant for puns, David Sievers engages Black critical theory to unpack the biopolitical significance of the National Thanksgiving Turkey pardon in “Gallina Sacra.”

Shin Young Park’s “The Postmodern Quest for Ethics at a Distance” engages Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Luc Marion to investigate the ethical significance of social distancing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jon R. Mehlhaus illustrates the ways that mind cure ministry perpetuates ableist conceptions of the human psyche in his article “Norman Vincent Peale, New Thought, and Disability.”

In a prescient historiography, Aseel Azab-Osman’s “The ‘Secular’ in Anglophone Scholarship on Premodern Islam” examines the use of the term “secular” to trouble the category’s reputation as anachronistic in Islamic studies.
Finally, this volume culminates with a captivating conversation between managing editors Margaret Hamm and Laura Mucha and historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez on her timely and celebrated new book *Jesus and John Wayne*.

Without the guidance of many, we could not have published this incredible research. We thank the professors on our anonymous Faculty Review Board who evaluated and enriched these articles during a heavy semester of online teaching. As always, we extend our gratitude to Katie Caponera for her unending support of students’ creative and academic work. To the entire Student Editorial Board, thank you for your wisdom and diligence even in this pandemic year. Finally, we thank the Harvard Divinity School Student Association for their tireless and unpaid anti-racist, liberation-based work to dismantle the violent systems in place here at Harvard.

We hope that the articles in this volume will inspire even more powerful and vital work in religious studies, the need for which the COVID-19 pandemic continues to underscore.

With gratitude,

Kate Hoeting, *Editor-in-Chief*
Margaret Hamm, *Managing Editor*
Mary Moon, *Managing Editor*
Laura Mucha, *Managing Editor*
William Scruggs, *Managing Editor*
GOOD POLYGAMIST, BAD POLYGAMIST:
SECULARISM AND THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN UTAH’S 2020 DECRIMINALIZATION OF POLYGAMY

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This paper examines the recent history of polygamy decriminalization attempts in Utah, focusing on the shift in decriminalization discourse from religious freedom to harm reduction posed by S.B. 102 in March 2020. Rather than decriminalizing all polygamists, S.B. 102 used the logic of harm reduction to differentiate between “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” and “criminal polygamists,” constructing polygamy within a binary that mirrors secularism’s operational logic which defines and manages religion. In theorizing the success of harm reduction rhetoric and the construction of the “criminal polygamist” through the performance of “good polygamy,” this paper raises questions about the limitations of religious freedom talk for polygamists and demonstrates how secularism works to produce cultural constructions of criminality.

Using the rhetoric of religious freedom, Mormon fundamentalists have tried time and again to convince the state of Utah to decriminalize the marital practice of polygamy.1 In the most recent challenge to Utah’s polygamy statute in 2011, polygamist patriarch Kody Brown, star of the reality television show Sister Wives, unsuccessfully sued the state on the grounds that the law criminalizing polygamy violated his family’s rights to privacy and religious freedom. With the goal of preventing further legal challenges to the anti-polygamy law, the Utah State Legislature passed House Bill 99 in 2017, which reaffirmed polygamy’s felony classification. But in March of 2020, something unprecedented happened: Utah’s State Legislature unanimously passed Senate Bill 102, which removed polygamy’s felony classification.

1 I’m deeply grateful to my professors, colleagues, and friends who have helped refine and strengthen this article. In particular, I’d like to thank Sally Promey, Tisa Wenger, and Cristina Rosetti their insightful, constructive feedback. Thank you to Alex Pearl, Jessica Yu, and Peter Schreiber for their thoughtful comments on this piece in its earlier stages.
and effectively decriminalized the practice of polygamy in the state of Utah for the first time since 1935. What made S.B. 102 successful when so many other attempts to decriminalize polygamy have failed?

Reading through the records and listening to testimonials of supporters of S.B. 102, one notices a startling absence of what Tisa Wenger has termed “religious freedom talk” to argue for polygamy’s decriminalization. Rather, proponents of the 2020 decriminalization bill employed the logic of harm reduction to make their case for polygamy’s decriminalization. Referring to a set of public health-based practices and principles aimed at reducing negative outcomes of certain criminalized activities, harm reduction is most commonly invoked in discussions regarding drug use or sex work. Harm reduction-backed decriminalization efforts have proliferated in recent years, achieving the decriminalization of marijuana in sixteen states, with Oregon becoming the first state to fully decriminalize drug possession in November of 2020. The central goal of harm reduction strategy is to reduce the harm that can result from participating in particular high-risk activities, like drug use, sex work, and, according to the supporters of S.B. 102, polygamy.

In their testimonies before the Utah Legislature and in news media interviews, supporters of S.B. 102 centered examples of “victims” of polygamy—women and children who had been subject to abuse within polygamous families and who, when they sought to report their abuser or access protective services, were themselves criminalized because of Utah’s felony polygamy statute. In advocating for the bill, State Senator Dierdre Henderson argued that decriminalizing “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” would be the only way to help women who want to leave their abusive situations get out of polygamy. In short, Henderson implied, this bill was not about “religious freedom” for polygamists or legalizing polygamy. Rather, as Dr. Cristina Rosetti stated in her testimony before the House Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Committee, “this [was] about harm reduction.”

Why were legislators convinced by the argument for harm reduction but not with the argument for Mormon fundamentalists’ religious freedom? What work does the language of “harm reduction” do that “religious freedom” does not? The answers to these questions, I suggest, can be found in two places: first, in Mormon fundamentalists’ representation of their polygamy to the Utah lawmakers and general

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public, and second, in the repeatedly used phrase “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” that became the linchpin of the harm reduction argument. Both the Mormon fundamentalists’ representation of their polygamy and the phrase “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” construct an “acceptable polygamist” while maintaining a figure of a “criminal polygamist”—an over-controlling patriarch, a sexual deviant, an abuser—thus rendering particular iterations of polygamy “criminal” while allowing polygamists who conform to American secular sociality to be tolerated by the state so long as they remain “law-abiding.”

In his work on the racialization of Mormon sexuality in the nineteenth century, Peter Coviello describes the centrality of Joseph Smith’s “radical theology of embodied life” to the early Mormons’ failure to conform to secularism’s social norms. He writes, “The Mormons were forever failing at being secular, I have argued, because what was increasingly demanded of ‘religion,’ if it wished to be legible as religion, and not atavism, zealotry, backwardness, and all the rest, was conformity to the premises of liberalism, and to its stacked forms of order, including the carnal.” Indeed, the Mormons were accepted into American secular sociality due to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ President Wilford Woodruff’s 1890 manifesto renouncing polygamy. This renunciation of polygamy also served to secure Utah’s statehood, demonstrating the entanglement of secular sociality—or what Coviello refers to as liberalism’s carnal forms of order—and the state. To gain their rights as fully incorporated citizens, nineteenth century Mormons had to become “good religionists” by conforming to American secular sociality’s “stacked forms of order.” But not all Mormons became “good religionists.” Woodruff’s 1890 renunciation of polygamy fractured the Mormon community, leading to the creation of several “fundamentalist” sects in the twentieth century who continued to practice the principle of plural marriage. Seeking to eradicate polygamy to maintain its legitimacy as a state and backed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who wished to maintain their status as “good religionists,” Utah criminalized polygamy in 1935.

Although I do not wish to suggest that in the discourse of S.B. 102, Mormon fundamentalists and their supporters replicated the strategy of late-nineteenth century Mormons, the similarities in their strategies of assimilation and creation of a criminal other calls attention to the ways that secularism’s operating logic of “good” and “bad” religion works to discipline those whose religious practice does not conform to the “stacked forms of order” of American secular sociality. The success of S.B. 102, I argue, is owed to the ways that Mormon fundamentalists and their supporters presented their polygamy while testifying to the legislature and in media interviews. These polygamists demonstrated their conformity to the liberal order by highlighting their assimilation to mainstream American social life, their domesticity and “family values,” and their participation in the American imperial project through military

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service. By arguing that they are not like the polygamists whom they characterize as abusive, tyrannical, and deviant, these “otherwise law-abiding” polygamists aligned themselves with the liberal order, rendering themselves normal in comparison. In promoting the existence of a “criminal polygamist” and “bad polygamy,” these fundamentalists and their supporters were able to present their polygamy as good, assimilated, and, most importantly, American. Dropping religious freedom as a rhetorical strategy and employing the language of harm reduction was essential for these polygamists to argue for their relative acceptability and to be tolerated by the state. The importance of this strategy can be seen in the fallout of the religious freedom case Brown v. Buhman which led to H.B. 99 reaffirming polygamy’s felony classification, as well as the way that religious freedom was discussed during the House and Senate hearings on S.B. 102, which illustrated lawmakers’ anxieties about the ramifications of “criminal polygamists” gaining the protections of religious freedom. While religious freedom could be perceived as collapsing the distinction between “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” and “criminal polygamists,” S.B. 102’s harm reduction logic reified this distinction in the law. Even without explicitly discussing religion, harm reduction rhetoric allowed secularism’s operating logic of defining “good” and “bad” religion to shape how polygamy was conceptualized in the discourse of S.B. 102, including in the bill itself.

In what follows, I provide a brief overview of the most recent constitutional challenge to Utah’s polygamy statute and the State Legislature’s reinforcement of polygamy’s felony status that followed in order to highlight the discursive shift from religious freedom to harm reduction that contributed to S.B. 102’s unprecedented success. In theorizing the success of harm reduction rhetoric and the construction of the “criminal polygamist” through the performance of “good polygamy,” I demonstrate how secularism, in its disciplinary sociality and pervasive operating logic of good and bad religion, works to produce cultural constructions of criminality.


On September 26, 2010, the reality TV show Sister Wives premiered on TLC, showcasing the life of Kody Brown, his four wives, and their eighteen children living in Lehi, Utah. As members of the Apostolic United Brethren, a Mormon fundamentalist church, the Browns practice polygamy, a spiritual marriage practice officially abandoned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1890 and made a felony in Utah in 1935. Shortly after the show’s first episode aired, viewers contacted the Lehi Police Department to ask what the department intended to do about the Browns. Soon after, the Lehi Police Department announced that it was investigating the Browns for violations of Utah’s polygamy statute, which in 2010 stated that “a person is guilty of bigamy when, knowing he has a husband or wife or knowing the other person has a husband or wife, the person purports to marry another
person or cohabits with another person.”8 In October of 2010, the Lehi Police Department forwarded the results of its investigation to the Utah County Attorney’s Office, which subsequently opened a case file on the Browns. Fearing prosecution, the Browns fled the state of Utah for Nevada in January 2011.9

On July 13, 2011, the Browns filed a lawsuit with the US District Court for the District of Utah naming Jeffrey Buhman, County Attorney for Utah County; Gary Herbert, Governor of the State of Utah; and Mark Shurtleff, Attorney General of the State of Utah as the defendants. In their suit, the Browns argued for the unconstitutionality of Utah’s polygamy statute, alleging that the statue violated their right to free exercise of religion, their right to “freely make personal decisions relating to procreation, contraception, family relationships, and child rearing,” and the Equal Protection Clause “because it treats religiously motivated polygamists differently from other people.”10

On December 13, 2013, Judge Waddoups released a lengthy 91-page judgement, in which he reflected upon the history of polygamy criminalization and the changing attitude toward government regulation of personal affairs and minority groups. Waddoups was particularly concerned with the statute’s “cohabitation prong,” which declared it a felony to cohabit with a person who has another spouse. Rather than being “operationally neutral” as the defendants argued, Waddoups ruled that—since the defendants acknowledged that felony cohabitation would not apply to adultery or other types of living arrangements—the “cohabitation prong” specifically targeted religious cohabitation. In its limited application to polygamy, Waddoups declared that the cohabitation prong “is therefore subject to strict scrutiny under the Free Exercise Clause and fails under that standard.”11 Waddoups further interrogated the meaning and legal intent of the “purports to marry” prong of the statute, questioning whether the phrase specifically referred to “spiritual” rather than legal marriages. The court struck down the cohabitation prong of the statute and called for a narrowing of the “purports to marry” prong, but ruled ultimately that, with these provisions, the statute survived constitutional scrutiny.12 Though not struck down in its entirety, the statute was successfully weakened. The Browns’ challenge to the statute on the grounds of religious freedom was partially a success.

However, this success was short-lived. In 2016, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed the ruling, citing Utah prosecutors’ policy of only pursuing polygamy cases in the case of other associated crimes.13 On the heels of this decision, in 2017 Utah State Representative Michael Noel introduced House Bill 99, which sought to reinforce polygamy’s felony status and protect the state from further lawsuits by

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9 Brown v. Buhman, 822 F.3d 1151 (10th Cir. 2016).
10 Brown v. Buhman, 822 F.3d at 1156.
12 Brown v. Buhman, 822 F.3d at 1160.
13 Brown v. Buhman, 822 F.3d at 1176.
revising the definition of polygamy. In the House floor debate, bill sponsor Rep. Noel presented H.B. 99 as a method of protecting Utah’s polygamy statute from constitutional challenges, saving the state the cost of further litigation. The Brown v. Buhman case, Rep. Noel said, cost the state “over a million dollars in tax-payer funds to prosecute.” He asserted that amending the statute would serve two purposes: to keep the statute constitutional by responding to Judge Waddoups’s concerns and to protect the state from the costs of another lawsuit. H.B. 99 primarily sought to alter one word of the law, changing “or” to “and” to link the cohabitation and purport to marry prongs of the statute, thus sidestepping Judge Waddoups’s ruling.

In the floor debate that followed, many legislators brought up the history of polygamy in the state, announcing that their ancestors had practiced plural marriage. Representative Marie Poulson stated that her great-grandfather was the “test case for polygamy” by revealing that he was the subject of the landmark religious freedom Supreme Court case Reynolds v. United States, which reinforced polygamy as a federal crime in 1879. However, Rep. Noel raised the question of whether they should understand contemporary polygamy as a genuinely religious practice. He asserted that there was an essential difference between the polygamy practiced by his ancestors and the polygamy practiced by groups such as the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS)—the polygamist community in Hildale, Utah led by Warren Jeffs, who was convicted of child sexual assault in 2011. Rep. Noel said, “To call the FLDS Mormons insults me, and bothers me. They are an apostate group, and they are not part of my religion.” Rep. Noel argued that the FLDS should be targeted by the law to protect women and children:

Tell the women . . . that we are going to continue to outlaw the practice of polygamy and bigamy in this state. We are going to ferret out these men and evil organizations that are taking advantage of our children. . . . This is Utah’s version of organized crime. . . . We can ferret it out.

The polygamy practiced by the FLDS, Rep. Noel asserted, was bad religion, and it was not worthy of legal protection.

In Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions, Megan Goodwin describes what she terms “contraceptive nationalism,” a rhetorical strategy that discredits and contains religious and sexual difference by characterizing religious outsiders as sexual predators. She writes that “narratives of contraceptive

nationalism reject religious difference as fundamentally unacceptable—
unincorporable—within the American body politic. Such narratives are prophylactic,
meant to defend the body politic from insemination from religious outsiders.”\(^\text{18}\) In
narratives of contraceptive nationalism, as displayed in the statements of Rep. Noel,
the unincorporable practices of the religious outsider are not rendered legible as
genuine religion worthy of protection by religious freedom, but as atavism, zealotry,
backwardness, and all the other varieties of what Peter Coviello terms “bad belief.”\(^\text{19}\)
Lawmakers’ understanding of polygamy as “organized crime” complicated
polygamists’ deployment of religious freedom rhetoric to secure legal protection for
their marital practice. In her groundbreaking work on religious freedom and the law,
Winnifred Fallers Sullivan argues that religious freedom is impossible in the United
States because religion as defined in the law does not correspond to the lived reality
of religious life.\(^\text{20}\) Because of this incommensurability, judges are forced to produce ad
hoc definitions of religion by which to determine the validity of religious freedom
claims. As such, informal understandings of “authentic religion” inform legislation,
law enforcement, and jurisprudence.\(^\text{21}\) How then could polygamy be protected by the
Browns’ claim of religious freedom when legislators rejected the idea of polygamy as
authentic religion? Partially successful in their initial attempt, the Browns’ fight for
religious freedom ultimately failed with the passing of H.B. 99 into law in March of
2017.

Three years later, the polygamy statute would come up for revision again, but this
time legislators proposed a new approach to addressing crime within polygamist
communities: decriminalization. Once again, the question of polygamy’s acceptability
was debated in the state capitol, but this time there were distinct differences in the
discourse: the logic of harm reduction was employed to center abuse victims while
emphasizing a distinction between “otherwise law-abiding” polygamists, like the
Browns, and “criminal polygamists,” like Warren Jeffs of the FLDS. Although
religious freedom was no longer the primary strategy to argue for decriminalization,
religious freedom talk was not entirely absent from the discourse. Discussed by
“victims of polygamy” who opposed S.B. 102, these references to religious freedom
revealed another level of limitations for religious freedom as a strategy for polygamists
seeking state toleration, emphasizing the effectiveness of the new strategies employed
by supporters of S.B. 102.

\(^{19}\) Coviello, *Make Yourself Gods*.
Press, 2018).
\(^{21}\) Jolyon Thomas, *Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in American Occupied Japan* (Chicago: University of
2020: Good Polygamist, Bad Polygamist

In an interview with Boston Public Radio in February 2020, S.B. 102 co-sponsor Utah State Representative V. Lowry Snow described his reasoning for supporting polygamy’s decriminalization. Throughout the interview, he emphasized that the intent of S.B. 102 was primarily to protect those in polygamous communities who are victims of abuse who do not try to access state services for fear of the legal consequences of being “outed” as a polygamist. To protect victims of polygamy, Rep. Snow asserted, the Legislature had to decriminalize “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” while maintaining the felony status of “criminal polygamists.” Snow emphasized the importance of integration, framing the bill as a means of bringing “otherwise law-abiding” polygamists “back from the fringes of society,” to “open-up” and bring “sunlight and openness . . . to this community.” When asked if he had any friends who are polygamists, Rep. Snow said, “The ones who I have known . . . I find to be law-abiding. [They] love their children deeply, [they] care about family issues, [they] are patriotic and are law-abiding.”

Snow’s emphasis on integration and “law-abiding” polygamists illustrates several key attributes of the discourse surrounding this bill. Snow highlighted the importance of integration but asserted that this integration requires some aspect of assimilation, particularly in regard to the law. For polygamists to integrate, they must be “law-abiding,” but that is not all they must be. Snow illustrated these law-abiding polygamists as assimilated into normative American secular sociality—or what Coviello would call liberalism’s “stacked forms of order”—by exemplifying family values, patriotism, and support of secular law.

We can see these values being performed by polygamists and their supporters in the Legislature hearings for S.B. 102 and in news media interviews. In a March 2020 interview with The Guardian, polygamist Joe Darger stated that he hoped the bill would help change societal attitudes regarding polygamy and “separate legitimate criminals from law-abiding polygamists.” Darger was explicit in his desire to change the narrative about polygamous communities:

23. Snow, interview.
25. Snow, interview.
If you want to end the narrative that there are abuses in polygamous communities, you’ve got to take them out of the shadows. The majority of them are innocent, faithful and civic-minded families. Marginalizing them as committing felonious behavior allows the stereotypes to exist; that polygamy equals abuse. Those kinds of stereotypes exist because no one dares speak up and say anything different.  

Like Rep. Snow, Darger argued that the first step was to “take these communities out of the shadows” by bringing them out of isolation through integration. Legal toleration and cultural integration, he argued, would end abuse in isolated communities and “separate legitimate criminals from law-abiding polygamists.” Darger asserted that the criminalization of polygamy collapsed the distinction between “legitimate criminals” and “faithful, civic-minded” families. Further, this image of the “criminal polygamist” highlighted the “innocent, faithful, civic-minded families” both Darger and Rep. Snow proclaimed as worthy of decriminalization by virtue of their assimilation.

Presenting her bill before the Senate Judiciary, Law Enforcement, and Criminal Justice Committee, State Senator Deirdre Henderson asserted, like Rep. Snow and Joe Darger, that “not all polygamists are abusers.” She explained that some polygamists were worthy of praise:

In order to appropriately address the serious problems that do exist within polygamous communities among some polygamous families and communities, we must first reject the premise that all polygamists are abusers or abuse victims. There are many good people raising children in loving homes who are also polygamists. I have visited with many of these families. They love their country, they are patriotic, many of them have served their country with honor. . . .

To demonstrate the extent to which these “good” polygamist families “love their country,” she showed the Committee a photograph of a polygamist family home in Hildale, Utah, home to the FLDS Short Creek community:

I want to show you a slide of a home I visited in Hildale. This family had nineteen baby pictures on their wall, and on another wall they had a picture of seven of their sons in full military dress uniforms, all having served in wars overseas for our country.

27 Smarden, “Polygamy is About to Be Decriminalized.”
29 The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is one denomination of fundamentalist Mormonism. FLDS are known for their distinctive clothing (the “prairie dress”) and for their abuse controversy involving their leader, Warren Jeffs. The Short Creek community spans Hildale, Utah and Colorado City, Arizona. See Senate Judiciary, Law Enforcement, and Criminal Justice Committee S.B. 102 Bigamy Amendments, 63rd Legislature, (UT February 10, 2020) (Sen. Deirdre Henderson opening statement).
The photo captured a scene of patriotism and domesticity in this polygamist home. Underneath the seven portraits mounted on the wall was a cabinet on which other military memorabilia were displayed. A folded American flag, medals, and a bronze statue of a soldier stood among other photos of the children of the plural marriage, suggesting a symbolic weaving of the family into a patriotic American identity. This display resembled an altar or a shrine in its careful curation of objects and images, a material manifestation and presentation of the polygamous family’s patriotism—this curation was a performance of the quintessential patriotic military family. In the context of the hearing, the image of this patriotic shrine within the polygamist’s domestic space crafted an argument for the American normality of this family. It was both a challenge to the viewer’s associations of polygamy as a practice of isolated fringe communities as well as an invitation to associate new images with polygamy. The image asked: What about this military family reads as criminal? Couldn’t this photo have been taken in the home of a monogamous American family? Perhaps, in your own home? Sen. Henderson concluded the presentation of this image by stating that “the people that I have spoken with long to feel part of society.”

While they may long to feel part of society, this image demonstrated the extent to which polygamous families already participated in society; it was a testament to their assimilation, demonstrative of their conservative family values, and evidence of their participation in the American military regime.

The description of “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” as “faithful, civic-minded families,” “upstanding, sincere, god-fearing citizens,” “good people” who are “patriotic” and “love their children” is echoed throughout the discourse in support of S.B. 102. In this rhetoric, “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” are contrasted with the abusive, manipulative figure of the “criminal polygamist,” whose specter haunts the discourse around S.B. 102, invoked by both supporters and opponents of the bill. In addition to decriminalizing polygamy for consenting adults, S.B. 102 increases the felony status for those who are convicted of crimes in concert with polygamy; further, the bill augments the number of crimes that could amount to a felony conviction. These include homicide; kidnapping, trafficking, and smuggling; sexual offenses; child abuse and abandonment; abuse, neglect, or exploitation; child abuse homicide; sexual

31 Joe Darger quoted in Smarden, “Polygamy is About to Be Decriminalized.”
32 Senate Judiciary, Law Enforcement, and Criminal Justice Committee: S.B. 102 Bigamy Amendments, 63rd Leg., (UT February 10, 2020) (Craig Foster testimony).
35 Snow, interview.
battery; and criminal nonsupport. Of the nearly forty individual testimonies in both Senate and House Committee hearings, nearly every speaker both against and in support of the bill framed themselves as representing or supporting “victims of polygamy.” Even when defending “good” polygamy, polygamists and their supporters foregrounded abuse within polygamous communities in their testimonies and media interviews. Alina Darger, plural wife and founder of Cherish Families, a non-profit that works to support and advocate for individuals from polygamous backgrounds, defended her family’s lifestyle while acknowledging the reality of abuse within polygamous communities. “There’s abuse that needs to be addressed,” she said. “We differ on how it needs to be addressed but we have the same goal.”

To address abuse and hold accountable the perpetrators of that abuse, she argued, the state needed to distinguish between the “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” and the “criminal polygamists.”

Complementing this binary between the “law-abiding” and “criminal” polygamists is the value-laden language of light/dark and the spatialized language of core/periphery that demonstrated supporters’ understanding of the state as a benevolent force. Rep. Snow called to bring polygamists “back from the fringes of society” to “open-up” and bring “sunlight and openness . . . to this community.” Joe Darger said he hoped the bill would take polygamous families “out of the shadows.”

One senator during the Senate Judiciary, Law Enforcement, and Criminal Justice Committee said, “I believe in sunlight. I believe in integration.” In her closing statement to the Senate Committee hearing, Senator Henderson quoted Martin Luther King, Jr. to reference the ways that S.B. 102 would address the “full on human-rights crisis” of polygamy in Utah: “darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that.” Sen. Henderson continued, “We must allow light in these dark places, we must allow them to feel the warmth of the sun.” With “light” representing state regulation and societal integration, these contrasting metaphors help differentiate between the good “otherwise law-abiding” polygamist and the criminal polygamist, elevating the positive value of integration, assimilation, and state regulation while denigrating isolation, opacity, and independence from the state. Proponents of the bill argued that criminal polygamy thrives “in the shadows.” Legislators, victim’s rights advocates, and polygamists argued that criminalization facilitated this “darkness” by not differentiating between the “innocent” and “abusive” polygamists, making the victims

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38 Snow, interview.
39 Smarden, “Polygamy is About to Be Decriminalized.”
of the criminal polygamist’s abuse fear accessing state services in the event they would be mislabeled as a criminal rather than a victim. One of the most repeated arguments in support of this bill was that the criminal polygamists committing abuse thrived under criminalization, because it allowed them to further isolate their communities by fomenting fear of the government. In contrast, good polygamy—the polygamy highlighted by Sen. Henderson, Rep. Snow, and other supporters—happens with integration and assimilation in the “light” of the state. In the words of the S.B. 102 handout that circulated during the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.”

In his study of nineteenth century Mormonism, Peter Coviello describes the Mormon body as queer in that the practice of polygamy exceeded the constraints of nineteenth century secularism’s racializing sexual politic. In renouncing polygamy and assimilating to a secular sociality whose biopolitics once marked the Mormons fit for extermination, Coviello describes the post-1890 Mormons who had renounced polygamy to gain Utah statehood as “protophomonationalists.” Coviello builds on the work of queer theorist Jasbir Puar’s theory of homonationalism which names the ways in which liberal states co-opt particularly “assimilated” queer communities into the imperial project. Puar argues that the politics of state recognition and incorporation entails that certain queer bodies may be temporary recipients of “measures of benevolence” contingent upon “ever narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity.” Being a recipient of the state’s benevolence requires abiding by certain norms, a process Coviello refers to as secularism’s disciplinary sociality. In the discourse of S.B. 102, polygamists and their supporters demonstrated the extent to which certain polygamists embody the liberal subjecthood that is the center of secularism’s sociality; they are invested in consumption, property ownership, patriotism, and biological reproduction within (hyper)heteronormative family structures. The presentation of

43 Coviello, Make Yourselves Gods, 215.
45 Puar, Terrorist Assemblages, xx.
46 Coviello, Make Yourselves Gods.
their liberal subjecthood, I argue, is rendered legible by the creation of an “other”: the illiberal, fanatical, abusive criminal polygamist.

Scholars have demonstrated that, under the hegemonic regime of secular liberalism, secularism’s “other” is not religion writ-large, as most secularization narratives contend, but “bad religion.”48 The structuring grammar of secularism is constituted by familiar oppositions like “belief and knowledge, reason and imagination, history and fiction . . . natural and supernatural, sacred and profane.”49 Within these oppositions is what Nancy Bentley has described as the “secularization two-step,” in which an opposition is followed by a second-order distinction where the oppositional category that leans farthest away from “the secular” is assembled into further contrasting binarized versions of itself.50 For example, in the binary of “faith and reason,” faith itself is not rejected by a secularism that gives primacy to reason. As Coviello states, “there is a kind of faith that is tolerable and indeed welcome there: the faith that improves us . . . makes us ethical, caring, and sensitive,” or as Puar would argue, the faith that makes us better subjects of liberal empire.51 The faith rejected by secularism is the faith that deludes and diminishes one’s capacity to reason, diminishing one’s ability to embody liberalism’s “stacked forms of order.” It is the faith that scholars have come to call “bad religion.” That is to say, with “good religion”—religion that is able to demonstrate itself as “consistent with the basic requirements of modern society . . . in which tolerance is sought on the basis of distinctive relation between law and morality”—comes its shadow, “bad religion.”52 Secularism, in this iteration, “will mark out the styles of adapted, enforced compatibility with liberal rationality that allow a given set of belief-practices to come into legibility as ‘religion’ at all, rather than as, say, credulity, fanaticism, superstition, backwardness, ‘fundamentalism,’ or any of the other sub-varieties of bad belief.”53 In arguing for decriminalization, progressive polygamists invoke the image of the criminal polygamist, contrasting his backwardness, inauthenticity, and criminality with their “faithful, civic minded families” and “upstanding, sincere, god-fearing” citizenship. In seeking to enforce a distinction between the good religionists—“otherwise law-

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abiding” polygamists—and the bad religionists—“criminal polygamists”—we are seeing the operational logic of secularism at play.

Narratives of contraceptive nationalism reject religious difference as fundamentally unacceptable and unincorporable within the American body politic. These narratives, informed by secularism’s operating logic, intend to defend the body politic from “insemination” from religious outsiders. It is these all-encompassing narratives of sexual deviance, fraudulent religion, and abuse—narratives that were central to the passing H.B. 99 in 2017—that “otherwise law-abiding” polygamists and supporters of S.B. 102 engage. In attempting to distance themselves from these narratives of polygamy, these polygamists presented themselves as good religionists with normal, model American families. Not sexual predators, but faithful, civic-minded families; not criminals, but law-abiding citizens; not outsiders, but participants in the American military regime.

However, the discourse supporting S.B. 102 illustrates that these oppositions are not mutually exclusive, but rather, are intimately linked. In focusing primarily on victims of abuse, the discourse of S.B. 102 produced its own contraceptive nationalist narrative about protecting these victims from criminal polygamists and their bad religion. But as we have seen, this contraceptive nationalist narrative allowed for certain polygamists to be distanced from the category of criminal polygamy if they proved their assimilation to the liberal order. The narrative relied on this distinction between criminal polygamists and “otherwise law-abiding” polygamists. I propose that the “otherwise law-abiding” polygamists’ successful assimilation was possible because of the operational logic of secularism as it informs the ways that religion is conceptualized in modernity. Indeed, part of the success of the harm reduction strategy was due to the way that it allowed secular binaries of good religion/bad religion, law-abiding/criminal, good polygamist/bad polygamist to be codified in law.

S.B. 102: From Religious Freedom to Harm Reduction

During the Senate Judiciary, Law Enforcement, and Criminal Justice Committee hearing of S.B. 102 in February 2020, Senator Daniel Thatcher—who described himself as the Committee’s sole undecided vote—articulated his frustration with the current polygamy statute:

Here’s the challenge[:] . . . under the existing law, they cannot prosecute. It will be struck down as unconstitutional. So, if we can’t prosecute, why do we leave it as a felony? What we can do is what you’re doing in this bill, you can tie [polygamy] to other offenses.55

54 Goodwin, Abusing Religion, 112.
His primary concern with the current statute was its lack of actionability, aware of the fact that Utah prosecutors had long maintained that they would not pursue polygamy charges against individuals in the absence of “other associated crimes” for fear of being perceived as attacking polygamists’ right to religious freedom—feelings that were reinforced by Judge Waddoups’s ruling in Brown v. Buhman. The answer to this predicament, Sen. Thatcher asserted, could be found in the way in which S.B. 102 decriminalizes the act of polygamy (“purporting to marry” and “cohabitating” with an individual who is already married) while raising the felony degree of polygamy associated with a number of other offenses. The answer to the “challenge” of prosecution for fear of religious freedom claims is to legally differentiate between the “otherwise law-abiding polygamists” and the “criminal polygamists.”

Sen. Thatcher’s comments hint at Utah lawmakers’ anxiety regarding religious freedom for polygamists—in particular, religious freedom for the “criminal polygamist.” In the floor debate for H.B. 99, Rep. Noel dismissed the religious freedom claims of polygamists based on his interpretation of polygamy as organized crime rather than authentic religion. For Rep. Noel, as reflected in his bill H.B. 99, all polygamists were collapsed into the category of bad religion. Although marginal in the debate over S.B. 102, the question of religious freedom was raised in the testimony of a “victim of polygamy” speaking in opposition to the bill during the Senate Judiciary Committee, illuminating another possible dimension of lawmakers’ anxiety regarding polygamists’ religious freedom.

Recounting her experience living in a polygamist community, Ora Barlow described the ways in which the men she identified as her abusers used the rhetoric of religious freedom to defend their abusive actions and their treatment of her as “property.” She said, “Religious freedom was brought up throughout my life again and again, but I didn’t feel free.” Recalling Rep. Noel’s logic in the floor debate of H.B. 99, Barlow positioned the religious freedom of criminal polygamists against her freedom of autonomy as a woman, asserting that the idea of religious freedom was weaponized by criminal polygamists to justify and protect their actions that violated “women’s rights.” Of course, the polygamists to whom Barlow referred were not necessarily protected by constitutional religious freedom, but this framing of religious freedom as a barricade for victims’ freedom from abuse and “women’s rights” highlights a weakness in religious freedom as a strategy for polygamy’s decriminalization. Where the harm reduction-informed strategy of decriminalization created a distinction between the “otherwise law-abiding” and criminal polygamists that would allow the state to pursue criminal polygamists while protecting victims, religious freedom, mirroring criminalization, would collapse the difference between

“otherwise law-abiding” and criminal polygamists, ostensibly providing the same protections for both the good polygamist and the bad polygamist.

In the success of S.B. 102 and the setbacks of Brown v. Buhman and H.B. 99 in the fight to decriminalize polygamy, we can begin to see some of the limitations of religious freedom as a strategy for Utah’s polygamists. One of the reasons that religious freedom claims have failed to strike down Utah’s polygamy statute, I suggest, is that polygamy has been framed by state legislators and their constituents as bad religion, or rather, inauthentic religion. Polygamy has been described by legislators, pundits, LDS church officials, and others as a perversion operating under the disguise of religion; in characterizing polygamy as a threat to women and children, they rejected polygamy as a legitimate religious practice. In this framing, all practitioners of this bad religion were encapsulated by the category of criminal polygamist, either as the patriarchal perpetrator of fraud and abuse or the manipulated polygamy wife. The question of polygamists’ religious freedom in S.B. 102 illuminates another dimension of religious freedom’s limitations. In one narrative presented in the discourse of S.B. 102, it is religious freedom that facilitates the abuse of women in polygamist communities. These narratives about polygamy as bad religion and religious freedom as enabling abuse are two potential challenges for religious freedom as a strategy for decriminalization that the harm reduction strategy of S.B. 102 circumvents.

Scholars have demonstrated the ways that religious freedom relies on secularism’s frameworks of good and bad religion to define the religion that deserves to be “free.” I argue that one of the weaknesses of religious freedom as a defensive strategy in the case of polygamy is this reliance upon the good/bad binary that renders “religion” legible, allowing certain religious people “freedom” and “protection” while rejecting others as undeserving for lack of “proper” or “sincere” religiosity. Yet, in its reliance

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58 The figure of the manipulated plural wife is common in anti-polygamy discourse. Scholars of early Mormonism and contemporary Mormon fundamentalism have sought to push back against this stereotype which denies the agency of plural wives. For examples of this scholarship see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); Goodwin, Abusing Religion.


60 Tisa Wenger’s Religious Freedom discusses the selectiveness of religious freedom and the racialized mechanisms of its application: “The principle of religious freedom—often coded as white and Protestant and set against the supposed bondage of the pagan and the Catholic—served as an imperial mechanism of classification and control, helping to define not only what counted as religion (or to delineate the good religion versus the bad religion) but also the contours of the racial.” See Wenger, Religious Freedom, 3. For a discussion of the ways in which claims and perceptions of “sincerity” operate within religious freedom discourse, see also Charlie McCrary, “Fortune Telling and American Religious Freedom,” Religion and American Culture 28, no. 2 (2018): 269–306.
on the good/bad binary to create “religion,” religious freedom has not necessarily allowed for that binary to enter into a given practice. In previous attempts to decriminalize polygamy through religious freedom, legislators, litigators, and judges framed polygamy as either good or bad religion, either worthy of protection or not. This is not to say that the harm reduction rhetoric of S.B. 102 has escaped this binary—polygamists have relied upon these secularist conceptions of good religion to make the case for their acceptance. Harm reduction makes explicit this binary, saving the “good” religionists—the “otherwise law-abiding polygamists”—while punishing the “criminal polygamists.” Harm reduction brings the secularization two-step into the practice of polygamy. Where secularism binarizes “religion” into “good religion” and “bad religion,” the rhetoric of harm reduction further divides the “bad religion” of polygamy into “good polygamists” and “bad polygamists,” or “otherwise law-abiding” and “criminal polygamists.” In doing so, secularism’s operational logic informs the way that criminality is imagined in the discourse of S.B. 102. In its production of the “criminal polygamist,” the logic of harm reduction allowed certain polygamists to make the case for their relative acceptability and worthiness of decriminalization so long as it also served the purpose of locking-up their criminal counterparts and assisting victims of abuse. The logic of harm reduction made space for toleration of good polygamists’ not-quite-so-acceptable-as-to-be-legal religious practice. Rather than religious freedom, harm reduction allowed for a secular compromise.

In this study of S.B. 102 and the recent history of Utah’s polygamy statute, I make two arguments regarding the success of the bill. First, that the Mormon fundamentalist presentation of polygamy constructed a “criminal polygamist” image that, in comparison, served to emphasize their assimilation into normative American middle-class life. We should understand this performance as a production of secularism’s disciplinary sociality that demarcates acceptable religiosities and forms of embodiment to be tolerated by the state. The rhetoric of harm reduction aided in this performance by reifying the figure of the criminal polygamist, assisting S.B. 102 supporters in their binarized construction of “otherwise law-abiding” and “criminal” polygamists. In interrogating the success of S.B. 102’s harm reduction strategy, I proposed some theories regarding the limitations of religious freedom as a strategy for those seeking legal protections or the state’s toleration. I want to be clear that in stating that the “criminal polygamist” was produced by this discourse and materialized in S.B. 102, it has not been my intention to discount individuals who have been abused within polygamy marriages and Mormon fundamentalist communities—these claims are credible and absolutely deserve support. Rather, I aim to illuminate discursive trends about polygamy that have shaped how polygamists have been imagined culturally and investigate how these cultural imaginations are reified in the law. Secularism’s construction of good and bad religion informs the ways in which criminality is imagined and how the conceptions of criminality that secularism produces have powerful material consequences for minority religious communities.
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The Sacred Essence of Copal Incense:
Ritual Survival from Postclassic Mesoamerica
to Modern Chicanx Communities

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When Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortes arrived on Mexican soil and journeyed towards the capital of the Mexica empire at Tenochtitlan, he encountered Indigenous priests who would ritually fumigate his men with the fragrant smoke of copal. Today, anthropologists experience a similar ritual in contemporary Nahuat villages, and students at the University of New Mexico learn from curanderas while immersed in clouds of copal. This paper explores the longue durée of the use of copal resin as it has survived from Postclassic Mexica rituals. Through engagement with ancient mythologies and analysis of survivance through transculturation, this paper provides a lens from which to understand both modern commodification and Chicanx reclamation of copal use.

The scent of a particular perfume or recipe prompts us to remember our antepasados/ancestors.¹ When we are sick, we long for the smell of Vicks VapoRub or follow our noses to find fresh tortillas. Before our minds begin to unpack the significance of illness, the scent elicits emotional and embodied responses. Our olfactory receptacles go beyond nostalgia to incite action—smells have the power to physically move us to dance, meditate, investigate, and pray. These smells are grounded in time and place, products of a moment unfolding. They can also transport us and transcend the boundaries of here-and-now. This is the power that burning copal resin holds.

Copaltemaliztli, the Nahuat word for burning incense, carries a presence and essence that has been central to ceremonies across Mexico for more than five

¹ This paper utilizes words in Nahuatl and Spanish and provides in-text translation when the word is judged to be relatively equivalent. When a more complete definition is necessary, I provide footnotes. Nahuat translations are from the Nahuatl Dictionary and Spanish translations are by the author. See Stephanie Wood, ed., Nahuatl Dictionary (Eugene: University of Oregon, 2000), https://nahuatl.uoregon.edu/.
centuries. With its sweet, piney, and clean scent, copal burns quickly atop charcoal, creating billowing clouds of white smoke. Copal is most well-known as an offering on *Días de los Muertos* altars, but it also plays an important role in *Danza* ceremonies and spiritual *limpias*/purifications at sweat lodges or other healing spaces. These copal rituals have ancient roots linking modern Chicanx communities and contemporary Nahua people to precolonial Indigenous legacies. Just as certain scents remind us of *familia* from one or two generations past, so too can the sacred smell of copal help us recover and remember our ancestors whose names we never knew. In fact, archaeologists have uncovered copal resin that, after being interred below Mexico City for more than 500 years, still maintained its unique scent. Copal resin’s resilience can not only be credited to the material fact of its durable chemical compounds but also to the spiritual reality of Indigenous survivance despite many colonialisms.

When the Spanish arrived on Anáhuac/Mexican soil, they brought the violent colonization of Indigenous peoples’ cosmovision and culture. Religious in nature, this colonization entailed forced conversion to Christianity, demonization of native spiritualities, and erasure of sacred wisdom. Archeologists continue to excavate, interpret, and reinterpret scattered clues from the time before Cortés. Like the artifacts archeologists find, rituals have found cracks in neocolonial contexts and survived through secret spaces, oral histories, and sacred texts. By mapping metamorphosis of a practice like burning copal, we can observe the coevolution and entanglements of these material and spiritual worlds.

In this paper, I offer an ethnoreligious history of copal rooted in questions of cosmovision, ritual, survivance, and ceremony. Within this historical narrative lies an implicit argument for and with Indigenous peoples who continue to reclaim ancestral rights, wisdom, and rituals. Ultimately, I provide context from which readers can

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2 Generally, these are all religious and spiritual spaces of Mexican and Mexican-American communities. I will further explain and explore some of these ritual uses in later sections.

3 I use the word Chicanx here for three reasons: first, to reference the Mexican-American community that is based in the U.S.; second, as a gender inclusive term compared to Chicano/a and other iterations; and third, to reference an identity that is committed to political and social change. As Alan Pelaez Lopez writes, the phrase is more than a trend, as the “x” references the many wounds of colonialism. See “The X in Latinx Is a Wound, Not a Trend,” *Color Blog*, accessed May 2021, https://www.colorbloq.org/the-x-in-latinx-is-a-wound-not-a-trend.


responsibly consider copal from an academic stance or perhaps engage with copal as a plant teacher or elder with a lineage worth honoring. I build a discursive bridge between ancient, Indigenous rituals and modern forms of reclamation and commodification.6

Biologically and culturally, copal belongs to a larger ecosystem that transcends space and time. Therefore, I provide a theoretical foundation of ritual theory to support the most effective way of understanding Postclassic Mexica religion. I also focus on the role of blood as a link between human sacrifice rituals and the prevalent view of copal as the blood of trees. These connections elicit questions around animism and sentience in the natural world. Next, drawing on archaeology at Tenochtitlan, I discuss evidence of copal’s ceremonial use both at the Templo Mayor and in common use by farmers and healers. After building on ancient Mexica cosmovision and ritual and exploring the reciprocity between humans, deities, and non-human entities, I transition to modern contexts. Through the lens of transculturation, I present one modern Indigenous Nahua community and a Chicanx engagement with copal based in the United States. By following this fragrant smoke of copal across time and space, I trouble straightforward approaches to understanding the place of this tree resin in religious rituals.

Acknowledgement and Methodology

Before beginning down this path, I must acknowledge an intentionally grounded awareness of my own time and space. Through this methodology, I seek to honor Indigenous land and wisdom in the present moment. I write as a detribalized Chicana graduate student at Harvard Divinity School, located on the land of the Massachusett, Nipmuck, and Wampanoag people. This paper draws from various disciplines to deepen scholarly understanding of copal, particularly those grounded in Mesoamerican tradition. I attempt to construct a cogent but expansive theory for future research, despite challenges in the search for literature on this topic.7 The

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6 This narrative seeks to empower the reader to come to their own conclusions about how to relate with copal resin and other ancient religions and rituals through the lens of this historical account. My conclusion offers an attempt at an argument for modern interpretation but leaves space for alternative approaches.

7 One research challenge that I encountered was that the English version of the Florentine Codex translates the Nahuatl word copalli into “incense” generally. In some cases, it is unclear whether other forms of incense were utilized or whether there were distinctions between types of incense
discourse on copal is embedded across the fields of Mexican history, ritual theory, anthropology, archaeology, religion, medicine, economics, and botany. Due to the destruction and demonization of Indigenous knowledge and writings, any bibliography on this topic will require a critical lens. Despite this limitation, I attempt to center the perspectives of Mexican and Indigenous peoples as the primary sources of our own lived experiences and lineages. Although my bibliography reflects formal academic sources referenced for this project, wisdom and knowledge about copal is ancient and sacred. Much of this wisdom has been passed on as oral tradition, because of the value in moving beyond the written word and as a result of the destruction of Indigenous writings. I do not claim ownership over these ideas, but I do take responsibility for the ways that my writing and research belongs to a larger lineage and the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty. I honor my ancestors, my guides, the divine essence of copal, and our many relationships with one another in this offering. Ometeotl.

Cosmovision and Ritual Context of Postclassic Mexica Society

In Mexica society, Postclassic approaches to mythology, cosmovision, and human sacrifice shaped understandings of copal. According to Alfredo López Austin, “myth is a narrative, but it is more than that.” Mythology manifests itself in social structures, religious rituals, and perspectives on nature and human life. For this reason, López Austin uses the word “cosmovision” to speak to a holistic and “macro system of thought and action . . . derived from . . . ritual materials, glosses, texts, and iconography.” While “cosmovision” attempts to reference larger religious and social frameworks of the Mexica, it is important to note that these rituals are neither “fixed and static” nor random. The rituals of Mesoamerica formed through

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in particular ceremonies. This finding suggests a need for further translation work to interpret ancient ritual uses of copal. See Bernardino Sahagún, Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, trans. Arthur J. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1950).

8 Postclassic refers to the final period of the pre-Columbian era. Generally, it begins in 900 C.E. and ends at the arrival of Hernán Cortés in 1519.
9 López Austin, Tamoanchan, 603.
10 López Austin, Tamoanchan, 604.
thousands of years of religious, cultural, and socio-political development. Today, this transformation remains ongoing in part through copal.

Like López Austin, Mircea Eliade seeks to explain the way that rituals repeat and evolve over time. *The Myth of The Eternal Return*, Eliade offers a three-part ritual theory. First, he writes that archaic rituals and symbolic expressions serve to reenact a divine or celestial archetype. Drawing from stories of heroes, gods, and ancestors, societies recreate a mythic universe through ritual repetitions, sacred objects, and ceremonial centers. Second, mountains, temples, and cities are experienced as meeting places between the celestial and terrestrial spaces. Each site becomes valued as an *axis mundi*: a terrestrial sacred Center. This social creation of sacred zones reveals the intersection of the upper, terrestrial, and underworlds. Third, Eliade argues that by repeating the ritual gestures given by the gods and ancestors, meaning materializes, repeating the creation of the cosmos. The inheritance of and commitment to archetypes creates “cosmic norms” that echo through time. In this way, religious cosmologies, sacred sites, and divine entities become essential to the maintenance and development of ritual over time. The Mexica use of copal can be understood as the reenactment of a divine pattern.

David Carrasco offers an example of how the Mexica’s ritual human sacrifice enacts the three parts of Eliade’s ritual theory. First, in “Human Sacrifice/Debt Payment from the Aztec Point of View,” Carrasco writes, “Before human life was created, a god, or pairs of gods or groups of gods, took each other’s lives or bled themselves in order to create the sun, water, all life forms on earth . . . in this worldview, creation emerged out of bleeding and death.” This creation story compels the Mexica to mimic the gods as an act of regeneration. Second, the Mexica had a robust use of the *altepetl* in religious rituals and ceremonies. Their *axis mundi* was not only in the geography of their Toltec ancestors’ sacred mountains, but also in their construction of Tenochtitlan and the Templo Mayor. Finally, the element of ritual repetition shows the Mexica participating in the revitalization of the cosmos. The Mexica lived in a blend of pantheism and animism in which the divine was

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13 Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 11.
15 *Altepetl* is a Nahuatl word meaning mountain of sustenance.
regularly with them through the ritual acts that they performed. The Mexica were the
last in a history of Mesoamerican empires before colonial contact. As such, they
integrated the beliefs and stories of their human, more-than-human, and
mythological lineage into their own capital and empire.

According to López Austin, Eliade, and Carrasco, these ancient myths, sacred
places, and rituals of the Mexica survived through the colonial period in overt and
covert ways implemented by keepers of the ancient knowledge. The pre-Hispanic
world’s basic cosmovision persists in many cultural expressions among Indigenous,
Mestizo and Chicanx peoples today. To begin to break from the confining mold of
colonial consciousness, we must gain access to Indigenous theories and methods and
include them in our scholarly approaches. While that duty may challenge modern
academic norms, I seek to take seriously the Mesoamerican production of
knowledge. Therefore, in regard to copal, the animisms and pantheisms of
Mesoamerica must be regarded as truth-sources alongside (rather than superseded
by) modern, Western epistemological research methods.

Copal as Blood of Trees

In order to take on the Mexica cosmovision, we must first understand copal as
the blood of trees. In this celestial framework, trees can bleed, and blood feeds the
gods. Several Mesoamerican creation stories found in surviving documents describe
the self-sacrifice of the gods Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, who according to López
Austin, “died in order to exist permanently.”16 The gods took their lives in order to
create. This story tells us is that death, to the Mexica mind, is part of an ongoing
cyclical process. According to philosopher James Maffie, \textit{teotl} is the concept that best
allows us to see through Mexica eyes into an interconnected world where the gods’
essences flow through everything.17 In Maffie’s definition, \textit{teotl} is sacred life force
synonymous with reality itself, inseparable from the cosmos. \textit{Teotl} is “all-
embracing, all-creating, all-nurturing, all-destroying, and in the end profoundly
mysterious.”18 From this standpoint, the Mexica see death as “simply a change of

16 López Austin, \textit{Tamoanchan}, 19.
17 James Maffie, \textit{Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion} (Boulder: University Press of
Colorado, 2014).
18 Maffie, \textit{Aztec Philosophy}, 86.
status.” Therefore, the gods’ deaths merely transferred their essences. In this creation story, the gods turned themselves into trees who held up the sky and stars. These “cosmic trees” continue to connect the human and the divine; they “function like antenna” rooted in the underworld and reaching out above the earthly plane. Therefore, trees are understood as divinity themselves—energetic channels positioned as the four pillars of the universe.

In Postclassic human sacrifice rituals, the human community repeated the creation mythology. *Ixiptla*, one of many forms of Mexica human sacrifice, involved human beings dressing in ritual attire to impersonate a deity. In the main feast of *Tezcatlipoca*, a designated person would be “cosmo-magically transformed” into the deity. The human being was transfigured through the emptying of their own essence, and according to the metaphysical reality of *teotl*, they became infilled by the deity’s essence. This person’s blood served as a regenerative debt-payment in order to maintain the cosmos. Just as humans ritually offered their bodies and blood to the gods, so too were trees included in the transference of essences in ceremonial practices. For the Mexica, all beings have an “invisible interior,” perhaps akin to a soul. Trees themselves are both sentient and sacred. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures* provides one example of the Mexica treatment of trees:

During a festival dedicated to the god of rain and fertility, for example, the Aztec would cut the tallest, fullest, most beautiful tree they could find. They carefully tied the branches to the trunk and cut it down so as to prevent it from touching the ground. They brought the tree back to the temple of the rain god and set it up in the god's courtyard. This tree was then attached to four other trees by means of twisting straw ropes on which hung tassels of grass.

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20 López Austin, *Tamnoanchan*, 16.
22 *Ixiptla* is most often translated as stand-in, representative, or image of deity. See Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 114.
23 This feast took place during the fifth month of the Aztec calendar with an entire year of preparations. See Carrasco, *The History of the Conquest*, 459.
Thus, the Mexica act of caring for and honoring trees materializes the creation story and the four cosmic posts. Because of the presupposition of a trees’ divine force, trees’ relationships with humans were reciprocal and relational. Instead of facing objectification and anthropocentrism, the trees became partners in ceremonial rituals.

In addition to understanding the cosmic significance of trees, the Mexica saw resin as the blood of trees because of copal’s extraction methods. López Austin explains that shamans had the burden of convincing trees to cooperate in ritual. He writes that “the offended ‘soul’ of a tree could make all of its body fall upon the man who was cutting it down.”

It was the responsibility of the human being to communicate to the tree “the need that forced him to [cut it down].” The tree was not merely available as a resource over which the humans had dominion; rather, the intentional relationships between humans and their ecosystems required a more complex approach to the religious use of copal. Ancient extraction methods likely mirror modern harvesting practices in the region, which make use of four basic tools: a large machete, a wooden mallet, rope, and a maguey spike. Similarly to human sacrifice and bloodletting rituals practiced by the Mexica, the living copal tree is sliced open and begins to ooze. Copaleros capture the resin by tying large maguey spikes to the branches. In addition to serving as a receptacle for bleeding trees, maguey spikes were also used in ancient practices of auto-sacrifice: the Mexica used these sharp leaves to pierce their ears and appendages, sprinkling their blood onto fires and altars as a sacrifice to the gods. In fact, the Mexica often added the human blood offering to burning copal. Inga Clendinnen offers a visceral written description blending copal resin and human blood:

Human blood jets vivid and wet, then darkens, becomes viscous, crumbles: human skins dry and crumble to earth as they shroud the warrior dancers . . .

human skin, darkened by the sun, also darkens in the fire, and then bubbles and boils like water before it blackens and peels away. . . . Copal resin sweats and bubbles and then transforms to a heavy sweet smoke.

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25 López Austin, Tamoanchan, 22.
26 López Austin, Tamoanchan, 22.
27 López Lujan, Humo Aromático, 112–4.
28 Clendinnen, Aztecs, 246.
Clearly, the Mexica viewed copal resin as a valuable resource in maintaining relationships with trees, the gods, and the cosmos. The careful harvesting and burning of resin from copal trees models an interconnected universe that necessitates reciprocity, respect, and sacrifice.

Copal at the Center of it All

If within Eliade’s framework, copal use in ritual served to reenact the Mexia creation story, the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan served as the undeniable *axis mundi* of the Postclassic Mexica people. In the words of Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, their “cosmovision had a material form, a center of centers, given shape in the Great Temple.”29 The temple served not only as representation of the *altepetl*, or sacred mountain, reaching vertically towards the sun, but also as the horizontal center that brought together the cardinal directions. The Templo Mayor symbolized the meeting point of the city’s architectural four quarters—another imitation of the cosmos.30

At the top of the temple, copal was present in the priests’ jaguar-skin pouches and in the left hand of the statue of Tlaloc (the god of fertility and water).31 In *Mesoamerican Figurines*, Cecelia F. Klein and Naoli Victoria Lona offer important archaeological insights to the use of copal at Tenochtitlan. As a part of the tribute system that brought enormous amounts of foodstuffs, textiles, animals, and plants into the capital city, the empire imported “large quantities of copal from conquered regions” alongside other valuable items like quetzal feathers, cotton, and jade.32 At the temple, the Mexica offered copal as a sacrifice. In particular, they often molded the resin into “human effigies” that were likely painted and dressed in paper garments.33 By evoking human flesh, these anthropomorphic moldings contributed to the idea that copal, like human skin and blood, provided nourishment for the gods.34 While many of the excavated figurines from Tenochtitlan seem to be shaped

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as the goddesses Chicomecoatl and Chalchiuhtlicue, no copal figurines of masculine
gods have been found. However, archeologists have found effigies reminiscent of
the god Tlaloc, which may suggest that copal was linked especially to Tlaloc.
Excavations have shown that in addition to offering copal at the Templo Mayor, the
Mexica also threw these figurines into the water surrounding the city as an offering
to Tlaloc. Although centered in Templo Mayor, the use of copal clearly extended
outside the bounds of the temple.

Access to Goods and the Gods:
Commoner and Common Use of Copal

Indeed, the Mexica used copal inside their own homes. Asking why copal was
more prevalent in religious rituals at Templo Mayor, Klein and Victoria Lona not
that “copal was widely believed to have intrinsic magical properties” and was used by
common people outside the city center. On ceremonial occasions, priests “would
offer incense day and night at certain hours, spreading incense with the clay censers
that had a cavity with stones inside for rattling. They would take the embers of the
fire and put the copal on the embers going in front of the statues… lifting the censer
in the four directions of the world.” After observing the use of copal in these
moments of public ceremony offered by religious specialists, Mexica parents taught
their children to imitate these practices in the home. From the Templo Mayor to the
family unit, the smoke and scent of copal was central to ritual practice.

Yet, economic realities and social stratification impacted the integration of copal
in the commoners’ homes. In Aztecs: An Interpretation, Inga Clendinnen explores the
actualization of the Mexica cosmovision at various levels of society. Quoting from
the 16th century Florentine Codex, Clendinnen writes on the ritual materials used by
common people:

Even where costliness was the criterion, as with the offerings to the Fire God on
the day One Dog, with the rich giving the Fire whole baskets of “clean, white
incense,” the commoners handfuls of “coarse incense,” and “the extremely poor,
The poverty-stricken, the needy, the discontented” no more than aromatic herbs, the intention of the offerers and the aromatic nature of the gifts were clearly similar.38

Clendinnen notes that that common people had equivalent offerings and ritual paraphernalia according to their socio-economic means. In addition to the substituting herbs for copal, commoners might have given corn rather than gold or flowers instead of exotic plumes.39 The Postclassic Mexica empire had a complex social stratification; however, accessible alternatives signaled that sacred “imaginative worlds” were shared across economic strata.

Embodying the statue of Tlaloc and the priests who held copal, children “carried little balls of copal” as protection.40 Clearly, copal’s ritual use extended beyond the Templo Mayor—its multidimensional, magical properties were applied by commoners, farmers, hunters, and healers. As Eliade’s third point of ritual theory states, the repetition of ritual creates cosmic norms in ancient societies and makes practitioners in tune with the forces of creation recorded in sacred stories. Copal protected the land for farmers and ensured prosperity for hunters.41 Copal also healed both spirit and body by providing protection from evil spirits, clearing chest infections, healing physical wounds, and warding away flies.42 As mundane as these problems may seem, these rituals infused sacrality into everyday reality. The Mexica’s world was profoundly alive.

Surviving evidence of copal’s role in Mesoamerican society offers priceless insight into the Mexica cosmovision, mythology, and ritual practice. Because of the near-total destruction of Tenochtitlan’s ritual precinct and elite practices at hands of the Spaniards, we will never understand the full story of copal. Through the recovery of artifacts, we can begin to trace the sacred smoke of this powerful substance.43 However, the ancient story continues beyond Spanish codices and archeological


43 Klein and Lona note that offerings elsewhere, such as Chichén Itzá, date back to the Middle Postclassic (1150–1350 CE). See *Mesoamerican Figurines*, 365.
excavations: copal survived conquest. Indigenous peoples remain in relationship with copal trees and their resin through transculturation.

Transculturation of the Religious Use of Copal

Early in the pages of the Florentine Codex, 16th century Franciscan friar Bernal Díaz del Castillo described incense filling the air between the Spanish and Indigenous peoples during their first encounters. Of one such moment at Campeche he wrote, “These were the priests of the Idols, and they brought us incense of a sort of resin which they call copal, and with pottery braziers full of live coals, they began to fumigate us.” Later, when meeting the caciques of Tlaxcala, Bernal Díaz del Castillo said that “they arrived at our camp with a great company of chieftains, and with every sign of respect made three obeisances to Cortés and to all of us, and they burnt copal and touched the ground with their hands and kissed it.” Versions of this pattern—fumigating, kissing the earth, and carrying copal to meetings—fill Spanish accounts. As David Carrasco explains, these rituals served as acts of honor to the earth and as acts of negotiation. Despite these Indigenous gestures of good faith, the wars of conquest and the onslaught of Catholic conversion presented profound challenges to Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and relating. The religious zeal of colonization was particularly hostile to the Mexica beliefs: throughout the Spanish accounts, Indigenous practices are called demonic, evil, and idolatrous. Spiritual practices were attacked alongside those who observed traditional rites of passage or held pre-Hispanic worldviews.

In the process of transculturation, “subjugated peoples,” despite their status, determine the degree and manner in which they absorb dominate culture. This term also refers to the processes by which people in the colonial period borrowed and integrated elements of Catholic and Indigenous religions, creating new religious combinations. Historians and anthropologists show that Indigenous people used their agency and adaptive skills to maintain connections to their heritage. In many

46 Carrasco, The History of the Conquest, xxiv.
34 The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School

In scholarly circles, transculturation has come to replace the term “syncretism,” which describes the colonized as passive. Transculturation, however, acknowledges the self-determinative power of Indigenous peoples. This lens is essential for analyzing copal’s transcendence across time and space, because it requires an asset-based approach. Rather than viewing the conquest as one-directional flow of knowledge and culture, transculturation invites us to look for ways in which Indigenous peoples skillfully effected post-conquest realities.

Much like the smoke of copal itself, this type of cultural exchange can be difficult to capture, as the ritual use of copal has survived in both subtle and overt ways over the past five centuries. Since the conquest, copal has survived at least three major shifts. First, in the early colonial period copal became the incense used in Catholic mass because of its accessibility and locality. Incense was not foreign to the Spanish, but the unique scents of copal were unfamiliar. In the second shift, the Catholic Church banished copal from all churches as well as Indigenous rituals that were deemed demonic. The Inquisition in Mexico forced Indigenous practices into secrecy through the violent policing of idol worship. But even after institutional suppression ceased, communities continued to practice their traditional rituals “out of the gaze of disapproving mestizos.”

Although I hope to explore these first two shifts in more detail in the future, this paper focuses on a third shift: the blend of Catholic and Mexica uses and beliefs today. As one journalist writes of this transcultural blend, “Catholic priests are as likely as native shamans to burn copal in rites of blessing and invocation, with one religious tradition reinforcing the other. . . . Copal is burned just at the moment of the transubstantiation of wine into Christ’s blood.” Today, the smoke of copal continues to drift through Nahua and Chicana/o communities. Let us now follow this smoke, beginning in Veracruz, Mexico and working our way north.

**Corn is Our Blood: Copal Use in Contemporary Nahua Religious Rituals**

In *Corn is Our Blood*, anthropologist Alan Sandstrom offers a comprehensive ethnographic account of religious rituals in Amatlán (a pseudonym for a Nahua village). After more than five months in the community, Sandstrom is invited to

witness his first religious celebration: “a major ritual dedicated to tonantsij, a mother deity associated with fertility.” Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 3.

In his account, he describes the presence of “thick clouds of copal incense smoke” that “[perfume] the air.” Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 3.

Copal is not merely a passive presence in the room: the head shaman who censes the chickens before killing them and proceeds to “blow incense” over Sandstrom. Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 4.

In this moment, Sandstrom realizes that the rituals “[trace] back to the days before the Conquest.” Although Catholicism is also present in the modern mixture, there is a “subtle and powerful” story of survival.


Many of these principles stem from pre-Hispanic cosmovision. The rich ritual calendar of Amatlán ties them together. Many of the ceremonies on the calendar align with the seasons and ancestral traditions, while others align with the Catholic liturgical calendar. For example, “On October 18 members of households burn copal incense . . . on their altars to observe the day of San Lucas.” Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 280.

This burning then leads into the preparations for Día de los Muertos, which they recognize as xantoloj—a four-day ceremony with copal at the center. Sandstrom describes processions in which an “old lady carrying a smoking copal brazier” dances and fills the space with copal smoke while the community chants and gives their offerings at the altar. Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 283–4.

Much like the practices of the Mexica, the rituals on the calendar range from public observances to private family rituals for births, harvests, funerals, or cleansings.

Similarly, the Amatlán community maintains a cosmology of pantheism. Community members provide ritual offerings of food and drink to the earth in keeping with their religious understanding of the universe as deified. For the Nahua people, “all rituals are curings, formal gestures to reestablish equilibrium with the spirit world, with the avowed purpose of restoring balance and health to the human community.” Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 313.

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50 Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 3.
51 Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 3.
52 Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 4.
53 Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 5.
54 Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 320.
55 Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 280.
56 Across North America, copal is perhaps best known for its use in Día de los Muertos altars, parades, and rituals.
57 Sandstrom *Corn is Our Blood*, 283–4.
58 Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 313.
specialist within the village: the shamans whose roles are essential because of ritual pollution. These trained individuals are referred to as *pajibijequetl* or *tlachixquetl* or *curandero*.

According to Sandstrom, human-spirit interactions must be cared for through ritual cleansing and purification. In a departure from Christianity, the community does not understand the injuries and illnesses through an individualistic, salvific lens. Rather than understanding the afterlife as future punishment or reward for behavior, the Nahua believe that “sins reap immediate punishment.” Spirits often attack or punish in a collective way, affecting family and friends. As such, the community has broader social responsibility and an ongoing need to resolve infractions through cleansing and offerings. Because the world is animated by divine essences, they also address physical ailments through these spiritual terms.

In these spaces, the modern transculturation of copal comes to life. In communities like Amatlán and beyond, the smoke carries human-made messages to the divine. Much like in ancient Mexico contexts, copal is still understood to “guarantee good hunts . . . to bless the farming land, to control weather, and to bless marriages and births.”

Nearly every ritual described in Sandstrom’s ethnography includes copal. But the scent is not contained by the geographic boundaries of Anáhuac/the Mexican basin. We can follow the scent across the Mexico–U.S. border, where we find cloud of copal in the ceremonial spaces of contemporary Chicanx communities.

**Copal Reclamation and Commodification:**

**An American Spiritual Marketplace**

While migrating within Mexico and into the U.S, people carry sacred bundles of copal. For millennia, people have moved through what is known as the U.S. Southwest, bringing various cultures, plants, and cosmovisions. Today Chicanx communities continue to burn copal in religious rituals, often recognizing the resin as part of our Mexican heritage. We observe copal rituals in public *Día de los Muertos* altars, opening ceremonies by Aztec Danzantes, at communal sweat lodges and private sessions with *curanderas*. Today, we can watch these rituals on YouTube or

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59  In Nahuatl, “one who waits, sees, expects”; Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 233.
60  Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, 321.
attend classes to learn how to work with various types of incense. In many ways, copal has become one of many religious commodities in the globalized market in the U.S. With a quick click, anyone can purchase the resin online and have the product boxed and mailed around the globe. As copal has survived and morphed over time, the nature of human relationships with it has changed. How does copal inhabit the “American spiritual marketplace”? As minoritized people in the U.S., how are Chicanx communities working to reclaim this ritual?

According to Brett Hendrickson, scholar of religious studies and Latin American studies, our modern “American spiritual marketplace” consists of a blend of Westernized Buddhism, “New Age” practices, Native American spirituality, and alternative healing modalities. In *Border Medicine*, Hendrickson describes the “recovery and continuation of ancient Mesoamerican traditions” in a course at the University of New Mexico titled “Traditional Medicine without Borders: Curanderismo in the Southwest and Mexico,” through which students are exposed to herbalism, *temazcales*, Aztec astrology, and beyond. The scent of copal infuses these students’ education as they learn from the *curanderos* who come to share their tradition. In particular, they use copal during a Four Directions ceremony, in which practitioners hold the burning incense in each of the cardinal directions during prayer. This University of New Mexico course is a unique educational opportunity that speaks to students’ location in the borderlands and also to an increasing interest in and demand for alternative spirituality. This university setting also allows for conversations around the origins of these practices and their significance in modern times.

However, Hendrickson also acknowledges the complexity of copal’s place within the marketplace of religious ideas and practices. Although the ceremonies in the University of New Mexico course draw from ancient Mexica rituals, today copal can be used in yoga or rebalancing chakras—traditionally Indian religious practices. Hendrickson names that copal is part of a story of *curanderismo* similar to that of Sandstrom’s Nahua accounts; however, in the U.S., there are growing multiethnic

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64 *Temazcales* are a form of Mexican sweat lodge differs from the Lakota or other styles. See Hendrickson, *Border Medicine*, 142 and 145.
65 Some ceremonies honor six or seven directions including sky, earth, and “center” in addition to north, east, south, and west.
and “Anglo clients.”66 Considering that one tactic of survivance through colonialism has been the safeguarding and secrecy of Indigenous practices, we must consider concerns of appropriation and power dynamics. What does it mean to practice copaltemaliztl divorced from dialogue around genocide, land theft, extraction, and oppression? The transculturation of copal rituals by and for Indigenous peoples seems distinct from this American spiritual marketplace. This conversation often regresses into essentialist claims of authenticity or incomplete analysis regarding practitioners’ intentions. Instead of falling into this fruitless form of debate, I suggest thinking in terms of reclamation and resistance.67

**Reclamation and Resistance in the Settler State**

The realities of access, assimilation, and agency of that marginalized communities face can complicate projects of reclamation and resistance. Susy Zepeda identifies the copious challenges that Chicanx communities face through a series of questions in her article “Decolonizing Xicana/x Studies”:

How does one do the work to reroot, to ground oneself when displaced from land, culture, knowledge, and spirituality, without reproducing forms of settler colonialism or colonization? What are the politics of claiming Indigenous ancestry when it is difficult to trace one’s lineage due to dominant forms of colonial erasure? How do ceremony and remembering constitute methodologies of decolonization?68

Following Zepeda’s approach, which she calls the “root work of tracing or excavando,” detribalized people of Indigenous ancestry are invited into a decolonial pursuit of healing. Excavando/excavating is not merely the hands-on labor of archaeologists, but the spiritual project for Chicanx people to undertake. How then does copal become part of the politicalized presence of the settler state?

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Let us first consider the ancient context this paper has provided: copal is the blood of trees, an offering and smoke signal to the gods, part of an interconnected and alive universe. This cosmovision is not theoretical. The Mexica embodied the material processes of extraction and sacrifice in sacred ceremonies and quotidian existence. Copal was a precious part of Indigenous Mexica civilization, and it now lives at the margins of the U.S. Empire.\(^69\) Take for example the copal trees themselves. How does the increasing popularity of copal resin threaten the survival of these plant relatives? The ability to procure copal resin from the multi-national corporation Amazon threatens the Amazon rainforest. Seeing the world through Indigenous Mexica eyes troubles extractive models and reveals the trees’ divine essence as part of the process of copaltemaliztli. Religious ritual and rooted plants become interconnected through the continual transference of divine essences. And what of the copaleros who harvest the copal? Thinking through the Mexica metaphysics of teotl, we cannot divorce the human labor from the product. And finally, what forms of human sacrifice continue to exist in our modern context? In shapeshifted forms, ritual killing remains among us through the ongoing family separation and incarceration at the Mexico–U.S. border, and the brutal treatment of undocumented workers who pick our food, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Copal carries a politicized presence. In militarized border zones, Día de los Muertos ceremonies explicitly and implicitly serve as resistance and protest. Honoring and praying to the four or more directions in Danza ceremonies becomes a critique of anthropocentrism and a call to interconnectedness. Viewing copal as the sacred blood of sentient trees requires careful consumption by critiquing mass-production and commodification. As such, burning fragrant copal becomes one pathway through which Indigeneity can be reclaimed in the face of oppression.

### Copal as Spiritual Teacher in the Midst of Crisis and Colonialism

Along with political resistance, Chicanx communities also seek internal and collective healing. *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*, an anthology edited by Lara Medina and Martha R. Gonzalez, contains descriptions of various copal practices. This book offers practical guidance

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\(^69\) Even as the material object becomes popularized in the spiritual marketplace, the cosmovision is “other” and “lesser” in this settler state context.
for reclamation of religious rituals from these U.S.-occupied lands and from communities that resist ongoing colonial violence. In one instance, the volume invites participants to connect with the elements through “shamanic practices” and “shamanic worldviews.”\(^{70}\) These practices are uniquely created for this context while drawing on wisdom from contemporary Nahua communities and Mexica ancestors. Another essay provides clear instructions for building an altar: “burn sage or copal and include the four elements—water, earth, fire, and air—on the altar.”\(^ {71}\) Copal appears in many of the poems and reflections throughout the book as a cleansing or purifying agent, but it is also directly named as a way to call upon ancestors and spirit guides:

> We are blessed with this copal. As the smoke encircles us, we are wrapped in the protection of Mother Earth, Grandmother Moon, and Yemayá, the power of the ocean. Remember that we are part of them and that we are equally sacred. May they always illuminate our paths, speak to us through our intuition, wisdom, and discernment, and keep us safe and protected.\(^ {72}\)

Copal belongs to a larger family in which ancestors—both human and more-than-human—act as teachers and guides. This volume provides resources for Chicana communities seeking to work with this resin.

In the same vein, Zepeda writes that “healing intergenerational trauma” must be grounded by traditional tools and medicines, “sitting in circle with . . . elders, tracing and respecting spiritual lineages.”\(^ {73}\) While copal and *curanderismo* can certainly be treated as products to buy and sell like any other good, these Chicana teachers promote wisdom that is rooted in relationships. Copal must be encountered as a plant relative, an ally, a plant maestra/teacher, elder, or plantcestor.\(^ {74}\) These ways of using copal align with Mexica cosmologies of interconnectedness. For Zepeda and other authors of *Voices of the Ancestors*, healing goes much deeper than the commodification rituals of the American spiritual marketplace.

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71 Medina and Gonzalez, *Voices of the Ancestors*, 51.
72 Medina and Gonzalez, *Voices of the Ancestors*, 316.
These brief examples barely begin to scratch the surface of modern reclamation of copal in ceremony and healing, yet we can see that this tree resin has maintained the emblematic scent and also magical properties in the consciousness of Mexican descendants. Eliade argues that these archetypes of ritual echo through time, but through the lens of copal, Eliade’s theory seems superficial. By practicing religious copal rituals in modern settler nation-states, marginalized communities do far more than merely imitate ancestors and primordial gods. These Chicana/o and Indigenous communities engage in spirituality as an act of reclamation and resistance—resistance to the epistemicide of Indigenous knowledge the commodification curse of our neoliberal, extractive context. Ultimately, copal becomes a spiritual teacher—stubbornly surviving over centuries and carrying a message to all who take seriously the sacred smell.

**Conclusion: The Sources Sustaining Copal**

These conclusions have not been reached outside of community: I weave together ritual theory of Mircea Eliade; the religious history of David Carrasco and Inga Clendinnen; anthropological and mythological insights from Alfredo López Austin; and archaeological research by Leonardo López Lujan, Cynthia Klein, and Noali Victoria Lona. Through the lens of transculturation, Alan Sandstrom’s ethnography in Amatlan carries the story of copal into contemporary Nahua religious practice. Finally, scholars of critical Chicana/o and Latin American Studies provide important interventions to aid in consideration of modern copal consumption and reclamation. Brett Hendrickson offers insights on multiethnic *curanderismo* through the lens of an American spiritual marketplace alongside examples from the University of New Mexico. Susy Zepeda, Lara Medina, and Martha Gonzalez inspire theory and praxis for healing and reclamation. And in my own humble voice, I draw from these many scholars to propose rooted contemplation of an ancient cosmovision centered on *teotl* from their engagement with copal and through the framework of an interconnected, foundationally related and alive universe.

My hope is that these various voices and disciplines create a collage—a composition complete through the careful arrangement of the interwoven narratives of copal resin. Or perhaps this research would be better described as an excavation. Zooming in to any section offers alluring particularities of this precious substance, while stepping back allows us to behold the thick clouds as they ascend into the sky.
Maybe if we behold the magical and mysterious blood of trees, we might in fact be moved to dance, meditate, investigate, and pray.
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Gallina Sacra:
Biopolitical Sovereignty at the
National Thanksgiving Turkey Pardon

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This paper explores the biopolitical significance of the presidential "pardon" of the National Thanksgiving Turkey. It argues that the "turkey pardon" enacts and strategically expands sovereignty through satirizing presidential authority over life-or-death decisions, making political space for more significant presidential sovereignty. Further, it makes the case that the turkey pardon, in deciding the exception, indirectly fortifies a system of racialized mass incarceration through analogy to actual presidential pardons and their reinforcement of who does and does not deserve exception. The unique inter-species exchange in this analogy sheds light on the politics of the human and animality. This exploration takes current events as a jumping-off point, assembling and connecting diverse discourses within political theology, sovereignty, democratic theory, biopolitics, humanism, and Black critical theory to demonstrate the practical theoretical workings of contemporary politics.

On Tuesday, November 24, Donald Trump made one of his first public appearances since the 2020 election had dealt him a severe rebuke. He did so to preside over the annual National Thanksgiving Turkey Presentation at the White House, choosing a 42-pound fowl named Corn to receive the annual “turkey pardon” over Corn’s companion, Cob. As is the tradition, the lives of both birds were spared. The very next day, Trump issued another pardon, which caused many to cry foul. This time Trump pardoned a person: Michael Flynn, his former National Security Adviser, who had pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI during the special counsel investigation led by Robert Mueller. Corn and Cob proceeded to live out their days at Iowa State University’s College of Agriculture and Life Science; Michael Flynn

subsequently met with Trump and his lawyers at the White House, advocating for Trump to invoke martial law and force states to “rerun” the election.³

The juxtaposition of these two pardons one day apart is more than mere coincidence. Trump’s use of pardon power, and his decision to employ it to pardon Flynn at all, is an expression of sovereign power, a term that I will explore shortly. And the general timing of Flynn’s pardon in the “interregnum” period, between the election and inauguration, during which the outcomes of the election were being certified and popularized, was also an intentional expression of sovereignty. But the decision to place the Flynn pardon in such close proximity to the turkey pardon, and to do it after, not before, the festive spectacle on the White House lawn, also reflects an intentional political calculation. Trying to imagine the order reversed helps us apprehend the intuitive logic of Trump’s decision to issue the Flynn pardon following, rather than preceding, the turkey pardon. One clearly sets up the other, but not the reverse. The political theology at work in that calculation is the focus of this paper. How did the turkey pardon facilitate Trump’s pardon of Flynn? Further, why is this the case? The emergence and codification of the turkey pardon in the shadow of another scandal about the uses and abuses of presidential pardon power—the Iran-Contra Affair—should dispel any skepticism about the function of the turkey pardon as an expression of the something significant about politics. But the unique interspecies nature of the exchange also sheds light on the politics of the human and animality.

The timing of Flynn’s pardon was choreographed to exert power by minimizing criticism and maximizing leverage. On the one hand, it was timed to minimize political liability: coming just before a federal holiday, which many celebrate with a four-day weekend, the pardon fell into a news black hole for most Americans. And falling after the November election, voters would have already issued their verdict and thus would not have recourse. But to Trump, the election was not over. The pardon came in the midst of Trump’s protracted effort to overturn the election results, so there was a small but relatively powerful set of people paying close attention to Trump’s actions: conservative activists planning “Stop the Steal” protests in state capitols; Republican leaders of the Michigan state assembly, whom Trump was enticing to launch a legislative counter-certification to the popular vote; Georgia’s Republican Secretary of State, Brad Raffensperger, whom Trump later pressured to fabricate sufficient votes to throw him the state’s electors; freshmen Republican Members-elect of Congress, who would formally recognize the Electoral College votes against Trump. It strategically displayed the unique pardon power he held as a corrupt reminder of the largesse he might extend to those who would use their positional power to help his antidemocratic crusade. Some speculate this was precisely the motive for Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who faces federal indictment, to have filed a legally

groundless suit seeking to invalidate the results of four states with Republican
councils whose electoral college votes went to Joe Biden.4

In this paper, I argue that the National Thanksgiving Turkey pardon serves as a
symbol that elevates biopolitical sovereignty over democratic self-sovereignty. This
satirical symbol normalizes the sovereign pardon power of the president in ways that
are politically advantageous to sovereign rule because enacting sovereignty
simultaneously expands sovereignty. It also implicitly legitimizes a system of industrial
food production that allows, even compels, animal slaughter by serving as sovereign
decision of exception, a concept articulated by Carl Schmitt and elaborated by Giorgio
Agamben and others.5 The turkey pardon does this work by producing a life that is
both inherently disposable and also uniquely unavailable to be “sacrificed” for the
Thanksgiving meal, a sacred fowl, Gallina Sacra, following Agamben’s construction for
Homo Sacer. This Gallina Sacra produces an exception to reinforce the rule that turkeys
are ontologically available to be killed. And in so doing, its production upholds the
ontologically subhuman status of those bound up in industrial incarceration, persons
who prove the rule to which Michael Flynn is the analogical exception. Flynn’s pardon
reinforces mass incarceration, the turkey pardon reinforces meat processing, and the
two meet in the production of a pardoned turkey.

I begin to advance this argument with a brief introduction to the advent of the
turkey pardon and the role that satire and humor plays in the spectacle. I then
introduce the politico-theological concepts at stake in this discussion, drawing on
Bonnie Honig, Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, and Ted Smith, before returning to
consider presidential pardon power in this context. Next, I’ll recontextualize
Agamben’s Homo Sacer concept for sacralized poultry rendered Gallina Sacra. Finally, I
look to Calvin Warren and Jacques Derrida for support in mapping the animality of
the turkey onto the politics of the human, connecting the production of disposable
non-human lives of industrial turkey production to the ontological exclusion of Black
lives from the human described by Warren.

**Origin of the Turkey Pardon**

The turkey pardon has the practiced camp of a tradition carried forward with
unexamined deference under the force of its own inertia; the Trump White House

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4 Namita Singh, “FBI Subpoenas Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton amid Whistleblower

referred to it on its administration webpage as a “time-honored tradition.” But if we can gain any distance from the practice, we see an absurd act that demands the question: what’s going on here?! A shrewd observer of political theatre might see this spectacle and immediately begin looking for the reason behind the red meat. What does the pardon’s attention-grabbing entertainment enable?

The turkey pardon has not happened since time immemorial. It officially began in 1989, though its roots reach back decades earlier. Turkey farmers had been giving their finest birds to the White House for more than a century prior, but these had traditionally been served up for a straightforward role in the Thanksgiving meal. John F. Kennedy was the first president to release the turkey, rather than serve it, when he declared at the 1963 ceremony that he would grant it a reprieve—even while a sign hung around the turkey’s neck, declaring the turkey to be “GOOD EATING, MR. PRESIDENT!” In 1987, Ronald Reagan was the first president to use the language of “pardon” for the turkey. And he did so jokingly at the presentation to deflect from a question about whether he would pardon Oliver North and John Poindexter, two key players in the Iran-Contra scandal who faced serious criminal charges. Reagan pardoned neither. His successor, George H. W. Bush, formalized the annual tradition in Reagan’s likeness, explicitly turning the turkey presentation into a ritual of pardon. Bush later went on to pardon six officials convicted of crimes connected to the Iran-Contra affair, including Reagan’s former National Security Advisor, a predecessor to Michael Flynn.

It is hardly accidental that the turkey “pardon” began as a joke connected to the hottest button political scandal of the day, nor is it happenstance that criminal National Security Advisers have twice received a pardon in the era of the presentation as pardon. These facts speak to the power of humor and satire as political tools to defang and deflect, as well as the underlying politics of the pardon’s general use. Yet, the turkey pardon is unique within American political humor because it is the primary instance of satire authored by the White House. The biggest moment for satire inside the Beltway is the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner. Normally this event involves a roast of the president and his administration by a comedian, as well as an

9 Montanaro, “The Presidential Turkey Pardon’s Weird Roots.”
opportunity for the president to return the favor.11 Most of these cracks are “punching up” at the president from a position of relative powerlessness. It is unusual for the president and the White House to engage in their own satire. Thus, the National Thanksgiving Turkey uniquely began receiving presidential pardons as satire, which helped mask expansive political interests of the presidency. In their analysis of the meat-eating discourse surrounding the turkey pardon, Carrie Packwood Freeman and Oana Leventi-Perez detail that laughter and puns are ubiquitous at the presentation press conference, producing light journalistic coverage rife with absurdist details about the state-visit-style pomp around the presentation (complete with soiling “Turkey One”).12 As such, the pardon meets the interests of journalists and the White House alike, introducing an opportunity for journalistic levity to indulge in (non-)human interest stories in contrast to the typical seriousness and high stakes of the White House beat, and an amiable depiction of the president.

The use of the word “pardon” with regard to the National Turkey clearly invokes presidential powers. Anyone can “spare” or “save” a turkey and select it for avoidance of death, but only the president has federal pardon powers. By using this term, Bush and his successors directly implicate specific powers of sovereignty by making sparing a disposable life into an act that only the president has the power to make. That connection continues to this day. To understand what is achieved in so doing, we now turn to the question of what is symbolically at stake in the act of pardon.

**Political Theology of Turkey Pardon**

On the eve of the 2020 National Thanksgiving Turkey pardon and three weeks into Donald Trump’s failing (yet decidedly ongoing) effort to overturn his democratic defeat in the election, *New York Times* White House correspondents Maggie Haberman and Matt Flegenheimer published a story organized around two questions: “What, exactly, was [Trump] holding onto? Why fight so hard, and put the country through so much, to keep a position he has often not appeared to want?”13 Here is the heart of their response:

In some ways, Mr. Trump had seemed to imagine his Washington life more closely resembling a rolling turkey pardon—the pomp and splendor, yes, but also a world largely amenable to his boss-man bearing and binary whims: This bird is spared. Those birds are not. He’d have his people call the turkey people

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11 This tradition has not extended to Trump, who refused to attend the White House Correspondents’ Dinner during his presidency.
12 Freeman and Leventi-Perez, “Pardon Your Turkey,” 111–3.
and hammer out the fine print later. But through it all, his word would be final.\textsuperscript{14}

Political theology has a name for the president’s capacity rendered as empowered “boss-man bearing and binary whim” over who lives and who dies: the Sovereign. This paragraph is an exact characterization of the kind of absolute power to govern by decree that is meant in the \textit{sovereignty} discourse of political theology, as exemplified by Carl Schmitt. Figured in terms of act, rather than outcome, Schmitt explains, “sovereign is he [sic] who decides on the state of exception,” wherein the state of exception denotes a case in which the outcome dictated by law is moot, overruled.\textsuperscript{15} In other words, sovereignty is the power to decide when the law does not apply.

When Haberman and Flegenheimer identify the “binary whim” of presidential decision, it can ring arbitrary and frivolous: there is no external logic or reason to the process of choosing which turkey to pardon; and anyways, it doesn’t matter. But on both fronts, that is precisely the point. “Whim” is another way of describing decisionism, perhaps with a pejorative, dismissive flavor for an office with so much of real consequence to adjudicate. But whim is exactly the prerogative of the sovereign because it refers reflexively to the decision itself to determine correctness. A sovereign whim cannot be wrong, because whatever the sovereign decides is thereby the case. Similarly, it matters because the sovereign decides it.

As for the aspect that “his word would be final,” this is also an expression of sovereignty. We can understand sovereignty as facilitation of an exact coincidence between decision and fact. Navigating a federal COVID-19 response denies the president the final word: each of the fifty governors has bureaucracies to navigate; Congress has its own calculus for passive federal relief funding; career scientists require data before approving a vaccine; and so forth. The whole thing is messy contest of power, in which the president’s decision is only one important variable among many. But the binary nature of pardon erases any space between decision and execution: the decision simultaneously constitutes a reality.

The \textit{topic} of this decision is also highly relevant to sovereignty. Sovereignty exacts decisions generally, and Schmitt would reserve for sovereignty the power to decide what to decide. But decisions about \textit{life and death} display the sovereign decision in its starkest terms. It is not just that life-or-death is the ultimate political decision. It is also the \textit{initial}, originating point of the political, according to Schmitt and Agamben. Tracing its lineage variously to Cain slaying Abel in Genesis in order to found the first Biblical city and Romulus killing Remus in order to found the city of Rome, Schmitt and Agamben argue that political life stems from order-establishing violence, or in the liminal instance of \textit{Homo Sacer}, sacred man, the creation of a zone where the

\textsuperscript{14} Emphasis mine. See Haberman and Flegenheimer, “What Donald Trump Liked.”

prohibition against violence is exempted.\textsuperscript{16} Agamben builds this line of thought from Foucault’s seminal concept of biopolitics, by arguing that this violent act constitutes a polity by changing the operative characteristic of a living thing from its \textit{zoe} (life) to its \textit{bios} (body).\textsuperscript{17} The biopolitical power to decide who lives, and its inverse, thanatopolitics (later given more central focus by Achille Mbembe, rendered as \textit{necropolitics}), the decision to subject to death, are both ultimately decisions about how to manage bodies.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, framing the act of selection of a National Thanksgiving Turkey as a “pardon” rather than as a “best turkey award” is not just about exercising uniquely presidential power: it is about demonstrating the power to grant the continuation of life, or relief from execution, which is the epitome of sovereignty.

If one key concept for the exercise of sovereignty in Schmitt’s definition is \textit{decision} (“he who decides on the state of exception”), the other is \textit{exception}. Broadly speaking, the exception refers to a law, rule, or norm that delimits the cases in which law does not apply—namely, exceptions to the rule. These two—rule and exception—are inextricable opposites. “The rule lives off the exception alone” in Schmitt’s assessment, because the process of creating a case in which the rules do not apply reinforces the notion that the rule applies in all other cases.\textsuperscript{19} It “applies in no longer applying,” as Agamben puts it.\textsuperscript{20} He explains, “The state of exception is the opening of a space in which application and norm reveal their separation and a pure force-of-law realizes . . . a norm whose application has been suspended.”\textsuperscript{21} One cannot pardon a turkey that is not first fated for slaughter; the exception implies, indeed requires, the norm without which \textit{exceptionality} would not apply. Schmitt analogizes this exception as \textit{miracle}, which conjures the unlikely, always celebrated, divinely wrought break from the normal, mechanical workings of the world.\textsuperscript{22} Walter Benjamin uses different language to communicate a similar concept to the exception that upholds the rule in his famous \textit{Critique of Violence}. He terms violence “law-preserving” where it refers back to or upholds the norm, and “lawmaking” where it seeks to transcend existing law to establish a new set of norms to be sustained.\textsuperscript{23} Whether affirming a new or existing standard, either type of exception ossifies into law.

Laws systematize the capacity of sovereignty, approximating what the sovereign would decide. But the locus of sovereignty, who possesses and wields it, is decentralized and contested in democracy. In Schmitt’s account, God was traditionally understood as sovereign; God ruled over all affairs on Earth, and God’s power was

\begin{itemize}
  \item Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 83.
  \item Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 1.
  \item Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 122.
  \item Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 27.
  \item Agamben, \textit{State of Exception}, 40.
\end{itemize}
above and superior to all human decisions. Beginning with Constantine, Christian rulers, who imagined themselves as ruling the political sphere with divine authority, transferred God’s sovereignty to and through themselves, thereby reinstalling the pre-Christian divine right of kings to rule their subjects with authority vested from the Christian God. This process was top-down, communicated from God to Sovereign. But Thomas Hobbes inverted the sovereignty pyramid, arguing that the people mediated or participated in the flow of sovereignty from God to Sovereign: individuals subsumed their God-given sovereignty into one composite of sovereignty, the body politic, which pooled individual power and transferred it to a “head” to this body politic, the Sovereign. The revolutionary step of republican democracy was to do away with the need for a head to this body politic. It transformed individuals from subjects to citizens possessing self-sovereignty, whose leaders were chosen by the people, not anointed through a direct transmission from God.

But wielding this sovereignty is a field of dynamic tension mediated by paradox. As Bonnie Honig shows, democratic theory maintains a tension between being governed by law-rule in the object of the Constitution and self-rule in the object of the people. Honig draws us to the chicken-and-egg problem between the Constitution and the body politic, each assuming the other as a necessary pre-condition for a just order. This problem in American democracy is further complicated by a third actor separate from the Constitution and the body politic: the president. The Constitution clearly precedes the president: presidential authority is rooted in the constitution, where the powers of the office are delineated. However, while not subject to the chicken-and-egg problem of when, chronologically, to start democracy, the president acts upon the Constitution and can act to decide to expand his own powers. The problems that flow from this actor are distinct from the other federal elected officials whose authority extends from the people and whose role is delineated in the Constitution—Congress—in the president’s unique nature: The president is by design one person, not a collective body, and operates a branch of government distinct from the legislature. The president is largely law-sustaining, insofar as their role executes and administers laws created by Congress. But the president also decides and acts when Congress cannot, such as in the role as the commander-in-chief, where singularly held decision-making power is needed. Thus, the president is itself an exception.

How much power to invest in this individual, what limits to place on it, and whether to have this role at all was a prominent point of contention for the Framers of the Constitution of the United States. The president is not a king—that was at least part of the point of the American Revolution. Presidential powers are contingent on elections and on the lawmaking and other law-preserving branches of government. But the president possesses certain enumerated powers that are vestiges of the politico-theological figure of the king. Among them, perhaps chief among them, is the

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power to issue irrevocable pardons to anyone for (almost) any federal crime. The point of tracing the thread of sovereignty, then, in our project of contextualizing a satirical pardon of an oversized farm animal is that the presidential power to pardon is fundamentally about defining justice outside of the law. And it has important implications for defining the body politic from which it supposedly derives its sovereignty.

**Pardon Power**

The Constitution explicitly invests the president with the power “to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offences against the United States, except in Cases of Impeachment.” The presence of this power in the Constitution was the result of the hotly contested question of the role of pardon within the fledgling idea of democracy. The Framers inherited the pardon concept from English law, where the pardon prerogative of Anglo-Saxon monarchs first appears in legal writing in the late 7th century. It developed and expanded over a millennium into an important power possessed by the sovereign and was firmly rooted in the sovereign alone by the mid-16th century rule of Henry VIII. This pardon power was soon to be extended to the governors of British colonies, including in the United States. Pardon power’s role in democracies received consideration from Locke, Blackstone, and other legal thinkers, as well as revolutionary figures in America. Thus, the Framers were acculturated to the idea that a legal system might include a mechanism for pardons, but they were wrestling with whether and how to include this in a way that did not undermine the fragile relationship between the people, law, and self-sovereignty.

In fact, the pardon was one of the focal sites of contestation about whether the Constitution should have a sovereign-like figure, and what their powers might be. This contest is reflected in the writings of the likes of Thomas Paine, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton, and it plays out in the Federalist Papers as a discourse on setting the right amount of power in the office of the president. And it was not unanimous: George Mason’s abstention from signing the final Constitution was rooted in fears about excessive power vested in the presidency, including this pardon power.

Structurally, the pardon invested the executive branch with a check on the judiciary—one of many such checks intended to balance the system. Smith proposes

that pardon was differently conceived among its various proponents and detractors, offering varied justifications for pardon. In one version, the traditional English notion, the pardon is a way for the sovereign to bring mercy and justice to a necessarily rigid legal structure that could not account for every possible scenario. In some cases, justice might require someone to reconcile a gap between law and justice as part of the inner workings of law’s absolute sufficiency (it accounts even for the cases where it seems to err). This idea of a ruler overcoming injustices in the law through extending mercy is itself preceded by Mosaic law. Others argued that the law should build in this mechanism without the role of a president but agreed with the fundamental role as enabling a public good of justice rather than an exercise of divine right. But Smith argues that this “pardon should be understood not as the work of reconciling law to justice but as the sovereign naming of an exception to law,” confirming the understanding of the pardon as an expression of sovereignty outlined above. 30 For Smith, the most enlivening purpose for the pardon is forward-looking and restorative, rather than assuming a retributive posture of meting out—or withholding—punishment. Departing from Schmitt’s characterization of mythical violence as the necessary predicate for politics in the model of Romulus, he sees the divine pardon of Cain as instructive, as it “changes the standing of Cain in the network of relationships around him.” 31 This pardon, for Smith, is rooted less in Cain’s guilt and proper punishment, and more in the transformation of the relationship between Cain and polity through the act.

The use of the pardon by presidents reflects an array of intent and relationality. George Washington pardoned the participants in the insurrectionary Whiskey Rebellion on his last day in office, arguably with an eye to the kind of transformative reconciliation that Smith evokes. The boundary limits of the pardon are often prodded by the president, but they are seldom codified in case law. Gerald Ford famously pardoned Richard Nixon for all possible offenses connected to the Watergate Affair and its subsequent cover-up. Though it arguably presses up against the restriction for pardon in the case of impeachment, this pardon was never tested in court, and served to quash consideration of legal action. Bill Clinton’s eleventh-hour pardons received scrutiny, with a U.S. Attorney appointed to investigate the pardon of financier and political donor Marc Rich, which ended without the finding of illegality. Similarly, there was debate over whether Donald Trump would have had the power to “self-pardon.” Though widely reported to have considered such a self-pardon, Trump did not issue one in the end, a choice sometimes attributed more to the optics of a perceived implication of guilt and the resulting risk of inviting further legal attention than to his acceptance of a lack of legal authority to do so. 32 Trump’s corrupt use of the pardon

is precisely the limit case against which the Framers were concerned that a president might use this power to decide the exception to promote their self-interest over and above the national interest.  

This discussion maps onto the point Antoni Negri makes, and which Agamben draws out, that sovereign power roots itself in potentiality, and that “the troublemaker is precisely the one who tries to force sovereign power to translate itself into actuality.”  

Sovereignty operates under the assumption that it dictates the limits of its own power rather than bowing to limits existing outside itself.

Civic Religion and Thanksgiving Turkey

With the history of the presidential pardon in mind, we return to the history of the turkey and Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving was declared a holiday by the Continental Congress in 1777, and it was popularized by Abraham Lincoln, when he declared it a national holiday in 1863, during the Civil War.

That both of these key moments for the holiday fell during wartime is important for us to note. The history of Thanksgiving as a holiday that sanitizes and whitewashes genocide against Indigenous people of the Americas is surely relevant to the performance of sovereignty over stolen land. As Benedict Anderson holds, nationalism depends on constructing a national identity through imagining a unified national public.  

A Thanksgiving holiday begs the question of to whom the public is giving thanks. And in Lincoln’s time, when secession made the definition of who was considered part of the nation the central question, the concept of a national holiday was vital to the project of constructing a unified republic and sustaining Union support for a war to unify said republic.

No wonder, then, that Thanksgiving figures so centrally in the history of American civic religion. Robert Bellah identified American civil religion as the “common elements of religious orientation” that provide a “religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere,” which are “expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals.”  

In other words, civil religion refers to a national set

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33 Trump’s use of the pardon is notable for the overlap of at least three different conceptualizations of the proper use of the pardon: personal interest; public good of political stabilization; and a separate sense of justice. The personal benefit to himself and his sustenance of power is also a political signal to followers of his cult of personality; doing something that benefits himself, rather than being embarrassing, is the political point. And this also coincides with a consequentialist sense of justice in which what is good for Trump is therefore just.

34 Agamben, State of Exception, 47.


38 Bellah used “civil” religion. I prefer “civic” because it disambiguates the multiple connotations of “civil” and directs attention to the civic project at the heart of the concept. See Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 42.
of collective commitments and activities that resemble a traditional religion but which refer to national identity. This tradition has recently been described as the confluence of civic republicanism—the notion of shared qualities and commitments that forge unity from plurality to create a common foundation for self-government—and the teleologic trajectory of the prophetic religious tradition.39

But what about the turkey’s role in Thanksgiving? Freeman and Leventi-Perez note that the public constructed by Thanksgiving ritual of the turkey pardon is an explicitly “meat-eating public.”40 Given this public, meat-eating becomes compulsory for an orthodox Thanksgiving ritual: dark-or-white, turkey meat forms a sacrament of civic religion. There are references to turkeys as requisite for a proper thanksgiving from Alexander Hamilton, and the tradition spread with the migration of New Englanders. The spectacular nature of the White House presentation has precedents in local “Turkey Trots.” Turkeys are spectacular already, with their dinosauric characteristics seemingly filling in a few missing evolutionary links. A cross between the feedlot chicken, majestically plumed peacock, and larger livestock, they are big, loud, and stubborn. The seasonal drive of thousands of turkeys to market (and to slaughter) made for a spectacle in market and railroad towns.

To understand how the presidential pardon reflexively upholds mass incarceration, we will observe the turkey pardon as a marketing tool to sell more turkey. According to the National Turkey Federation, Americans consume 46 million turkeys for Thanksgiving.41 The ceremonial pardon of one lucky bird—although as we will come to discover, both finalists for the pardon, Corn and Cob this year, are actually spared—is certainly the exception. But this exception was specifically designed to license more turkeys for slaughter. The National Turkey Association (NTA) took over the annual tradition in 1947. The NTA, founded several years earlier, is a trade association representing the interests of industrial poultry companies that continues to oversee the annual presentation at the White House. Should their modern mission be confused, their website—EatTurkey.org—clarifies their interests. The advent of their formal relationship actually came as a response to presidential efforts to decrease the consumption of turkey. In 1947, President Harry Truman, seeking to ration grain to pre-Marshall Plan Europe, launched a campaign asking Americans to voluntarily decrease their meat, poultry, and dairy consumption. This included the introduction of Poultryless Thursday. (Thanksgiving falls, notably, on a Thursday).42

40 Freeman and Leventi-Perez, “Pardon Your Turkey,” 104.
Truman abandoned the effort in early November, and the NTA initiated National Thanksgiving Turkey presentation, which was made annual.

The pre-pardon turkey presentation was a fairly straightforward marketing effort. Just as an apple association might send apples to the White House ahead of the Fourth of July, or Smithfield might send a glazed ham for Christmas, the goal was to establish a particular food practice as quintessential to the celebration of an American holiday for the purpose of selling more of that product. Here, again, is civic religion at work, with the president participating in and prescribing what it is to be American. The White House asserts a ceremonial role for itself in many other key instances of civic religion. For Easter, it hosts the Easter Egg Roll. On Veterans Day, the president visits Arlington National Memorial and lays a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which uniquely represents the body politic. The lighting of the National Christmas Tree takes place on the Ellipse, adjacent to the White House lawn. All of these rituals have an echo of normative Americana. But they are also entirely exceptional; only the president can do this particular version. The fact that some of these national holidays are secular and some are religious is irrelevant because they similarly define our national practice.

To see the normative power of civic religion in prescribing a national identity, it is helpful to imagine scenarios that would create more dissonance. Imagine Senator Bernie Sanders as the hypothetical first Jewish president, overseeing the Easter Egg Roll. More to the point, imagine Senator Cory Booker, a vegan, overseeing the turkey pardon. Sen. Booker is also a proponent of addressing mass racialized incarceration, but this dynamic has already been broached in Barack Obama’s administration. The uneasy relationship between turkey pardons and human pardons, with the undertone of racialized mass incarceration, is succinctly conveyed in the NPR headline, “Obama’s White House Pardons: Turkeys, Yes; Humans, No.”

Today, the practice allows the White House to have its turkey and eat it too. The pair of prize turkeys delivered to the White House also come with a pair of pre-slaughtered birds. The advent of including slaughtered birds in the pardon ceremony might seem like an excessive presentation that resolves the cognitive dissonance of JFK’s reprieve of a turkey with a “GOOD EATING, MR. PRESIDENT!” sign around its neck. It reminds us that the pardoned turkey is, and should be, the exception. It reinforces what is elided by the pardon, a spectacle built around selling us turkeys, whom we are not to pardon but rather to eat.

There is one more key characteristic this civic ritual that brings this act more centrally into the biopolitical discourse: the designation by the president of the selected bird as the National Thanksgiving Turkey. Just like the Christmas tree becomes the National Christmas Tree when it is selected and placed in front of the White House,

the turkey presented to the president for pardon becomes the National Thanksgiving Turkey. The president sacralizes the turkey through this designation.

**Gallina Sacra**

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben traces the origin of sacred life within a biopolitical frame. He defines the category thus: “Life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed is sacred life.”\(^4^4\) Sacred life is a liminal concept in an inverted relation to common protections against being killed. In antiquity, blood sacrifice carried an honorific but was prohibited for those set aside as “sacred.” However, the conferral of sacredness transformed one’s relationship to society; just as banishment from the city in classical civilization dealt a social death that transformed a person’s relations, so too did sacralization, and the prohibition on murder was removed in this transformation. Most people were available to be sacrificed, but not to be murdered; the opposite is true of *homo sacer*. This change takes place under the rules of sovereignty; it is a function of the biopolitical mechanics that govern the space of sovereignty. Agamben explains, “The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice.” He continues, “sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere.”\(^4^5\) This “capture” demonstrates the ability of sovereignty to separate a living thing from its relational qualities—a human, who is part of a community, for example—leaving only its status as a living thing, whose life continues at the discretion of the sovereign. In fact, “the production of bare life [that life which is no more than a living body] is the originary activity of sovereignty,” Agamben holds.\(^4^6\) Here, at the connection between sovereignty and the production of bare life, lies a link to the nation-making ritual of sovereignty-sustaining pardon in the practice of civic religion.

Agamben’s concept of “sacred life” can be applied to the situation of the National Thanksgiving Turkey. By that designation, the turkey has been selected for sacrifice, to become part of the official White House practice of civic religion in the Thanksgiving feast. Precisely because it is exceptional, it will be spared, prohibited from sacrifice for Thanksgiving, as its pre-1963 predecessors were. It is livestock, so it is the kind of thing that is acceptable to kill. As its pre-slaughtered body-doubles remind us, it is still. Upon being granted a pardon, it is pulled into the sphere of sovereignty. Ontologically precarious, yet not subject to sacrifice, it becomes sacred poultry, or *Gallina Sacra*.

One key difference between *Gallina Sacra* and *Homo Sacer* is in the status of prohibition on non-sacrificial killing. Where man normally has a prohibition against being murdered, a prohibition that disappears when he becomes *homo sacer*, this

\(^4^4\) Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 80.
\(^4^5\) Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.
\(^4^6\) Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.
prohibition never exists in the first place for the turkey. The turkey is property, not a moral agent. Even animal welfare laws that protect household animals from being murdered do not apply to turkeys. The turkey is always already available to be killed. One response to this challenge is that the pardoned turkey shares the inversion of this norm with homo sacer: after the White House ceremony, the turkey becomes unavailable for non-sacrificial killing either and is instead sent to live at a research university. For both, sacralization changes their prohibition on being killed, but in opposite directions. But a broader response might be to inspect the work done by the less-examined, first word in homo sacer—homo—and explore the politics of what happens to those excluded from humanism.

Gallina Sacra offers a biopolitical framework for the same quizzical aspect of the turkey pardon, the exception from sacrifice that sanctions widespread killing, that leads Freeman and Leventi-Perez to identify a “hypocritical ritual” in the term they coin, “animal sacrifice in-reverse.” Freeman and Leventi-Perez place the pathos for the turkey pardon “within an animal sacrifice framework of atonement and a need to cleanse one’s guilt.” My summary of the symbolic device they propose is that “this turkey will live so that others may die.” I share their general analysis, particularly in their attention to the negative relationship between animal sacrifice and meat consumption in modern societies. But Agamben’s treatment of sacrality adds insight to the nature of this body placed in limbo between sacrifice and availability for death. Rather than being sacrificed in reverse, I argue the turkey is made sacred. Tending to the turkey’s sacrality adds two important analytical compliments to “sacrifice in-reverse.” First, it recognizes the ontological status of sacred fowl as the same uncanny not-this but not-that grey zone Agamben identifies for homo sacer. And second, this language pulls the turkey out of the Mosaic legacy of animal sacrifice and into an uncomfortable inter-species relationship with human sacrifice, a turn that invites the analogy to the politics of the human to which we will turn.

The sacralizing process of Gallina Sacra notably includes naming. An online voting process fed into the selection of Corn and Cob as the names for this year’s birds. While naming does not confer humanity upon these animals, it does change our relationship to them; or rather, it creates a relationship, signifying that they have gone from being an interchangeable thing to something with a degree of individuality. And individuality reflects a unique dignity of a singular life—however slight that dignity might be deemed in a turkey—that constitutes the commandment against killing. Moreover, the relationship formed in naming fosters affection. This is the risk behind the common warning against naming livestock.

47 Freeman and Leventi-Perez, “Pardon Your Turkey,” 115.
48 Freeman and Leventi-Perez, “Pardon Your Turkey,” 115.
49 Freeman and Leventi-Perez, “Pardon Your Turkey,” 115.
Humanity and Subhumanity

So far, we have focused on the performance and expansion of sovereignty and civic religion in the production of a pardoned National Thanksgiving Turkey. The remainder of the paper turns to the underside of these pardons, the bodies reinscribed for death by the exceptions that prove the rule. To do so, we will analogize the pardoned pair—Corn and Michael Flynn—to elucidate the norm that Flynn excepts. And to do so, we will shift our focus to the politics of the turkey to the politics of the human.

In *Ontological Terror*, Calvin Warren takes on the notion of the human by arguing that it excludes black people, and that this is necessarily the case. He argues that antiblackness is a function of humanism, which converts black being into an “ontometaphysical” negation, which he depicts as “black being.” This process of negation turns a black person, who lacks being, into “the Negro”:

> Ontological Terror meditates on [the] (non)relation between blackness and Being by arguing that black *being* incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics, in an antiblack world. Blacks, then, have function but not Being—the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing). . . . The Negro is black because the Negro must assume the function of nothing in a metaphysical world.

Warren’s position is that there is no such thing as “black humanism” because the ontological humanity (*being*) of the Negro is negated by necessity. This occurs because *being* has a dialectical nature wherein it requires its opposite to assert itself. Thus, it allows only the fully-human—the normative white, male subject—and anything short of that is a life form that lacks Being, and therefore is *being*.

As Warren’s work demonstrates, focusing on the point at which humanity is lost can help us define and test the concept of the human. But I offer another strategy here. Instead of looking at the zero-degree mark, we can also learn about the politics of the human by looking at the 90-degree point. What does the way we treat dinosaur-like birds tell us about the way we treat non-human life? Taking this approach to the threshold point of the human, from the outside in, might offer valuable insight into the treatment of people excluded from “the human.”

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50 Editors’ note: Per the *Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School*’s style guidelines, we would typically capitalize the “B” in “Black.” However, in keeping with the analytical and stylistic intentions of Calvin Warren, author of *Ontological Terror*—the text discussed in this section of the paper—we have elected to keep the “B” lowercase for this particular section.


Critiquing Heidegger in a similar line of thinking to Warren, Jacques Derrida takes up this argument. He asks us to consider the relationship of human sovereignty over animals and human sovereignty over each other. He characterizes this as a “double and contradictory figuration of political man as on the one hand superior, in his very sovereignty, to the beast that he masters, enslaves, dominates, domesticates or kills, so that his sovereignty consists in raising himself above the animal and appropriating it, having its life at his disposal, but on the other hand (contradictorily), a figuration of the political man, and especially the sovereign state as animality.”

I am following Derrida’s impulse here to consider the human animal’s animality as part of our humanity, rather than to treat it as a separate concept superseded by whatever we deem to be “the human.” Derrida is showing us that Agamben’s bare life as produced by sovereignty is a feature of animality, not just of homo sacer.

If we allow ourselves to examine the turkey pardon in any depth, then we want to know why the turkey is being pardoned. This is actually a question in two parts: 1) What did this turkey do to warrant being spared? 2) What did the turkey do in the first place to get into the mess of needing a pardon? What is its crime? For what is the turkey being pardoned?

The first question is dispatched by the nature of the Sovereign as “he who decides” on the state of exception. There may well be a reason that the president chooses one turkey over another, or why a particular turkey gets selected for presentation to the White House—generally being large and exemplary for the purposes of marketing. But these explanations of the decision are beside the point: the decision itself is the point. The turkey didn’t do anything in particular to earn reprieve, beyond perhaps finding itself bred for oversize features and accommodating feed. That pardon is arbitrary.

As for what the turkey did in the first place to require a pardon? The answer to this question is, of course, also “nothing.” The turkey did not do anything to end up destined for slaughter. It is destined for slaughter by its very nature of being a turkey in the United States. Or, following Warren, it is subject to death by nature of its being, if ontological subject-being is only available to the human. The fact that the turkey did nothing to be sentenced to death and nothing to be sacralized is a reflection of its relationship to being. Warren explains this alterity to the human in Heideggerian terms. He employs Heidegger’s concept of equipment, “an object that when used with such regularity becomes almost invisible, or transparent, to the user. . . . Utility eclipses the thing itself.” Elsewhere he explains that “blacks are introduced into the metaphysical world as available equipment in human form.”

The same process operates for other non-human entities, including the turkey. Rather than being, the turkey becomes equipment to serve human being. We can follow Warren’s point to the negation of being into “black being” of “the Negro” and extend the equipment-ization

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of life into a usable body to all life defined outside of the human. Warren argues that “black being” has a unique experience of this negation and is singularly important for the continued coherence of the human by virtue of its being its negative. There is a risk, in drawing attention to non-human animal life, of suggesting that we should focus on it rather than on antiblackness. I have no interest in drawing into question the particular tragedy and repulsiveness of antiblackness or decentering the expulsion form the human it employs. Quite the opposite, by regarding the seamless equipment-ization of millions of poultry, we can better understand its workings on the would-be-human in antiblackness.

In Warren’s characterization, antiblackness is an “ontometaphysical” negation intrinsic to white humanism, a depiction which links the “metaphysical violence” that results from negating being into “black being.”56 “The Negro is the incarnation of nothing that a metaphysical world tries tirelessly to eradicate,” he explains. “Black being is invented precisely for this function ontologically; this is the ontological labor that the Negro must perform in an antiblack world.”57 The metaphysical world he describes is that of whiteness/being, which is thus premised on the negation Blackness/being. Like the exception in sovereignty being used to reinforce that which it is not, being produces being “as a site of projection for the human’s desires, fantasies, and ontological narcissism.”58 Critically, being and human-ness are unavailable to black being. This paves the way for black being’s treatment as non-human—in slavery, antebellum “freedmen,” and today in black bodies. “The term free black,” explains Warren, “is the syntactical reflection of the metaphysical holocaust, the violence between the terms free and black that is unresolvable.”59 In other words, the negation of black being prevents freedom from being possible in an antiblack world. Mass incarceration is a clear manifestation of this willingness to treat black being as raw biological material available for use—or for disposal. Michelle Alexander’s characterization of mass incarceration as “the new Jim Crow” is perhaps the most widely acclaimed treatment of this antiblack nature of mass incarceration, situating it as the inheritor of the antiblack legacy of Jim Crow, and slavery before it.60

Taking this insight seriously requires us to recognize the structures that uphold this alterity. If the turkey and black being are both excluded from the protections available to the human, through the sphere of sovereignty and its rule-reinforcing exception, then the commonplace availability to death of livestock (turkeys) can help elucidate the readiness with which availability to death is a logic that drives mass incarceration, the successor of chattel slavery.

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56 Warren, Ontological Terror, 16.
57 Warren, Ontological Terror, 16.
58 Warren, Ontological Terror, 47.
59 Warren, Ontological Terror, 16.
Conclusion

The pardon of the National Thanksgiving Turkey helps us see the way in which the pardon reinforces a capitalist system of death. And once we see this, it is not difficult to build an analogy to the relationship between both the National Thanksgiving Turkey and recipients of the presidential pardon like Michael Flynn on one hand, and also of the pardon-slaughter system of reinforcement on the other. The turkey pardon advances presidential power in general, which expands pardon power specifically through strategic analogy of the pardoned turkey to the pardoned human. The pardoned turkey, as exception, is a sustaining force in industrial animal slaughter. Finally, the turkey-as-exception relationship to an underclass of “normal” slaughter turkeys carries over to its human analogs, as exemplified by Michael Flynn in relation to incarcerated people in general, and incarcerated Black people in particular. Thus, I hope to have shown that the turkey pardon does work for the prison industrial complex and its dehumanization of poor people and people of color by making a farce of political pardons. The animal analog to political pardons is intended to grease the wheels of sovereignty, but it also helps us see the shadow analog between incarcerated animals and incarcerated people.

There are surely other important parallels between the mechanisms that reproduce the bare life of incarcerated people and industrial meat. The way in which corrections officers and slaughterhouse workers both become desensitized to violence, for example. Or the enjoyment of cheap material “equipment” outputs of each category of the non-human—furniture made by prison slave labor and shrink-wrapped, gutless (and sometimes even legless) Butterball carcasses—by the general public, sanitized by separation for the consumer between the products and the violence needed to create them. These connections demand consideration elsewhere.

Returning to the pardon, it is important to make explicit what the exceptionality of the pardon implies. The pardon, generally speaking, is law-preserving exception. By indicating the miraculous cases where the punishment dictated by law do not apply, it certifies and sustains those individuals to whom pardon is not extended. Envisioned as a release valve for gross injustice in legal outcomes, the pardon sanctions a justness to the whole. And even if we use Smith’s assessment of the transformative power to define a new political relationality in the pardon, we are left with law. Pardoning a political prisoner might have deep significance, but it would not change the fate of people facing unjust mandatory minimum sentences. Pardoning Michael Flynn only further cordon off “law and order” as something that serves the sovereign.

We would also do well to consider Trump’s pardon of rapper Lil Wayne in connection to his argument in the closing weeks of the election that he had “done
more for the African American community than any president with the exception of Abraham Lincoln,” and what it licenses.61

Is there a pardon that is law-destroying, divine violence, in Benjaminian terms? One could imagine a truly mass pardon coming from a president’s desk, covering thousands of people facing federal charges. This would be entirely within the president’s constitutional powers, which again are limited only to impeachment, broadly or narrowly defined. Such an act would be a negation of law, a rupture in the legal fabric. It is certainly not the use envisioned by the Framers, but it could share a resonance with the role imagined by some, such as Alexander Hamilton, of a power that allows national unity, and creates new ground to move forward. When Warren argues that “Black freedom … would constitute a form of world destruction,” by ending the current ontometaphysical regime, perhaps this image gesture toward what would invite such a rupture.62

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The Postmodern Quest for Ethics at a Distance: Lyotard and Marion on Social Distancing and the Ethics of the Other

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This article offers a theo-philosophical inquiry into the postmodern understanding of distance to offer an approach that may allow us to ethically engage with social distancing in relation to alterity and realize that it ultimately challenges and inspires how we live with others in the postmodern world. Drawing upon Jean-François Lyotard’s philosophy of alterity, the author provides postmodern insights into social distancing within the ethical dimension as an act of welcoming the otherness of the Other. As a theological response, the author discusses how Jean-Luc Marion’s theological turn in the phenomenology of givenness may provide an iconic account of the eucharistic life that offers an interpersonal ethics at a distance for truly living in solidarity in the postmodern world.

For many people in the United States, the first week of March 2020 was the last normal workweek of the year for due to the coronavirus pandemic. Since then, social distancing and wearing a mask have become a crucial part of our daily life. The basic goal of this reduced human contact is to mitigate the spread of the virus by keeping a safe space between people. Because the first reported cases of coronavirus were from Wuhan, China, social distancing has also been practiced against Asians and Asian Americans due to anti-Chinese sentiment. There have been many cases of violence against Asians in public places, even though we are still dealing with the issues in the process of getting used to this new phenomenon in our communities. If social distancing continues to be a discriminatory social phenomenon, targeting a certain group of people, this will replay one of the tragedies of modernity, which is the failure to preserve the otherness of individual reality.

In modernity, social distancing has often been employed under the dominant ideology of Western Christian society to enforce social discrimination between people of different races, genders, and social statuses. In their research on the role of social distancing during genocides that have happened over the past 75 years, Lisa Haagensen and Marnix Croes have found that different degrees of social distancing were practiced...
during the Holocaust to prepare for the social death of the targeted group (Jews).\(^1\) When the Nazis implemented widespread antisemitic legislation after their rise to power in 1933, they deliberately manipulated social distancing to curtail all interactions between the Jewish victim group and the German perpetrator group in the years leading up to the extermination carried out by the Nazi regime.\(^2\) Many contemporary philosophers and theologians agree that the World War II genocide of the European Jews was fostered by social distancing grounded in a totalizing ideology. In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf argues that the wrong kind of distancing has played a vital role in ethnic cleansing in Europe.\(^3\) This is one of the most powerful and terror-inspiring metaphors fostered by the totalizing ambition that is a distinctively modern phenomenon.

The dominant ideology of the West that has allowed the practice of social distancing for violent othering has come under strong criticism, however, which has led to the end of the credibility of modernity’s belief systems. In this process, the term *distance* has not been banished along with the decline of modernity; rather, it has been reexamined and reborn with a new ethical connotation of alterity of the other and has become one of the key terms for understanding the postmodern condition.

This article is a theo-philosophical inquiry into the postmodern understanding of distance to offer an approach that may allow us to ethically engage with the social distancing we are practicing today as a praxis of postmodern sensitivity toward otherness. I argue that the notion of distance, which has been transformed into an ethical distance from the Other in postmodernity, helps us to perceive social distancing as having an ethical place in our personal lives in relation to alterity and that this ultimately challenges and inspires our way of living with others in the postmodern world.

This article has two parts. In the first part, I address the philosophical understanding of social distancing by drawing upon Jean-François Lyotard’s philosophy of alterity, which has been neglected in the pursuit of the totalizing aim of modernity. Lyotard, with his deep awareness of the alterity of the Other, provides postmodern insights into social distancing, understanding it within the ethical dimension as an act of welcoming the otherness of the Other.

The second part of this article is a theological response to social distancing and in a broader sense, to the postmodern criticism of Christianity as lacking ethical sensitivity to the alterity of the Other. I examine Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of givenness and argue that his notion of the icon generates a way to traverse the distance by self-gifting to the Other. Marion’s iconic perception of the Other helps us

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to perceive social distancing within a dimension of the eucharistic life. Through this perception, the Word is not merely conceptualized but is actualized by a praxis of self-offering love, supporting the notion that Christians should actively pursue this understanding of social distancing to establish a genuine sense of interpersonal ethics for truly living in solidarity in the postmodern world.

Postmodern Quest for a Distance for “Feeling” the Other

Postmodern Critique of Distance for Silencing Others

In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard deploys “delegitimation” as a reference to the state of contemporary culture and society and to the decline in the unifying and legitimating power of metanarratives. He identifies postmodernity simply as “incredulity towards metanarratives.” 4 Incredulity is one of the defining factors of contemporary intellectual society in regard to science and technology, which are viewed as delegitimizing the eternal values and meaning produced by the moral narratives of modernity.

What, then, makes metanarrative unacceptable for Lyotard? The answer to this question may be found by considering the final chapter of his Just Gaming, which is titled “Majority Does not Mean Large Number, It Means Great Fear.” 5 Lyotard views a metanarrative as a totalizing story about history that is claimed and driven by the immense force of the majority, which excludes the Other who does not belong to the majority. He emphasizes that the metanarrative involves a built-in inequality and violence or terror that controls the effects of the discourse, in that not every individual’s story can be told. 6 In other words, the metanarrative generates the distance of the intentional forgetting of people or events that do not fit its totalizing structure.

For Lyotard, the modernist narratives have an overall secularized form of Christian eschatology that pursues the “promises at the end to reconcile the subject with itself and the overcoming of its separation,” through which it justifies the current event of terror. 7 Lyotard says, “What the terror wants is to arrest the meaning of words once and for all: a method required by the desire for truth,” and it does so by silencing the Other. 8 The failure of modernity’s grand purpose of totality for universal finality is evident in that the “Auschwitz” that Lyotard characterizes as a symbolic end or a

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6 Lyotard and Thébaud, Just Gaming, 100.
“tragic incompletion of modernity,” opened up postmodernity with a particular sensitivity toward the history of discrimination and Othering in Germany.9

According to Justine Thacker, what Lyotard is trying to tell us in his critical analysis of the postmodern condition is not so much “how to think, but rather how to behave.”10 Lyotard’s emphasis on “how to live” as a practical response to the problem he identifies is evidenced in the following conclusion:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us witness to the unpresentable; let us activate differences and save the honor of the name.11

The above quotation articulates Lyotard’s focus well. Terror as the unethical oppression of the Other by the power of the majority has been enacted in the last hundred years, and still today we hear “the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror.” In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard clearly explains this by saying, “We can say today that the mourning process has been completed. . . . Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative.”12 We live in the world, a world that celebrates the end of distress over missing narratives or the lack of (a singular or unified) meaning. Yet, this celebration, for Lyotard, is not a naïve farewell party but an alarm signaling a war against the return of terror.

Drawing upon Nietzsche’s famous declaration of the “death of God,” Lyotard sees that we live in a pagan world haunted by multiple gods and fragmenting into a multiplicity of language games; this makes us incapable of having a unifying language that brings together all the rules of legitimation.13 Frederick C. Bauerschmidt observes that Lyotard’s reading of postmodernity as the end of all metanarratives has become the locus in which “modernity’s universal narrative of human reason is shattered into

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10 Justine Thacker, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Theological Knowing (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 26.
12 Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 41.
micro-narratives of race, class, and gender through which the previously suppressed Other is presented to us with new force” in radical indeterminacy.14

Facing the postmodern world fragmented into a multiplicity of mini-narratives, Lyotard might perceive the multiplicity of distance in between, generating an open space in which the mini-narrative of each individual can be relentlessly emerging. Each narrative is, however, never completely determined and absorbed into the prevailing meta-discourse of the society, for there is no one totalizing principle that grounds the irreducible diversity of all other discourse. The truth of narratives is always bound to the quality of the narratives’ openness to radical alterity, which is an ungraspable, unnameable, and unmasterable otherness judged by its own principle that it cannot have control over others. In this vein, Lyotard endeavors to retain a sense of the unpresentable as his ethical way of witnessing to the otherness of the Other in favor of an awareness of difference by making his own turn to Kant’s aesthetics of the sublime.

Ethical Distance for Feeling Unpresentable Otherness

For Lyotard, the postmodern arises from the incredulity that destroys “the consensus of the taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable.”15 With his stress on unattainability as the very nature of the postmodern emerging from the loss of the belief in attainability that excluded the Other, Lyotard retains the notion of the sublime as an event of the unpresentable Other. According to Paul Hamilton, this event “is always one of what ‘will have been,’ future perfect, never one which provides a rule for the present.”16 Our judgment of the sublime always arrives belatedly, as it were, and therefore never finalizes or determines the sublime as an event of the present. What we know from the experience of the sublime is just something unpresentable that happened in the past. Here, Lyotard radicalizes the Kantian sublime in that whereas Kant indicates that there is an unpresentable, Lyotard endeavors to present the unpresentable by considering the sublime an essential aspect of postmodernity.17 In other words, the sublime, for Lyotard, is not a mere component of postmodern thought but is postmodernity itself:

15 Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 81.
“The postmodern is sublime.”¹⁸ Lyotard explains his theory of the sublime as the expression of postmodernity in the same essay:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresenatable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentation, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable.¹⁹

In his reading of Lyotard, Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt observes that the postmodern shares with the modern a sense of the lack of reality of all representation. However, it is distinct from the modern in that the postmodern is no longer suspicious of the received representations because such suspicion itself has a belief that there is something that modernity called “real” that one can possibly access.²⁰ For Lyotard, the postmodern denies any solace of good forms that would replace the old forms; rather, it “puts forward the unpresenatable in the presentation” by “a proliferation of forms created out of those received representations.”²¹

A significant aspect of Lyotard’s reading of the Kantian sublime is that “the sublime is a feeling.”²² For Kant, the mixed feeling of pain and pleasure is a matter of greatness in size or number, indicating the superiority of human reason over sensible nature. However, for Lyotard, this contradictory feeling is caused by “the deregulation of our understanding” that disorients the Kantian subject and dismantles our time and space.²³ What we can perceive in a sublime event is a feeling of something there that is unknown and unknowable.²⁴ I feel that something exists there, but it is unpresenatable to me, for it cannot be consumed or determined by my understanding. Lyotard rejects the self’s appropriation of the world that resides in Kantian teleological tenets because it destroys “the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable.”²⁵

The desire to convey a sense of the unpresenatable (unknowable) is what Lyotard takes as an ethical gesture toward the Other whose “thereness” has been threatened

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by modernity’s grand attempt to define it in metanarratives. Lyotard argues that in the contemporary world, the self should be decentered, becoming a witness to the unpresentable Other. Renée van de Vall’s analysis of Lyotard explains that the desire for the unpresentable gives a particular role to absence within the postmodern world:

Where traditionally philosophy has regarded silence as lacunae, uncharted territory that should be mapped with concepts, reasonings, and conclusions, Lyotard is very reticent. He is aware of the fact that charting a philosophical white spot is often the first stage of conceptual colonization. . . . Silence indicates inevitable gaps in our comprehension, gaps that should be respected, rather than bridged.26

This special place designated for silence is the place for the Other. Silence suspends any representation of the Other and thus keeps the alterity of the Other as unpresentable; it can only be felt, not determined. Regarding silence, for Lyotard, “the possibility of nothing happening is often associated with a feeling of anxiety”; however, this anxiety of suspension “can also be accompanied by pleasure, for instance, pleasure in welcoming the unknown.”27 This is a contradictory feeling of both anxiety and pleasure, which raises a question characterized by indeterminacy: “Is it happening?” Although the tone of the question can be modulated, the emphasis of the question is now, now, which represents “nothing might happen: nothingness now.”28 In this vein, the feeling of the thereness of the unpresentable Other also might appear, referring to the unpresentable now that can be greeted here and now.

Social Distancing for the Well-Being of Our Mutual Alterity

In Lyotard’s critical analysis of the totalizing structure of metanarratives, distance appears as a violent phenomenon among the socially differentiated, a phenomenon that forces society to determine who is the Other who is to be exterminated from the metadiscourse. Lyotard’s deep awareness of the alterity of the Other emerging in the rise of postmodern culture and society, however, provides a new understanding of distance as an ethical distance that welcomes the otherness of the Other without determining it as an intended object. Lyotard’s sublime sentiment for the unpresentable seems to succeed in its role as a solution to the problem of totalizing terror by breaking with the notion of community or shared culture and narratives as consensus, therefore giving us the ethical notion of distance for “feeling” the otherness of

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28 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 29.
the Other whose presence within his or her own unique narrative of life is to be felt and greeted without being reduced and absorbed into the metanarrative generated by those with power.

In this vein, the distance for feeling the presence of the unpresentable Other can be applied to our perception of the current social distancing as an ethical phenomenon of mutually greeting each other’s alterity with the following three overarching aspects. First, the feeling of the unpresentable otherness, which is a distinctively postmodern sentiment, refuses to return to the modern impulse of using distance as a discriminating tool for exclusion of the Other and, therefore, rejects the practice of distancing for racial/ethnic discrimination, determining who is the Other by identifying the Other as the source of the coronavirus and thus to be exterminated. The modern subject has now been decentered and fragmented into the countless Other as a sublime force. Lyotard may argue that this sublime force that invokes the feeling of the presence of the Other without a determination—as the mode of “let there be unpresentable Other”—should be applied equally to every individual who practices social distancing with a face covering as the unpresentable other today.

Second, the sublime feeling of the unpresentable Other is in the movement from pain to pleasure. As discussed earlier, for Lyotard, the sublime feeling takes oneself from the pain caused by the limits of the conceptual understanding (or representation) of the Other to the pleasure of being a witness to the real presence of the unpresentable Other by feeling that its presence is happening here and now. It is true that social distancing may cause feelings of anxiety due to the radical indeterminacy of the Other, including the unknowable possibility that the other person may have the coronavirus. However, this feeling of anxiety should be accompanied by a feeling of pleasure in witnessing each other’s presence, “here and now,” that is alive and real today. The six-foot distance should not be a tool for aggressive defense that expresses anxiety about or resentment of each other—which seems to create a further distance between the two—but an ethical distance of mutual welcoming and respect, so that none of the individual singularities of our society feel threatened or oppressed but rather are encouraged to contribute to building up such a lived sentiment for each other.

Finally, the sublime feeling as a postmodern sensitivity of otherness makes us aware of unexpected (marginalized) otherness at the border of our particular narratives. The unifying discourse of the grand narrative is now open to be interrupted and recontextualized by a new self-understanding of the event of the Other. Our everyday practice of social distancing is searching for the space for an open narrative that may welcome and enjoy the interruption of other stories, for it generates the countless event of the (unpresentable) Other whose own experience of the pandemic needs to be heard and felt. It seems that the current society strives to find a way to create an open and shared space for communication and engagement in distance more than ever, such as through virtual platforms for meetings, so as to manage the potential side effects of social distancing, for example, the danger of an increase in loneliness.
and alienation due to the loss of a sense of community. However, we see how challenging a task it is to offer a sense of connection across distance. This challenge is actually what is primarily at stake in the postmodern condition, according to Lyotard. The postmodern sublime wages a war against the desire for a return of the terror of modern subjectivity for saving otherness, but at the same time, its radical indeterminacy faces the challenge of preventing the unpresentable otherness from turning into an indifferent Other, withdrawn from other people’s reality in the postmodern fragmentation.

Notwithstanding this postmodern dilemma, it is evident that Lyotard’s reading of the Kantian sublime offers a postmodern insight on openness to alterity, and this should encourage our perception of social distancing as a real praxis of ethical sensitivity to the Other. At the same time, social distancing challenges us to question how our deep awareness of the alterity of the Other can practically touch and grasp the Other’s life during the current pandemic, as well as in the post-pandemic world when the physical distance is finally removed.

I will come back to this question in the following section addressing Marion’s theology of givenness that offers a theological insight on distance as a response to the current social distancing and, in the broader sense, to the question of the postmodern way of living with otherness.

Jean-Luc Marion and the Distance of Givenness

*The Iconic Gaze at a Distance*

It has become almost common in contemporary theology to argue that the postmodern rejection of Christianity triggered by Nietzsche and Heidegger in particular and continued by their postmodern heirs is not valid against God in the biblical texts but against a certain god of metaphysics. For Lyotard, along with other postmodern thinkers such as Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida, the problem of the metaphysical God of Christianity understood as *causa sui* is that it generates narratives with the grand aim of determining that all beings are within God as the foundation of human existence, and this has contributed to the building up of the totalizing culture of the West. The underlying motive of these thinkers’ rejection of the Christian narrative is their ethical concern about the lack of practical sensitivity to the Other.29

Marion makes his own theological turn in phenomenology and responds to the postmodern accusation against Christianity by criticizing the metaphysical construct of God:

The Christian religion does not think God starting from the *causa sui*, because it does not think God starting from the cause, or within the theoretical space

defined by metaphysics, or even starting from the concept, but indeed starting from God alone, grasped to the extent that he inaugurated by himself the knowledge in which he yields himself—reveals himself.30

How then can we think of God outside of metaphysics? Marion suggests a post-metaphysical way of thinking about God, a thinking that releases God from the metaphysical categories that have transformed God into a conceptual idol by addressing the radically irreducible alterity of God as an icon.

The distinction between the two modes of approaching God as an idol or an icon is key to understanding Marion’s thinking of God, clearly articulated in his The Idol and Distance. Idol has a Greek root (eidô, “I see”), which represents the human gaze upon the material idol in which the divine is figured and taken into view.31 This is an intentional act of viewing the invisible divine by empowering the idol to make it divinely revealed to observers. In God without Being, Marion examines how a material idol can be applied to a more conceptual level, generating a conceptual idol. The divine is anthropomorphized by the human gaze and confined to the conceptual understanding of the viewers. This is what happens in thinking of God as causa sui; this way of thinking creates only a conceptual idol of God as it develops its apprehension of God under “the figure simply of efficiency, of the cause, and of the foundation.”32

In other words, the conceptual idol of God is idolatrous the same way as material idols are, for it results from the human gaze that confines God conceptually within a human measure and imagination in which the distance between the divine and human beings is abolished. To overcome such an idolatrous thought of God, we should switch our mode of approaching God from the idol to the icon.

Unlike the idol, which attracts the attention of viewers, the icon proceeds from God toward the human gaze and envisions the gaze. For Marion, the icon is “no longer mirror image of human desire, wishes and images, as is the case for the idol. . . . The icon in some way maintains the invisibility of the divine.”33 In other words, whereas the idol, which is the conceptual representation of what viewers have seen, depends on the measure of the viewer’s very human capacity, the icon, contrariwise, traverses the distance and exposes human beings to the infinite divine in order to envision them.34

Drawing upon Pseudo-Dionysius’s mystical theology, Marion speaks of an iconic approach to God by positively determining the inerasable distance between God and human beings that God traverses. Whereas the idol abolishes the distance between it

31 Marion, God Without Being, 27–8.
32 Marion, God Without Being, 35.
33 Christina M. Gschwandtner, Marion and Theology (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 33.
34 Gschwandtner, Marion and Theology, 34.
and the viewers, the icon preserves the distance between the divine and the viewers. In order to keep the distance to receiving God as an icon, Marion proposes the word *Gxd*, representing the pre-metaphysical reality of God as love excessively manifest on the cross, “the Gxd revealed by, in and as the Christ . . . [this] Gxd does not express of himself first according to and starting from Being.”35 Because God revealed as love precedes Being, God can no longer be conceived as the ground of being but rather as “a love-donation” that delivers God as a “being-given” to the Other.36

As Jesus’s self-giving love manifested on the cross overwhelms our logical thinking, the radical love of God exceeds the intentional grasp by giving Godself completely with nothing withheld: “His obviousness unfolds in the atonal tonality of dazzlement.”37 According to Angel Mendez, for Marion, God’s donation is God’s saying, which is God’s self-exposure to us, and accordingly, “My saying of God is the giving of myself giving words to another: it displays my vulnerability to the other.”38

Immanuel Levinas, who greatly influenced Marion’s thinking, pinpoints the vulnerability of this saying as “saying uncovering itself, that is denuding itself of its skin, sensibility on the surface of the skin.”39 The saying is, thus, the gifting, which is the pure donation of the self to the Other within which the discourse takes place. However, the givenness should not be understood as a phenomenological reduction as an intentional donation to be possessed or manipulated by the receiver.

In this vein, for Marion, distance does not appear as an alienation of the Other under the totalizing scheme but as an ethical space that saves the irreducible alterity of the Other by showing our vulnerability and openness to the Other. As God who comes across the distance to disclose Godself to us in the most vulnerable manner on earth and remains unspeakable, incomprehensible, and unthinkable, we should also hold the traversing distance to embrace the Other in their radical indeterminacy.40 By the iconic gaze of God that fixes upon us, our position as observers is transformed into the one observed who receives what is given by the iconic gaze, what comes to us as a gift in God’s radical unattainability. This iconic gazing subverts “every idol of the frozen gaze” and finally opens up the horizon of mutual iconic gazing in-betweens.41 In this mutual iconic gazing, each is receptive to the Other as a given and simultaneously as being given to the Other. This act of mutual gifting, which is not for possession but for openness to the Other via the iconic gaze, is governed by ethics,

38  Mendez, “God and Alterity,” 556.
and this ethical phenomenon of gifting is further developed in Marion’s notion of the eucharistic life—the life that represents Christ, who is absent from our perception but present as the icon in the breaking of the bread, the loving action.

**Traversing the Distance for a Eucharistic Life**

Marion identifies holiness with the act of *kenosis* in that holiness becomes visible in the supreme sacrifice on the cross, revealing “the mortal sufferings of the invisible holiness in the horror of the visible sin.”42 The face of Christ as an icon calls to a belief in a life of holiness and freedom grounded in an immortality that goes beyond death. Theological faith, for Marion, imposes an eschatological waiting for the ultimate manifestation of the face of Christ upon his return, for it is simultaneously the same day of the true manifestation of human other’s infinite face, which is hidden in Christ.43

In the meantime (during the eschatological waiting), believers are called to be holy and participate in the eucharistic celebration. The principle of the Eucharist is that at the time Jesus is recognized, he disappears: “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight” (Luke 24:31).44 According to Piotr Karpiński, “The purpose of Eucharist was to make it visible, while Jesus disappears.”45 As the disappearance of Jesus turns out to herald the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, “the Word disappears so as not to fix on itself, but by receiving the Body and Blood, it lives in the disciples.”46

The eucharistic life in which Christ’s body and blood live offers the following three crucial aspects of Christian life today. First, “the eucharistic present,” says Gerard Loughlin, “is temporalized from the past as memorial, but not in the sense of remembering what is no longer, of calling to mind a nonpresence,” but rather as “the pledge of an advent completed from the future.”47 In other words, the eschatological future is embodied in the Eucharist in that *kenosis* (the memorial of the past) for the sake of eschatological redemption (in the eschatological future) lives here and now in our present moment. Marion says that “presence must be received as the present, namely, as the gift that is governed by the memorial and *epektasis*. Each instant of the

45 Karpiński, “Theology of Jean-Luc Marion,” 802.
present must befall us as a gift.” Christ’s self-offering love never becomes the past but is our present, which is always and already arriving as a gift.

Second, the Eucharist does not change Christ into ourselves and under our control; rather, we are changed into Christ, his body (the Church) shared at the table by which we become Christ’s body, the table to be shared with others. Marion says, “The bread and the wine must be consumed . . . so that our definitive union with the Father may be consummated in them, through communion with the ecclesiastical body of his Son.” The consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist become the ultimate icon of love, for they manifest how God’s love incarnates in us, taking possession of our present, of the here and now, so that the visible absence of Christ becomes the real presence through our acts of nourishing and feeding others in love.

Finally, the Eucharist always sustains the unbridgeable difference between God and the human self. The consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist represents what Marion calls “an irreducible exteriority of the eucharistic Other” within which Christ offers us the sacramental gift of himself without being determined by human consciousness. Marion says, “The believing community does not become conscious of itself, but of another, of the Other par excellence.” The difference makes intimacy possible by guaranteeing that the Other is not delivered to us as an effect of the self’s consciousness, will, and attention; rather, the distance is traversed, and we reach out to the Other via love, which is an act of self-donation that imitates the act of kenosis, the act of God who gives Godself radically. Love is not merely spoken but is an act, as Marion rightly points out: “In the end, it is made. Only then can discourse be reborn.”

**Iconic Distance and the Eucharistic Life**

Marion’s iconic manifestation of distance opens up the horizon of the ethical dimension for the Other by destroying the modern idolatry practiced in the form of totalization in the Christianity of the West. Marion’s iconic gaze upon us decenters our egoistic perception so we can see the radical alterity of the Other at a distance. Through ethically traversing the distance, grounded in the kenotic love of God, we can make an iconic approach to the Other by an act of self-donation without expecting anything in return. The act of self-gifting that breaks our tendency to determine and possess the

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48 Marion, *God Without Being*, 175.
50 Marion, *God Without Being*, 179.
52 Marion, *God Without Being*, 168.
Other finally calls for the eucharistic life, the life that enables Christ’s table to be open to and, thus, shared with the Other.

Marion’s distance for the self-gifting love of Christ, which is at the heart of the eucharistic life, may both challenge and inspire today’s practice of social distancing and the theological aspect of the postmodern condition in a broader sense. I argue that the current social phenomenon requires that we have an iconic gaze upon one another at a distance and in radical indeterminacy due to the Other’s face being covered with a mask. Our gaze expresses our mood and gesture toward others. It could invoke a different kind of atmosphere, such as a welcoming, indifferent, or even threatening atmosphere, based on our measuring of the Other. As we are seen, for Marion, we human beings bear the incomprehensible nature of God within ourselves in that we are known as incomprehensible but also as holy under the iconic gaze. The iconic gaze, therefore, has no measure other than its own excessive love of God that embodies our whole present, which is always and already arriving as a gift. Viewing our present situation in this iconic way requires the discipline of being comfortable with the ambiguity of the Other. Within this, social distancing can be practiced as an iconic encounter with the unknown Other (including the possibility that the other person may have the coronavirus) by perceiving and embracing each other’s present moment in the here and now as a gift. The application of Marion’s iconic perception of the presence of the Other is not limited to the current pandemic but can be extended to our entire way of postmodern living.

The iconic distance does not aim to break the relationship but rather to develop intimacy in between by breaking the structured thought of the Other in that we can have our gaze open and responsive to the endlessly calling of the Other without measuring them. We see how our local church communities try to get actively involved with the social campaign of sharing the table with others at distance in various ways, such as raising donations or sharing free food and materials with others in need. All our love actions should be expressed in the form of self-giving grounded in this iconic manifestation of distance, within which we let ourselves be absent from the conceptual perception but present in the breaking of our daily bread, sharing what we are always and already receiving. This is what Marion might call the eucharistic life, one in which Christians are called to participate during the current pandemic and also in the postmodern world as a theological response to the postmodern criticism of Christianity as failing to show how the Word incarnates and lives in us for the Other. If we do not live this eucharistic life, the Word becomes a conceptual idol.

What the Christian belief in the real communion with Christ in the Eucharist should convey is the Church’s surrendering to the call to be a sacrament of Christ, to live the eucharistic life in which the self-offering love of God is revealed not merely as a sign but as a real presence (reference) of Christ that is seen, heard, and touched by “others” in today’s world.
Conclusion: The Distance for Embracing Our *Nowness*

I began this article with a concern about the improper use of social distancing for exclusion under the dominant ideology of Western Christian society and its justification of the violent application of distance. Given the urgency of the need for an ethical understanding of social distancing in our practical engagement with the Other in the current pandemic, I examined Lyotard’s ethics for the Other that he developed based on his critical observation of the discriminating distance in the past, believing that it might offer the concept of an aesthetic distance in an ethical sense that would allow us to sublimely feel and appreciate the presence of the Other without determining it. As seen, the ethical distance is expressed in the form of an unconditional welcoming of the Other in their radical indeterminacy, and this may ultimately represent Lyotard’s postmodern way of living with the otherness of the Other that can be applied to our specific current phenomenon of social distancing as a praxis of behaving ethically. I observe that the current pandemic also seems to mirror our postmodern condition in terms of the fragmented alterity that isolates itself due to the trauma of the totalizing terror of modernity and therefore offers us the challenging task of touching (connecting with) each other ethically in today’s world.

Although Christianity has led the way in contributing to a totalizing structure that excludes the sense of otherness and thus is under strong criticism, Marion’s iconic approach to the Other in his critical reflection on Christian philosophy seems to offer a new theology, one that creates a way to traverse the distance ethically by sharing the eucharistic life with the Other. This is the life of self-offering, which is not a purely conceptual event but rather a lived sentiment that makes the Other’s presence a gift. Social distancing practiced in the form of self-offering as a lived sentiment for the Other who comes near us in our daily lives is an act of lived ethics that we should be pursuing as a postmodern way of living with the Other.
REFERENCES


NORMAN VINCENT PEALE, NEW THOUGHT, AND DISABILITY: POPULAR RELIGIOUS PSYCHOLOGY AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE MIND

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Positive Religious Psychology, as typified in Norman Vincent Peale’s 1952 self-help work The Power of Positive Thinking, has played a major role in shaping contemporary theologies of the mind. Drawing on a tradition of “mind cure” ministry with deep roots in American Protestantism, Peale promulgated a theology of mind that emphasized the role of faith and God’s power to heal individuals suffering from a number of afflictions both physical and mental. In this system, neurodiversity, and disability more broadly, work as metaphors for God’s absence. This theology of mind furthers the marginalization of those with disabilities in religious psychology and pastoral theology, inhibiting those in these fields from speaking to the experiences of the neurodivergent. This negative development, I argue, can be countered by returning rhetorical power back to those with disabilities to author their own experiences and interpretation of God’s presence in their existence.

“Disability, tension, and kindred troubles may result from a lack of inner harmony. It is remarkable how prayer restores the harmonious functioning of body and soul.”
– Norman Vincent Peale, The Power of Positive Thinking

One of the enduring legacies of twentieth century Protestantism is the tradition’s ability to encounter and transform popular culture for its followers. Much has been written in both academic and popular literature on the influence of evangelical Christians in politics and the rise of the Religious Right, but it is equally worth considering their impact in supposedly secular realms like popular culture. In the story of twentieth century Protestantism, prominent Christian leaders of the twentieth century engineered entire spheres of culture with their flock in mind. Rather than envisioning popular culture as separate from the world of

Christian media, it is more helpful to interrogate how Christianity has conformed to the dictates of consumer-driven capitalism. In this examination, I take inspiration from Kathryn Lofton’s *Consuming Religion*, which explores how the market economy is increasingly the mode through which spiritual seekers “harness material means . . . to access material power.” Through the creation of their own channels of media—think Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network or the large Christian publishing house a la Zondervan or Thomas Nelson—Christians in the twentieth century proliferated new ways in which people could incorporate religious or “spiritual,” teachings into their lives. In part because of this embrace of the media marketplace, Protestant theologies of the self and of the body continue to play a central role in contemporary life. In particular, the rigid individualism that courses through much of Protestant thought has become uniquely preserved in the field of wellness, especially in self-help publishing.

A forefather of the Christian wellness genre, Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993) played an outsized role in the development of popular religious psychology and its practice in mainstream circles today. The minister’s 1952 magnum opus *The Power of Positive Thinking* was the bestselling nonfiction book of that year (finishing, perhaps appropriately, only behind the Holy Bible), and it has been translated into over forty different languages. The book established Peale as a household name and verifiable brand. In Louise Woodstock’s survey of twentieth century self-help literature, she credits Peale as being “both the most popular and the most avid mass mediator” of religious self-help. But the line between religious and secular self-help literature blurred during its rise as a genre in the second half of the twentieth century. Christians were not the only ones to read and consume Peale’s teachings: any person with access to a bookstore or an internet connection can consume his message of spiritual uplift.

Today, the Peale Foundation produces an app featuring recordings of the minister’s most popular sermons. Similarly, Peale’s influence extended beyond church book clubs and into boardrooms. His published works contain references to the business leaders he courted, such as J. L. Kraft, founder of foodstuff megacorporation Kraft Cheese. These figures voiced public approvals of Peale and implemented his teaching in their careers and workplaces. Additionally, his monthly periodical *Guideposts* reached over

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4.5 million subscribers at its height, beating out both *Newsweek* and *People* by a margin of over one million readers. As a leading public intellectual for evangelical Christianity, Peale held immense sway over the tools that his readers utilized in their pursuit of wellness during the twentieth century.

Although recent scholarship investigates Peale’s legacy in the political and business worlds, less attention has been paid to his role in developing popular theologies of mind that were accessible to wide audiences. While pastoral care manuals focus more on incorporate professional psychotherapeutic models than self-help fads, Peale’s status as self-help pioneer signals his ongoing influence in popular theology. Borrowing pastoral care scholar Carrie Doehring’s term “embedded theologies,” I define these theologies not necessarily as creeds that Christians confess to, but rather as assumptions or value judgements that every individual carries with them in their experience of life to guide their decision-making. I argue that embedded theologies are the immaterial means that individuals harness to make sense of their material world. These theologies are embedded in the sense that they are a product of one’s experience and cultural context. As we shall see, Peale’s theologies of self and of mind are deeply embedded in cultural norms of middle-class white America.

Excavating *Positive Thinking* for “embedded theologies” of self and mind provides much to critique regarding the self-help genre’s influence on popular theology. Given Peale’s status in the field of religious psychology, how does his work affect Christian understandings of the mind and neurodiversity? If feeling mentally well and secure in one’s experience of the world is as central to personal salvation as Peale’s theology suggests, does this theory extend to the lived experiences of the neurodivergent? Peale produced very little literature that directly discussed people with disabilities. In light of this absence, it is worth subjecting his grandiose claims to mental healing in *Positive Thinking* to the rigors of disability studies. This evolving field has produced important critiques of the role of cure narratives common in self-help works like Peale’s.

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9 Lane’s *Surge of Piety* extensively details Peale’s association with prominent politicians and medical figures. Additionally, Carol George’s biography of Peale examines his legacy in popular culture and politics and includes the juicy detail that Peale officiated the second wedding of ex-President Donald J. Trump, whose family attended Peale’s Marble Collegiate Church for decades. See Carol V. R. George, *God’s Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

10 For recent, often-cited examples of professional pastoral care works that incorporate up-to-date psychotherapeutic models, see Carrie Doehring’s *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2006). See also Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger’s *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).


Specifically, I take the lead in my deconstruction of Peale from Eli Clare’s work *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, in which this poet-philosopher discusses the role that the disabled body is made to play in traditional narratives of “cure.” Rather than being endowed with subjectivity and the potential to grow, disabled bodies are narrativized in ways that justify drastic interventions that challenge the self-hood of the disabled. This intervention can emanate from a deity, the medical establishment, the state, or some combination of the three. In certain spiritual spaces, this discourse forces the disabled body to become “the proving ground for Christian miracles.”

It is worth considering how Peale interacts with this tradition of faith-induced healing given his influence in popular theology and the self-help genre. Clare describes a subset of these believers as a frequent, unwanted presence in his experience of his own disability. He recounts the intrusions of Christians who were convinced that his cerebral palsy needed to be healed. These Christians offered him prayer as a remedy for his perceived imperfections. Situating Peale within a larger, still thriving New Thought context, we see how his theology of mind undergirds many popular assumptions of what constitutes “normalcy.” Furthermore, we can explore avenues of argument for theologians and ministers opposed to Peale’s spiritualized conception of mind and body as a harmonious machine able to be regulated simply by proper (positive) thinking. By turning to the efforts of disability studies scholars today, we see how the experience of people with disabilities can and should impact popular theological understandings of health and the mind.

In Peale’s theology of mind, the Reformed Protestant preacher linked traditional Christian messaging of personal salvation through faith with a normative experience of mental and physical wellbeing. Peale embodied this linkage in his work as a parish minister. He frequently and deliberately blurred the categories of pastor and scientific therapeutic practitioner. Working with Smiley Blanton, a respected psychologist who had studied under Sigmund Freud, Peale created and ran the Marble Collegiate Church Clinic (MCCC). This venture, operated out of the basement of the church, allowed Peale and other affiliated ministers the opportunity to inhabit the role of “therapist.” Peale and Blanton drew inspiration for this ministry from figures like Anton Boisen and Richard Cabot, who led early efforts to combine the teachings of psychology and psychiatric medicine with the work of the church. Peale’s colleague Harry Emerson Fosdick had been running a pastoral counseling ministry at Riverside Church in New York City for over a decade before MCCC was founded. This concern with the more

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15 Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*.
16 George, *God’s Salesman*, 87.
17 Fosdick consciously appropriated the language of an emerging therapeutic culture in his work, once boasting that “[his] preaching at its best has itself been personal counseling on a group scale.” Fosdick’s willingness to combine therapy and ministry suggests this tendency is not the sole property of evangelical Christians but rather has broad purchase across American Protestant communities. See George, *God’s Salesman*, 87.
worldly matters of parishioners’ mental wellbeing spoke to a desire demonstrated by non-fundamentalist ministers at this time for greater acceptance and engagement with a popular culture, which was growing more receptive to therapeutic language and treatment. Contrary to narratives of American religious history that emphasize Christians’ supposed efforts to separate from the secular world, Peale’s ministry illustrated eagerness to integrate the work of the church with the prerogatives of the medical establishment. His published works dovetailed nicely with the emerging field of self-help literature, a genre in which Peale carved out his personal brand. I argue that Peale’s desire to speak to wider audiences encouraged a kind of theologizing that accepted culturally normative assumptions around wellness. Without a hermeneutic of suspicion to critique these assumptions of wellness in religious psychology, Peale found himself perpetuating some of the most violent tendencies towards neurodiversity found in supposedly secular medicine.

In *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Peale’s concept of faith was distinctly visceral and transformative. As Peale explained, the target of this faith was neither sin nor moral failure, but rather the “inferiority complex”:

> The greatest secret for eliminating the inferiority complex, which is another term for deep and profound self-doubt, is to fill your mind with overflowing faith. Develop a tremendous faith in God and that will give you a humble yet soundly realistic faith in yourself.18

Peale continued on to list a “lack of self-confidence” as one of the greatest problems plaguing American society, holding people back from becoming, in his mind, their best, truest selves.19 Although this worldview proved inspirational for some, its model of selfhood—that one only needs to pray the right prayers and find the true inner supply of divine grace to improve their life—deserves interrogation. What kinds of problems does an “overflowing faith” address? Should religious psychology primarily concern itself with those who thrive or with those who have found themselves cast to the margins?

Peale’s definition of improvement closely resembled definitions of improvement that were cherished by white, middle-class Americans. *Positive Thinking* brimmed with stories of upwardly mobile whites whose lives were characterized by professional success and domestic bliss, inhabiting archetypal narratives of the Post-War American Dream. To Peale, the act of believing in God was “not piously stuffy but is a scientific procedure for successful living.”20 Throughout *Positive Thinking*, Peale claimed that belief in God, positive affirmation, and goal visualization were all important steps to getting ahead in the world. Peale supported this claim with many testimonials of successful businessmen and professionals who credited the power of positive thinking

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to their successes. While these techniques might work for some, Peale failed to meditate on how other factors such as race, class, or ability might help or hinder one’s potential to find fulfillment in their day-to-day lives.

Peale’s failure to address social influences on identity likely stemmed in part from the genre of self-help, which promoted an incredibly individualistic notion of wellness. In Heidi Marie Rimke’s study of self-help as an agent of individualism, books like Peale’s posit the self as “a united centre of personal agency which can act upon itself, others and the world. This conception presents the individual as the sole ontological pivot of experience. Further, the self is conceived as possessing an inner reservoir of power that can be accessed.”21 This inner reservoir of power for Peale is one’s relationship with God. Although later self-help writers drifted away from explicitly religious language to the vocabulary of the “spiritual,” the Christian God appeared as a source of inner power throughout Positive Thinking.

Norman Vincent Peale and the Enduring Influence of New Thought

Written in a plain and somewhat folksy voice, Positive Thinking consists of practical psychological advice broken up with anecdotes of miraculous healing and transformation through the power of faith in God. Taking on a pragmatic tome, the book espoused the mechanics of what Peale called “practical religion.”22 In this practical religion, readers are encouraged to repeat biblically-based affirmations like “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” from Philippians 4 and “If God is for us, who can be against us?” from Romans 8.23 These affirmations served to reconnect the individual with a “divine energy,” without which one would “gradually [become] depleted in mind, body, and spirit.”24 This reliance on divine energy or supply is not an innovation of Peale’s; rather, it comes from a very specific American interpretation of biblical healing stories. New Thought, sometimes called the “mind-cure movement,” was one of the first successful attempts by American religious figures to blur the boundaries of medicine and faith and give ministers authority in matters of personal wellness.25 Figures in this field published literature, established churches, and launched ministries that influenced Norman Vincent Peale and Smiley Blanton years later. Their acceptance of what was once a counter-cultural expression of Protestant worship led to its gradual acceptance in contemporary self-help literature. Peale’s engagement with New Thought spoke to his skills as a popularizer as he successfully

tapped into what made this tradition endure by rejecting whatever impeded its mainstream success.

Part of Peale’s success stemmed from his ability to build of groundwork laid by previous religious entrepreneurs within American Protestantism. Although Peale oversaw a vastly popular ministry network in his life, the figures he chose to emulate were decidedly apart from the mainstream. Peale’s greatest influences came from “alternate” forms of American religiosity often ignored in traditional accounts of American Christian history that emphasize rise of mainstream denominations.26 The tradition most broadly labeled as “New Thought” made faith healing through mental manipulation a central part of its ministry and outreach. The movement was founded on a notion inherited from esotericism notions of Divine Supply.27

In the early stages of this tradition, Mary Baker Eddy and her church of Christian Science proved particularly influential. Eddy’s lasting theological innovation of God as “Divine Mind” set the foundations for the kind of pure idealism taken up by later New Thought denominations, like Unity Church, which Peale listed alongside Christian Science as his greatest influences on Positive Thinking.28 The theology of Christian Science was distinct in its aggressive rejection of the material world. In Eddy’s theology, all goodness in the universe emanated not simply from God, but from the Mind of God, or “Divine Mind.” Sickness, disease, and disability were all lumped together as base and sinful corruptions of the physical world, entirely separate from this Divine Mind.29 Eddy was not the first Christian thinker to associate physical and mental afflictions with sin, but she distinguished herself with her firm separation of human consciousness, which she saw as an individual’s responsibility to reconcile with the Divine Mind, and sin, which was wholly a phenomenon of the physical world. Through cultivation of a more correct human consciousness, humans could transcend the sin of the physical world to find permanent bliss in the Divine Mind.

Following this strict mind-body dualism, a faithful Christian Scientist could cast out sin by refusing to acknowledge its existence and denying its materiality. Eddy labeled any sort of physical or mental pain as “mortal error.”30 To correct these spiritual maladies, Eddy prescribed a kind of therapy with roots in earlier practices of mesmerism popular in the early nineteenth century. She taught that affirmations should be relayed from minister to patient about God and health. Only by fully

27 As Albanese’s study shows, this esoteric tradition goes back far into Christian history. Metaphysical religion today claims sources as far back as ancient hermetic or Gnostic traditions. These traditions were preserved in Western Europe by theologians and flourished in secret societies like the Rosicrucians. Yet, this tradition only begins to exert significant influence on U.S. religious practice when it was picked up by American Christians in the nineteenth century. See Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*.
28 Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 252.
29 Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 64.
believing these truths could the body be purged of sickness. Historian Catherine Albanese provides a vivid picture of the kind of therapeutic model Christian Science imposed on its followers:

The healing role of the Christian Science practitioner was meant not so much to provide compassionate care as to demonstrate Truth in an ideal order that reduced the physical to the nothing that it was in order that, in short, proved the claims of the Christian gospel as Eddy herself understood them. . . . Truth brooked no compromise and demonstrated its reality by vanquishing the appearance of diseases and disorder. 31

In this psychological framing of Christian mission, the body itself became the proving ground of Providence. One’s body is transformed into the locale in which the individual encountered God’s grace, or conversely, if they did not succeed in their practice, God’s wrath. This framework created a spiritual feedback loop for the early Christian Science subject that judged the presence of the Truth of God by their moment-to-moment experience of wellness. Instead of labeling the physical experiences of vulnerability or pain prompted by disease as related to God’s grace, Eddy’s cosmology forcefully denied and repressed these experiences. In this sense, Eddy’s teachings were radical insofar they rejected the medical model of disability common in her day. This rejection of the medical model did not allow for a social model of disability or an individual-environment model to be adopted by her followers; rather, early Christian Science under Eddy promulgated a strictly theological model of disability, completely spiritualizing the phenomenon and rendered it silent and unworthy of mention.

While many in mainstream medical circles balked at Eddy’s extreme anti-materialism, academia lent some credence to her basic assumptions about the connection between positive thought and healing. The notion that positivity could bring about immense change in individuals was an accepted tenet of the newly emerging field of psychology. The broader New Thought teaching of repeating positive affirmations to aid recovery from injury caught the interest of some of the leading lights in psychology. For example, Harvard University professor William James approved of much of the theory behind what he called the “mind cure” religion despite disputing some its most excessive claims to total healing. 32 As an influential figure in psychology, James’ disposition towards mind cure can be described as one of “sympathetic critique.” 33 In New Thought theology, if not always in its practical application, James saw the potential to improve human wellness.

James found in the mind cure movement a model of the unconscious that was very liable to suggestion and ideas. Notably, this theory of mind diverged from the emerging Freudian model of the unconscious as a site of conflicting and repressed primal urges. James viewed mind cure as the best of what religion, science, and philosophy had to offer humanity. Mind cure theology combined the optimism of Gospel healing stories with the Emersonian transcendentalism and Berkeleyian idealism on which his psychological practice was built. James' father was also a Swedenborgian mystic, meaning that esoteric Christian expression was a more formidable part of his upbringing than others in the field. As a towering figure in American psychology, James was able to give mind cure theology an intellectual sheen. He dubbed the budding movement the “the religion of healthy-mindedness” in his influential *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Peale himself would call James in *Positive Thinking* “one of the wisest men America has produced.”

**Gender and Disability in New Thought**

Although Eddy did not analyze the gendered elements of mind cure, one cannot tell the story of New Thought without mentioning its attractiveness to a particular class of American society that had often been coded as disabled: women. In *Each Mind a Kingdom*, Beryl Satter argues that mind cure ministries offered a level of agency to white, middle-class women that was typically inaccessible at the time. Many forerunners of New Thought such as Emma Curtis Hopkins and Unity Church co-founder Myrtle Filmore found themselves “cured” of invalidism or neurasthenia through mind cure. These diagnoses were overwhelmingly given to women at the request of their husbands by male physicians. Ultimately, these imagined illnesses justified the disqualification of women from public life—the traditional treatment for these afflictions was constant bedrest. Satter ascribes a kind of proto-feminism to the healing work of these women, noting how many New Thought innovators played important roles in suffragette and temperance movements.

Unpacking this thorny area of religious history presents challenges of interpretation and emphasis. On one hand, it is true that the ministerial spaces created by New Thought were genuine safe havens for middle-class white women normally confined to the home. These women turned mind cure ministry into an opportunity to affect a kind of agency over their bodies and society not normally given to them in late Victorian culture. As Anne Harrington writes in her study of mind-body medicine,

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34 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1917), 92. Is this really a 1917 copy? It’s a different date than is cited in the references. Carol George notes that while Peale could muster up very little enthusiasm for the dry theological texts he was assigned at seminary, he devoured volumes of James (and James’ intellectual role model, Ralph Waldo Emerson) in his free time.


American faith healing communities increased the visibility of women through their leadership roles at the various colleges, churches, and lecture circuits established by these movements. These spaces gave women a pathway to the public spheres of politics and academia. On the other hand, the theological work done in these circles pushed forward a kind of mind-body dualism inherited from Enlightenment medical orthodoxy that strictly enforced codes of normality, ultimately to the detriment of larger fights for women’s liberation. Although it may have been a liberating movement for some, the freedom it espoused was still situated within the cultural assumptions of white, Protestant American culture. Furthermore, it would have been unthinkable for women of less economic and racial privilege than Eddy or Hopkins to win the same level of acclaim and prestige through mind ministry. These limitations in part stemmed from the fact that the underlying theology of the movement shunned vulnerability of any kind and left little space for the kind of “cripping,” or reclaiming of one’s disability, shaped by disability studies scholars. New Thought women could only be accepted if they offered proof that they had overcome their disability.

Similarly, Peale’s work repeats this pattern of limited liberation. In The Power of Positive Thinking, most of Peale’s anecdotes of healing and cure come from the professional world. The book abounds with stories of businessmen who used positive thinking to overcome their “inferiority complexes.” These men were Peale’s intended audience. Behind the scenes, Peale expressed discomfort, sometimes escalating to anger and disapproval, that the readership of Guideposts skewed towards married, middle-class women. He wished that his message would inspire change in those who had already accrued cultural capital by virtue of their identity. Unlike some early New Thought leaders, Peale did not prioritize inciting widespread social change; rather, Peale saw his ministry as unlocking the potential of individuals in spite of growing social concerns like racial justice or class consciousness.

**The Programmable Unconscious:**

*Positive Thinking* and a New Theology of Mind

One observable consequence of Peale’s cultural inheritance comes from the minister’s ability to repackage New Thought for a more modern, scientifically literate age. Unlike some previous New Thought authors and denominations, Peale scorned the more mystical and esoteric elements of mind cure teachings and instead preached a dressed-down and pragmatic approach to spiritual healing. Through his work, religion became subordinated to psychology and the medical imperative to “cure”

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39 George, *God’s Salesman*, 118.
abnormalities. This development aligned with advancements in the fields of psychology and the professionalization of medicine more broadly that led the American public to afford doctors greater trust and respect by the mid-century. No longer hawking an alternative therapy for believers on the margins, Peale was mind cure’s greatest populizer, and he used that status to influence the course of popular psychology and self-help publishing. Writing in the 1950s, Peale did not find himself in an antagonistic relationship with the medical establishment in the way that many of the women of Christian Science and New Thought did. While Mary Baker Eddy and Emma Curtis Hopkins preached about being ignored by physicians because of their gender, Peale was quite comfortable seeking language and ideas from the medical profession, taking what worked for his theology and leaving behind the elements that made early New Thought counter-cultural.

One observes this tendency in the way that Peale and his colleague Smiley Blanton appropriated certain elements of Freud’s teachings for their own. Blanton was very attracted to Freud’s theory of transference between patient and doctor, and he speculated that it may have mirrored the transference of faith between a believer and God that is necessary in some forms of Christianity for salvation. He ventured that this transference could explain the miraculous healings of the ill reported at Lourdes. In his later account of his time with Freud, Blanton admitted that he never convinced the doctor to fully sign off on his own theories of transference. However, the mere fact Blanton was tied to a forefather of an increasingly respected field of medicine gave Peale’s work and ministry at the Marble Collegiate Church Clinic increased cultural purchase. It also demonstrated Peale’s comfort as a minister with the truth claims and prerogatives of modern medicine.

In *Positive Thinking*, Peale did not resist the advice of trained medical professionals or problematize their methods of healing. In fact, Peale quoted esteemed doctors and physicians often, and they all seem to agree with Peale’s theory of faith-transference as a prerequisite for healing. *Positive Thinking* focuses its truth claims on a theology of the unconscious that linked physical wellbeing with the experience of dependence on God’s power that occurs in one’s personal relationship with God. In this spiritual schema, prayer became like an operation done on the brain. By thinking positive thoughts and rejecting negative ones, the individual cultivated God’s healing power in their life by connecting to a Divine supply of energy. Typical of Peale’s advice was his injunction to avoid pessimism at all costs: “Never mention the worst. Never think of it. Drop it out of your consciousness.” In Peale’s understanding of the mind, thoughts and prayers were contagious. He framed prayer in terms of “vibrations” that were sent out to others and, ultimately, God. This teaching had precedence in Christian Science, which described thoughts as similar to germs. Mary Baker Eddy

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40 Lane, *Surge of Piety*, 45.
41 Peale, *Positive Thinking*, 130.
often worried about “malicious animal magnetism” (MAM)—the influence of others’ negative thoughts on her own consciousness—causing her to blame her own physical ailments on MAM and seclude herself from colleagues.44 While Peale resisted making the explicit connection between sin, negative thoughts, and illness that Eddy did, he affirmed the underlying assumptions that linked positivity with good health and health with God’s favor.

Peale and the Consumption of Religion

Peale’s practices of mental manipulation as a form of spirituality spoke to a changing consciousness in the United States around conceptions of religion and, more importantly, changing ideas of the function of religion for those who practice it. Instead of a formalized belief system or a theory the world and human responsibility in it, Peale’s Christianity functioned as a product in the wellness marketplace. Above all, in Peale’s works, Christianity became a form of therapy. Academic and clerical critics alike since the publication of Positive Thinking argued that Peale’s theology diminished and degraded Christianity through secularization.45 I propose, instead, that this relationship had the opposite effect: Peale’s work re-enchanted the supposedly secular, impartial world of science, giving Christians greater purchase within this realm and allowing them the privilege of considering certain states of normality as divinely ordained. On a practical level, The Power of Positive Thinking allowed Christians to engage with the daunting and technical field of medicine in a way that motioned to standard theological convictions about the supremacy of God in earthly matters. Christopher Lane’s work on the impacts of Peale’s ministry on psychological medicine argues that Peale did not merely meet the public’s interest in spiritually inclined self-help, but that he and his associates helped fuel its rise.46 The ascension of religious psychology was inextricable from the larger field of self-help literature. As the United States suburbanized, the niche independent bookstores of urban centers suffered. In their place rose mass market book retailers less likely to keep unpopular items on their shelves.47 This shift in the economy of literature led to the rise of recognizable brand authors like Peale, whose self-help literature taught Americans a new way to conceptualize their relation to themselves.

Rather than thinking of psychology and religion as separate categories, Peale’s lasting influence includes present-day assumptions about the interrelatedness of these fields. The preponderance of holistic medicine and mind-body healing practices used not only in Pagan contexts but in Christian ones as well are due in some part to Peale’s theology of mind. Peale’s American Foundation for Religion and Psychiatry

44 Satter, Each Mind a Kingdom, 64.
46 Lane, Surge of Piety.
47 Woodstock, “Vying Constructions of Reality,’’ 164.
exemplifies this association: its mission was to teach “that religious belief was so
integral to mental health that total psychiatric recovery was unlikely in a person who
had not undergone full religious conversion.”48 Thus, in the secular world of medicine,
Christian identity and practice became relevant through Peale’s popular psychology,
de spite its limits.

Rejecting Metaphor: Towards a New Theology of Mind

To move toward a more liberating theological model that respects the experiences
of those of all abilities, the ongoing influence of positive religious psychology must be
countered. The self-help genre as developed by Peale has played an important role in
framing what constitutes a normal, healthy mind, especially among Christians. This
theology of mind—established in New Thought and perfected for the mainstream by
Peale—lumps together disability with illness, treating both as disordered and separate
from God’s goodness. The original sin of mind cure’s theological assumptions must
be confronted. From Mary Baker Eddy on, disability itself is denied a voice in mind
cure theology. This spiritualization of disability is in fact a silencing of disability. To
construct a more accurate theology of mind, disability cannot function as metaphor.
The disabled body is only allowed to speak once it has been appropriately abled
through the intervention of God. While Beryl Satter is correct that many women
considered “disabled” by late Victorian society were given a public platform in mind
cure ministry, this influence was only permitted once the individual’s disability itself
was considered “cured.” In his literature, Peale failed to confront disability in theology.
The fact that Peale uncritically accepted most of the previous generation’s theories
connecting negative thoughts to physical experiences of vulnerability colored the few
passing references to disability that he makes. The only instance of the word
“disability” in Positive Thinking occurred when Peale lumped it together with other
maladies that positive religious psychology was more accustomed “fixing.” Peale wrote
that “disability, tension, and kindred troubles may result from a lack of inner
harmony.”49 Classifying disability along with the vague affliction of “tension” ascribed
disability to the category of disorder that mind cure theology put itself in total
opposition to. Within this model, using a wheelchair or having a learning disability fell
into this broad category of being that betrayed a “lack of inner harmony,” distancing
those with disabilities from God’s presence.

The idea that the disabled body is the victim of a disordered interior has deep
cultural roots. In Illness as Metaphor, Susan Sontag recounts how labels of disease and
disability often serve as an otherizing force.50 These rhetorical tricks obscure the actual
lives of those with disabilities. By linking God, faith, and normative definitions of

48  Lane, Surge of Piety, 15.
49  Peale, Positive Thinking, 56.
wellbeing, Peale’s theology of mind turned disability into a metaphor for chaos—an “other” requiring intervention from the Divine. Thus, to fashion a more inclusive religious psychology, we must reject the use of metaphors out of disability and disease. In M. Remi Yergeau’s work on autism and rhetoric, disability is characterized as a tool of the medical establishment to eliminate the rhetorical power of the neurodivergent to advocate for themselves and assign symbolic meaning to their actions.\(^{51}\) Yergeau writes that “we, the autistic, are a peopleless people. We embody not a counter rhetoric but an anti-rhetoric, a kind of being and moving that exists tragically at the folds of involuntary automation.”\(^{52}\) In some behaviorist models of autism, people with autism are denied to even possess a theory of mind, much less a theology of mind, meaning that they are not thought to be capable of giving voice to the experience of consciousness in themselves and others. These models not only deny basic humanity but severs people with autism from spiritual life and religious communities. To undo some of these preconceived notions in theology, we must turn to models of the self that are expansive, spontaneous, and accessible to all.

The major antagonizing force that a more constructive neurodivergent theology of mind faces is the central role that faith in God is given in the field of positive religious psychology. Assessing Peale’s staying power in contemporary religious psychology, Peale’s biographer Carol George credits Peale’s ability to appease dominant ideologies through his message of faith. She writes, “Eclectic, synthetic, obviously non creedal and unsystematic, [Peale’s] particular theological blend combined aspects of evangelical Protestantism, metaphysical spirituality and the American Dream; it proved to be perfectly adapted to the cultural currents of the decade.”\(^{53}\) Peale’s New Thought theology thrived because it told a compelling story with symbols and motifs those of different denominational backgrounds could recognize and appropriate in their own lives while also seeming to be in agreement with the teachings of contemporary medicine. In short, Peale’s work spoke to their experience of the world. But, for those with disabilities, the idea that positive thinking provides the ultimate cure can be a narrow way to understand existence. As Eli Clare shows, the idea of “cure” itself deserves critique from those whose lives have been interrupted by cure-peddlers.\(^{54}\) Secular critics of Christian Science and New Thought, such as the medical historian Anne Harrington, agree that the prevalence of mind cure today has more to do with its power to speak to the American imagination than its theological model of disability.\(^{55}\) Like most structures in the United States, the mind cure narrative of healing was not built with the needs of the disabled in mind.


\(^{52}\) Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 11.

\(^{53}\) George, *God’s Salesman*, 131.

\(^{54}\) Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*.

\(^{55}\) Harrington, *The Cure Within*. 
Ultimately, pastoral care practitioners can center the spiritual needs of the neurodivergent by incorporating therapeutic modalities that acknowledge the ways in which society and being-in-relationship shape popular theologies of mind. Carrie Doehring’s *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* embraces a cross-disciplinary approach to pastoral care that can help caregivers name “embedded theologies” for parishioners.\(^{56}\) Doehring understands that these theologies are not formed in a vacuum; they are bound by social location and cultural context. Rather than viewing the self as a contained, independent entity, Doehring’s theology of the self embraces the way in which one’s experience of the world impacts their approaches to spiritual practice. From this understanding, pastoral caregivers can examine how disability fundamentally challenges the models of selfhood prescribed by thinkers like Peale. This postmodern approach to pastoral care uplifts individual experience as both unique and bounded by environmental factors, meaning that it can better speak to experiences of disability.

Since the publication of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, theologians have criticized the way that the book makes an idol out of belief itself. Anne Harrington describes this critique:

> The power that the [positive thinking] narrative ultimately asks us to acknowledge is not the power of God but rather the power of faith itself. In this sense, 'the power of positive thinking' is a resolutely individualistic miracle narrative. Miracles are possible, it tells us; but it is up to us—up to our capacity to believe—whether or not they happen.\(^{57}\)

Similarly, it is up to theologians to articulate how God thwarts the assumptions on which these miracles rest. This challenge does not require denying God’s ability to enact miracles; rather, it encourages us to call attention to which kinds of miracles Peale’s God performs. Our ability to rebuff Peale’s theology of the mind and its theological understanding of disability comes from an ongoing and thorough critique of individualism in healing narratives writ large. In Eli Clare’s work on narratives of healing, theologians can find a powerful yet nuanced interrogation of cure:

> Cure is such a compelling response to body-mind loss precisely because it promises us our imagined time travel. But this promise can also devalue our present-day selves. It can lead us to dismiss the lessons we’ve learned, knowledge gained, scars acquired. It can bind us to the past and glorify the future. It can fuel hope grounded in nothing but the shadows of natural and normal.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{56}\) Doehring, *Pastoral Care*, 112.

\(^{57}\) Harrington, *The Cure Within*, 105.

\(^{58}\) Clare, *Brilliant Impressions*, 57.
Thus, theologians do not need to oppose the idea of cure completely, but they should be wary of cure’s ability to disconnect us from the experience of our bodies. Theologians must question whether individuals are healed through the denial of all feelings of vulnerability as Peale’s self-help Jesus suggests, or if God’s healing works in ways outside the imagination of modern health science. If we believe that we are made in the image of God, we should locate that divinity within “our present-day selves,” not the idealized picture of the self that New Thought counsels us to have. The self-help industry has an incentive to make individuals feel insecure about their shortcomings; Christians should not.

Going forward, further interrogation of Peale’s idealizations of health is necessary. Much remains left to examine of what theology can say about human experience in the “shadows of natural and normal” on which thinkers like Clare shed light.59 Offering thorough critique of how dominant modes of religious psychology cast these shadows wider than they need to be, theologians can reassess the role of positive thinking and Peale’s religious psychology in popular culture and self-help literature. Certainly, positive thinking should remain a tool to stimulate newfound appreciation for the blessings in our lives. However, this practice should not cause us to lose our capacity to mourn. In lamentation, we take stock of the afflictions and pain put upon us through our existential experience of vulnerability. When we deny the effects of this vulnerability, we deny ourselves. By demystifying the mind and insisting on the subjectivity of those with disabilities to author their own narratives of healing, theologians can redress some of Peale’s harmful legacy on our embedded theologies of consciousness.

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59 Clare, Brilliant Impressions, 57.
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THE “SECULAR” IN ANGLOPHONE SCHOLARSHIP ON PREMODERN ISLAM: A CRITICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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The “secular” as analytic concept is often contentious, and current wisdom in the anglophone study of Islam is particularly averse to its use when investigating premodern Muslim societies. Recently however, several articles have appeared, arguing for the fecundity of the “secular” to the study of premodern Islam. This critical historiography reviews the ways that the secular has been defined, conceived, employed, or discarded with respect to the field, from the mid-twentieth century to the current moment. I argue that rather than the secular being a defunct or anachronistic category, investigating scholars’ use of the term reveals how it is embedded within their intellectual and political commitments, is dependent on their source material, and helps revisit questions that are central to the field: what is religion? What is the secular? Is religion synonymous with revelation? What place is there for the mundane in the study of religion?

Over the past three years, several scholars published articles arguing for the relevance of the “secular” as a conceptual and analytic category for the study of premodern Islam. None of these articles has been paid particular attention. It is, however, curious that although they are separate projects, they have appeared in such a definite time frame and in conversation with interconnected debates. Whether or not they represent an actual new wave in Islamic Studies of thinking about the secular, these articles are challenging what had seemed in recent years to have become a settled debate: that any notion of the secular employed in the study of premodern Islam was anachronistic, insensitive to contextual specificity, and thus dubious, if not altogether poor scholarship.

I use the occasion of (what I tentatively call) this new wave to revisit the question of the secular, situating this recent scholarship within a larger historiography on premodern Islam. I ask how the secular has been conceived in studies of premodern Islamic societies, texts, and institutions. Aware of the lack of any real “schools of Islamic studies” to speak of, I instead examine how each of the scholars under
consideration still wrote within larger, discernible intellectual trends—such as Orientalism, post-colonialism and critical theory, or the emic-etic distinction—and in interaction with predecessors and interlocutors. I argue that there is nothing inherently inadequate, essentially “Western,” or ontologically invalid about the secular in premodern Islam. The caveat is that the secular in premodernity was never a simple translation or imposition of modern understandings of secularity. I therefore aim to show how any conception of the secular in premodern Islam, or lack thereof, is deeply embroiled in the scholar’s intellectual and political commitments, and, perhaps as significantly, in their selection of sources.

This historiography is divided into three parts. In part one, I briefly lay down the stakes for why the secular matters. In part two, I briefly discuss the scholars’ arguments and specific conceptions of the secular. This overview is necessary to accurately reflect how the category has developed and been contested over time and to highlight how subsequent scholars were strongly conscious of, and critically responding to, previous conceptions. This section lays the groundwork for part three, where I thematically consider how this new wave relates to previous conceptions, and draw out where they employ conventional conceptions, where they slightly adjust them, and where they markedly depart from them. I therefore use this breakdown to both nuance my engagement with how the secular is being conceived, as well as to ask whether any of these new formulations offer fresh answers to some of the more enduring questions that any scholar of Islam is expected to address in their scholarship, namely: what is religion? How much of it is defined by revelation? What defines the “secular,” how does it function, and how is it related to its “other”? I close with concluding remarks where I reiterate the stakes as I see them: as important as it is to be critical of the political context and intellectual genealogy of modern secularities, to make the concept the monopoly of a Western/modern trajectory forecloses research possibilities and potentials.

Why Bother with the Secular?

I was first drawn to conceptions of the secular when I tried to make sense of a statement made by several Muslim acquaintances: Muslims today suffer from a cognitive dissonance. They know how to be Muslims who happen to be doctors (or insert another vocation), but not Muslim doctors. I myself try to make sense of the personal anxiety of being Muslim in worship, but feeling religiously neutral, that I behave as if God is not there, when engaging non-ritual or non-religiously inspired activities, vocational or other. This problematization of the self, intricately connected to the question of defining what it means to be a good Muslim, is one area that can demonstrate in practice how conceptions of the secular can be used, and what potentials they open or close.

If we employ the arguments of scholars who believe that the secular is anachronistic to Islam, then perhaps the answer is straightforward. Since the secular is
a modern European construct that creates a differentiation between sacred and secular along public and private divides, then what these modern Muslims are experiencing is secularism's mediation of their Islamic identity. The secular, as a modality of power, is instead enforcing its own sensibilities and visions of subjectivity, particularly in the public sphere, which competes with Islam, with its own distinct modality of subject formation. We may add, as Christopher Craig Brittain does, that as modern subjects, these Muslims should reckon with the fact that political representation in the public sphere will always be incomplete and will diverge from their ideals.1 This is because they are partaking in a space that brings together people of different religious identities. Accordingly, this "distance"2 that they feel, expressed in terms of cognitive dissonance or the absence of God, refers to those modern "moments in which [all] individuals and communities wrestle with the ‘distances’ encountered in social experience."3

Yet, if it becomes apparent that a kind of differentiation did indeed exist in premodern Islam, and therefore must have been part of Muslims' subjectivity and experiences of being Islamic, this aspect opens avenues for comparative analysis. We may ask, for instance, whether and why this differentiation was not problematic for premodern Muslims as it is now? Alternatively, we may wonder if the work of premoderns like Al-Ghazali points to an analogous construction of piety where the more Muslims cultivated ethics and conducted themselves in a specific way the more they enhanced their capacity to be in the presence of God and mindful of God? Are the notions of modern distance and premodern presence in and of God analogous problematizations of the Muslim self? Do they differ in degree or in kind, and why?

These seem to be questions of religious experience of and in space. And what is capitalist modernity but a reconfiguration of a subject’s experience of space, time, and labor? If we concede from the start that there was no religious/secular differentiation in premodern Islam, then we attribute all explanatory power to modernity without understanding how modernity functions to create, ab nilo, these novel questions of religious selfhood. If, however, we dare to propose that modernity did not itself create these problematizations of the self but simply mediates them in the current epoch, we may be able to understand both modernity and Muslim subjectivity better.

**Orientalist Beginnings and Twentieth Century Trajectories**

The academic study of Islam and comparative religion is historically implicated in Orientalist epistemology, and for much of that early work, the colonial encounter was concerned with apprehending the other in ways that can be both categorised in some
universal sense and contrasted to the modern Christian standard.\textsuperscript{4} Within this framework, there could be no place for secularity, since that was among the hallmarks of Enlightenment Man’s emancipation from the tutelage of religion and tradition. Islam as the other was understood within a "narrative of unity of all spheres," assuming the "supposed absence of secularity in Muslim doctrine, consciousness, politics, or lived practice."\textsuperscript{5} Bernard Lewis, for instance, notes that the pairs religious and secular "have no equivalents in the classical languages of the Muslim people," and one wonders what he makes of \textit{dīn} and \textit{dunya}, an incredibly commonplace pairing in revelatory texts as well as subsequent scholarly textual production.\textsuperscript{6} Lewis also argues that the reason why no secularist movement has ever autonomously emerged in Muslim societies, as well as why they were not particularly keen on any external attempts to impose one, was because, unlike Christians, Muslims were never taught to distinguish between God and Caesar. Hence, Muslims never learned to differentiate between the duties required towards each—a differentiation, which would have resulted in the institutional differentiation that Christianity underwent.\textsuperscript{7}

Perhaps one of the early voices to trouble the unequivocal denial of the secular in Islam is Marshall Hodgson. In \textit{The Venture of Islam}, he introduces a new term to analyze processes and phenomena in Islam as a civilization.\textsuperscript{8} Against the commonplace "Islamic," which should be used, he argues, to refer to those things pertaining to Islam in the "proper, the religious, sense," the word "Islamicate" is to define those things, secular in nature, and therefore to refer not directly to "religion, Islam, itself, but instead to the socio-cultural complex historically associated with Islam and Muslims."\textsuperscript{9} As a telling example, Hodgson explains that when he uses the term \textit{Islamic literature}, he is referring to religious literature rather than "secular wine song."\textsuperscript{10} The assumption here of course, is that since wine is prohibited in \textit{Shari'a}, no such act can be undertaken religiously, and must be secular in the sense of being antagonistic, or at least indifferent to, religious scripture.

\textsuperscript{4} Mustapha Kamal Pasha writes that “buttressed by Orientalist frames of apprehending 'religious' others, secularity rapidly evolves into a 'standard of civilisation', both for separating 'insiders' from 'outsiders' in international society, as well as for producing the hierarchisation of political community.” See “Islam and the Postsecular,” \textit{Review of International Studies} 38, no. 5 (December 2012): 1046.

\textsuperscript{5} According to Pasha, "From Weber to Gellner to Lewis . . . Islamic Exceptionalism ensured the supposed absence of secularity in Muslim doctrine, consciousness, politics, or lived practice." See “Islam and the Postsecular,” \textit{Review of International Studies} 38, no. 5 (December 2012): 1046.


\textsuperscript{9} Hodgson, \textit{Venture of Islam}, 58–9.

\textsuperscript{10} Hodgson, \textit{Venture of Islam}, 59.
Clear in this nomenclature is Hodgson's distinction between religion and culture, as well as his understanding of Islam as doubly the equivalent, firstly, of Christianity in the religious sense, and secondly, of Byzantium or Rome, in the civilizational sense. This distinction should be expected of a thinker whose overarching framework is that of understanding civilizations and their afterlives, partly for the purpose of comparative work. The term Islamicate is a rather obvious translation of concepts from modern Christianity since it denotes for him the realm of things non-religious and therefore secular. Still, it retains a relationality between the secular and the religious: while secular wine songs are not religious, they are still connected to Islam. This connection could be due to the songs being practiced within the greater civilizational configuration of Islam or because they draw aesthetically and linguistically from his strictly demarcated religious sphere.

Hodgson's ambiguity about the place of the secular in premodern Islam, while troubling early Orientalist tropes, still retains an element of Islamic exceptionalism: the religion of Islam offered a total social pattern, exerting demands on the believer that could pertain to any aspect of their life. Yet this demand was configured into patterns that were distinguishable from other non-religious patterns of practice. While those former never prevailed over the latter, they demarcated the limits beyond which the more independent patterns, in trade or in poetry for example, could not go. Within these limits however, these latter could be performed autonomously, such that, in any given sphere, what was religious was distinguishable from what was part of the greater culture and civilization of Islam. With yet another telling example, Hodgson states that "in even the most pious man's life, there was much that he could not call religious"—not ritual, but cultural, perhaps such as secular wine songs.11

Another scholar for whom the religion/culture distinction carries over to the study of Islam is Louis Gardet. He writes that Islamic history is a unique example of a culture with an explicit religious foundation, which sometimes existed alongside the secular aspects of said culture, but often absorbed them so that the two became very closely interlinked.12 Unlike Hodgson's emphasis on civilization, Gardet locates culture as the primary site of delineation. Although secular trends had a sure place in Islamic culture, it was predominantly religious. Despite this conceptual difference, Gardet shares Hodgson's ambiguity about the relationship of the secular to the religious: neither science nor secular literature nor art, he says, "were separated from religion in the way that certain branches of modern humanism have been in Europe. They were affected by Muslim values."13 The way to understand this differentiation is spatial: the secular belonged to Islam as a community, but not the religious sphere.

11 Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 89.
Writing about two decades later, Ira Lapidus offers a more confident differentiation, arguing against the familiar trope, "the Muslim ideal," that "the institutions of state and religion [were] unified, and that Islam is a total way of life." Throughout his work on history of Islamic societies, Lapidus argues that, while there was no singular political model, Muslim societies were organized and governed through a differentiation of religion and politics. This differentiation was itself the function of Islamic expansion, and the resultant differentiation of the "Arabian Islamic complex." While early Islam introduced an "undifferentiated concept of the relations of secular and religious authority" unprecedented to the Middle East, later the caliphate developed into a monarchical identity along with professionalization and bureaucratization. With the weakening of the caliphate under the Abbasids and the proliferation of various sultanates who ruled independently whilst owing allegiance to the Caliph, the caliphate retained the symbolic function of unifying state and religious community. Meanwhile, the sultanates, which Lapidus describes as "secular states," were distinct from the religious community, who were the true bearers of Muslim religious life.

Once again, we see a distinction carrying over from the separation of Church and state: the religious community represented Islam because they were concerned with "individual learning, pious practices, prayer and ritual, social welfare, and the mediation of local disputes" in juxtaposition to the state's concern with taxation, public order, and military conquests. An additional, perhaps Arab, bias can also be discerned, where Lapidus argues that the religious elites drew from the original "communal, personal, religious, and doctrinal aspects of Islam," whereas the political institutions became heavily legitimated in neo-Byzantine and neo-Sassanian terms. Nowhere in this narrative is the clear distinction between the "religious" and "stately" functions troubled, even when one considers how social welfare, learning and discernment, and pious practices were often employed in discourses on kingship and good Islamic governance. The only exception is when Lapidus concedes that this distinction was not total on several grounds. Firstly, Muslims themselves refused to profess the distinction, and secondly, since much of the realm of the mundane, like economic and social transactions that for the Christian West would be considered secular, was regulated by religious law, there could not be a clear-cut distinction between the jurisdiction of the state vis-à-vis the religious community. Lapidus does not further explore the implication of the idea that the mundane was religious in identity and why this would trouble his proposed differentiation.


I now turn to a figure who, while not a scholar of premodern Islam, has shaped recent academic conceptions of the secular, arguably with regards to premodern Islam as well. Talal Asad, an anthropologist by training, has written on religion, secularism, statehood, and has called for an anthropology of modern secularity. While both his *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular* address the question of how the universal category of religion was constructed and extrapolated from modern Christianity and the European encounter, I focus my discussion on the latter, where he analyses “the secular” head on.\(^1\) In *Formations*, Asad presents several groundbreaking arguments. First is drawing out the secular from secularism, the political doctrine, so that the secular is conceptually prior to secularism. The secular, forever an elusive concept, cannot be defined and must be understood through its traces, but it can be used to denote a constellation of "concepts, practices, and sensibilities" that came to be defined as "the secular."\(^2\) Asad opposes the idea that secularism removes societal mediation, allows the space for all citizens to participate in the public space, and affords tolerance. Secularism, instead, is the state’s distinctive political medium that, while still mediating differences across groups and individuals, claims to tolerate and transcend them all. Secularism is thus an enactment of the project of modernity and is conceptually drawn from the secular, but also is the site where the secular, as a modern modality of power, is articulated.\(^3\)

Asad notes that this phenomenon is relatively recent, because in premodern societies, while other processes of mediating between social and other differences were adopted, states sought to mediate local identities without ever aiming toward this transcendence. More importantly however, the secular is modern, because Asad locates it within the nexus of colonial encounter, biblical hermeneutics, and the construction of a universal category of “religion” through which Christianity, and by extension other socialities and belief systems were understood. Using exclusively European sources such as anthropological studies and intellectual writings on modernity, Asad offers a European, modern genealogy of the secular, in which the concept is intimately tied with the project of modernity. It was the colonial encounter with the non-European world that brought about a shift in how European intellectuals and hermeneutists redefined the “sacred” against myth and “the profane,” which, implicated in the civilising mission and biblical philology, resulted in the novel construction of religion and nature as universal categories.\(^4\) Furthermore, a conceptual split occurred between what came to be “religious” (inward beliefs, mood,

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and motivation against premodern subject formation through embodied rituals and practices) on one hand, and “secular” on the other.\footnote{Brittain “Tragic Category,” 151.} The reigning scholarly notion that the secular is anachronistic to the premodern can be traced to the genealogy that Asad offers, and has grown in salience since. Fitzgerald for instance takes up the notion that the construction of the categories of sacred and secular grew out of European colonial discourses and would be suspicious if used to understand non-European socialities.\footnote{Timothy Fitzgerald, \textit{Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations} (London: Equinox, 2007).}

Despite his quibbles with Asad on the question of orthodoxy, Shahab Ahmed reinforces this critique of the secular. In \textit{What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic}, Ahmed is only tangentially concerned with the question of the secular as it is simply one of the many categories that he critiques for its inadequacy to capture Muslims’ experiences.\footnote{Shahab Ahmed, \textit{What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).} Instead, Ahmed offers a conception of Islam that is inclusive of and recognises coherence in the multitude of contradictions in thoughts and practices held by premodern Muslims. A work of emic concern, he critiques the religion/secular divide for inaptly conveying what Muslims themselves were thinking when engaging in certain practices. The secular/religious divide reinforces the Islamic legal tradition’s supremacy (against Islamic philosophy, art, or Sufism) by making anything drawn from revealed law, restrictively defined, the realm of the religious, while all else is thought to be secular. Moreover, if contemporary scholars define many premodern Muslim acts of self-expression and communication \textit{qua} Muslims, as secular, then the category is useless for understanding what it meant to be Muslim.\footnote{Ahmed, \textit{What Is Islam?} 201.} Ahmed contests the assumption underlying the use of the secular by some modern scholars that when Muslims practices a set of sensibilities attributed by modern thought to be secular, they are essentially "leaving the domain of Islam [and] entering a universal “secular” terrain," a notion Premodern Muslims would have found alien.\footnote{Ahmed, \textit{What Is Islam?} 200.}

The Secular New Wave

Against such weighty condemnation, it is curious to think along the scholars I identify in this new wave, who use the concept of the secular far more directly and confidently while being cognizant of the established wisdom they unsettle. In this section I offer a review of the authors’ main arguments as to why the secular is so integral. These six articles can be divided into two groups. The first three articles are all part of the same project, \textit{Multiple Secularities}, and were published together in a special
issue of Historical Social Research Journal by Dressler et al., Salvatore, and Yavari.28 In a nod to Hodgson, they draw on the notion of Islamicate Secularity. The second three articles, written by Jackson, Fadel, and Abbasi, are mostly concerned with the Islamic legal tradition and are in conversation with scholars of secular(ism) and all see their contribution, not as creating a space for the secular in premodern Islam, but as simply excavating what is already there.29

In the introduction to their special issue, Dressler et al. lay down the theoretical and analytic frameworks around which the various articles contributed coalesce. They draw distinctions between secularism, secularisation, and secularity, where the latter is used to indicate a number of "fundamental cultural and symbolic distinctions, as well as institutionally anchored forms and arrangements of differentiation between religion and other social spheres and practices."30 Cognisant of secular(ity)'s Western modern baggage, they argue that analogous, though not identical, distinctions and differentiations between the religious and non-religious existed in non-Western premodern settings even if the term secularity was never employed.31 Furthering their claim that there is no singular secularity pertaining to the Muslim world, each article in this first group argues as to what and how different kinds "of social and institutional differentiation emerged within Islamicate contexts in relation to Islam, and how were those differentiations related to conceptual distinctions."32 They mark their debt to Hodgson throughout by employing, rather uncritically, the religion/non-religion distinction. They maintain a similar ambiguity as Hodgson, arguing that religion and the secular, though differentiated, were mutually constitutive, and they introduce the notion of a "relational double face, where differentiation does not exclude convergence."33

In his own article, Armando Salvatore (one of the contributors to the volume’s introduction), takes the ethical concern of regulating human conduct as a site where a soft distinction developed throughout Islamicate history.34 Salvatore is referring

specifically to Adab, a genre of Arabic, pre-Islamic literary productions that continued to develop after the rise of Islam and that has Persian homologues as well. What makes Adab distinguishable from another primary realm of regulating human conduct in premodern Islam, namely the prophetic Sunnah (Hadith), is that while the latter was the product of revelation, the former undeniably had no specific prophetic origin. Instead, it offered "the quintessence of practical wisdom accumulated over the generations: the opposite, in principle, of a type of knowledge and practice originating in revelation." This distinction is designated as "soft," because secular Adab operated as a harmonious counterpoint to Hadith rather than an antagonistic or even indifferent alternative.

This dynamic occurred because Islamic revelation was similarly concerned with the cultivation of good conduct. This mutual objective notwithstanding, Salvatore argues that Hadith and Adab were maintained through a "fundamental, mutual demarcation" even in the scholarly production of premodern Muslims who were trained in and wrote on both.

Similarly, Yavari takes another site in premodern Islam, politics, and governance to argue that when Muslim texts are read comparatively against their Christian counterparts, the same debates surrounding the "quasi-secularity . . . [of] the perennial tug of war between religious and lay authority" can be delineated. Since secularity, including "secular politics when disambiguated into concern for the common good" was discursively engaged in both premodern settings, she contends that the secular must be understood not as one native principle or ideology, but through multiple contexts. She argues that her comparative framework reveals the "inescapable truth" that the language of secular politics acted, though distinctly in diverse contexts, on the political sphere. What makes that language "secular" is not clearly defined, except to describe it as a process of separating religion from politics and religion from philosophy.

Moving to the tradition of Islamic law in the second group of articles, Sherman Jackson writes against contemporary scholars, as well as modern Muslims who maintain the nonexistence of a sacred/secular boundary in favor of a holistic view of religion/Islam in premodernity. Seeking a way to relate the secular to Islam other than the irrelevant sacred/profane dichotomy, Jackson proposes a realm that he calls the Islamic secular. This framework shifts the relationality from religion/secular to

36 Salvatore, “Adab,” 35.
40 Yavari, “The Political Regard.”
Shari'a/secular. The Islamic secular is that site where modes of assessing human acts are neither grounded in nor derived from the revelational sources, i.e. Shari'a. By being non-revelational in relying on alternative epistemologies and assessments (such as asking what the legal driving age should be, or what exact socio-economic policy will yield better welfare to the community), the Islamic secular is secular. However, since the Islamic secular still operates within "God's adjudicative gaze," it is still Islamic and "thus religious."42

Debating similar voices, Mohammed Fadel argues that Islamic law in premodernity did not present an obstacle to secularisation in Muslim societies but rather served as a historical catalyst for secularisation.43 This dynamic occurred because from the very beginning, Islamic law differentiated social life based on the metaphysical conceptions of the human having a dual nature. On the one hand, human beings were servants of God with commitments to the next life, and on the other, they were objects of "material reality," which meant that a particular set of social institutional supports were necessary to protect their vulnerability.44 The requirement for the provision and protection of certain material goods, in addition to development of law both pedagogically and institutionally as separate from theology and exegesis, contributed to this differentiation. These laws that were concerned with the human's materiality were secular, for Fadel, in all the senses of the term, except for their "asserted origin in revelation."45 Rules of trade were secular because their logic was that of material provision, ensuring shelter and survival for the human. That meant, for Fadel, that their logic is not the "logic of religion," because this latter is "carefully limited to worship," where worship is understood as "the cultivation of subjective dispositions toward God as reflected in ritual law."46 This distinction has no place for revelatory laws of social and economic conduct that were both devotional and responding to material needs (such as food, intercourse, and social welfare), and thus marks a problematic limitation in his conception of the secular.

Finally, Abbasi argues against the denial of the secular in premodern Islam, which he locates across Orientalist, critical, Muslim, and non-Muslim scholars alike.47 Abbasi is especially critical of scholars who recreate the Eurocentrism that they try to challenge by "basing their conclusions about the Islamic past on theoretical critiques of European modernity instead of the indigenous sources themselves."48 He argues that the din/dunya binary he finds profusely in premodern texts indicate that Muslims separated their world conceptually into "distinct religious and non-religious spheres analogous to the modern religious-secular, with things like worship, prayer, and divine

42 Jackson, “The Islamic Secular,” 2, 3, and 16.
43 Fadel, “Islamic Law.”
44 Fadel, “Islamic Law.”
45 Fadel, “Islamic Law.”
46 Fadel, “Islamic Law.”
47 Abbasi, “Did Premodern Muslims?”
law on one side and all worldly matters on the other.” 49 Ultimately however, he suggests that the din/dunya analogue is more useful and should be popularised, since if it is simply translated in scholarly work on the religion/secular dichotomy, the modern assumptions attached to this binary would distort the different premodern interactions of din and dunya. 50

Having reviewed the authors’ main arguments, the place of the secular in them, and situated their work in conversation with specific voices, I now turn to thematically consider what this new wave offers to enduring questions of definitions and conceptions in the study of Islam.

Religion and Revelation

In part two, I indicated that the works of Hodgson, Gardet, and Lapidus betrayed a modern Christian bias, where the categories of religion and the secular were universalized and applied to premodern Islam. However, Dressler et al.’s Hodgsonian framework argues that there is value in his intervention on account of its introduction of a distinction between religious and non-religious aspects of Islam, as well as alluding to “practices of distinction within societies and cultures where Islam was the dominant religion.” 51 This two-part heritage perhaps explains why they are not content with simply adopting Islamicate, but also adding secularity (hence the framework of Islamicate Secularities), which otherwise would sound redundant. If Islamicate denotes a distinction between religious and non-religious, why add secularity? It seems that, going beyond Hodgson’s creation of a distinction, their focus is on the processes of distinction themselves, what generates them, and what causes their embrace or rejection in diverse Islamic contexts. 52 But the problem remains: What does “religion” mean in premodern Islamic contexts?

These limitations are partly what inspires Ahmed’s rejection of both categories, especially when neither category helps us understand how premodern Muslims themselves came to “divide up, arrange and . . . know their world.” 53 Instead, these categories lead us to assume that any contradictions or ambiguities in Muslims’ self-expression were only “symptomatic of a problematic encounter with the secular.” 54 We see this for instance in Lapidus, where any ambiguity between religion and secular politics in his discussion was due to the fusing of pre-Islamic ideals of divine kingship or sacred Greek/Sassanian value systems. 55

50 Abbasi, “Did Premodern Muslims?” 224.
54 Ahmed, What is Islam? 201.
But this understanding of the pre-Islamic points to an even more important assumption about what is Islamic (what is religion), and what is not. I argue that how scholars relate revelation to Islam and how revelation is itself conceived accounts for the differences across conceptions of religion. All the scholars I have analyzed understand Islam intimately in terms of revelation, and they are keen, excepting Ahmed, to distinguish between Islamic revelation as a truth, value, and epistemic system against prior, external, and/or competing systems. Thus, we can understand what is un-Islamic, and therefore irreligious about Lapidus’ Greek and Sassanian values, Hodgson’s Islamicate, and Salvatore and Yavari’s interest in the spheres of Adab and politics. How much of religion/Islam as a conceptual space is taken up by revelation? How loosely or restrictively is the latter defined? The answers to these questions create an interesting spectrum along which I locate Ahmed, Jackson, and Salvatore/Yavari. On one end of the spectrum, we have Salvatore/Yavari, for whom revelation is limited to the textual (Qur’an and Sunnah) and revelation fills up the whole space of religion, à la Hodgson. In the middle of the spectrum is Jackson, who is committed to an equally limited textual definition of revelation, given his legal training, but who argues that revelation and the law derived from it do not constitute the totality of Islam/religion and that Shari’a and Islam are not coterminous. This is precisely why the secular in his conception is non-Shari’i (non-revelatory), yet not un-Islamic or irreligious. At the other end of the spectrum is Ahmed, who conceives of Islam as a hermeneutic engagement undertaken by Muslims through Revelation. Yet “Revelation” is so expansively defined that almost anything can be revelation: it is divided into a Pre-Text, Text, and Con-text. The Text quite simply is the Qur’an; the Con-text is the total body of all historical Islamic practices and interpretations; and the Pre-text refers to the cosmologies that Muslims adopt, through which they understand the world and seek to know God, which the Qur’an constitutes only a part of. Therefore, a Muslim philosopher can know God through the Qur’an as well as Reason writ large, which is the cosmological site of Revelation, where as a Sufi understands experiential gnosis to be the main site of Revelation and knowing God, only a part of which is the actual text of the Qur’an. In Ahmed’s formulation, anything can be Islamic, and thus there is no need for the secular, as long as the Muslim is acting or practicing in a way where he/she is intending to be Muslim and to derive meaning qua Muslim.

One wonders if Ahmed would have found it useful to speak of the secular to refer to acts that a Muslim undertakes whilst not intending to be a Muslim. In any case, the inversion of that is precisely how Fadel, Abbasi, Jackson, and Dressler et al. (and by extension Hodgson) primarily understand religion. There is something fundamentally devotional, ritualistic, mindful of God, and gravitating towards the afterlife (even when dealing with worldly matters) about religion in their respective conceptions. This concept is what Hodgson seems to allude to when he speaks of Islamic as being Islam

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56 Jackson, “The Islamic Secular,” 7 and 10.
in the proper, religious sense. It is also the basis of Fadel's distinction between the
logic of religion and the logic of the secular. Abbasi articulates the same understanding
when he argues his premodern Muslim interlocutors associated *dīn*, the analogue of
religion, with "divine law, worship, reward, virtue, and was seen in relation to the next
life and God."*57* He therefore argues that Muslims did indeed have a concept of
religion writ large, which was important to distinguish from the non-religious or
worldly matters precisely because the belief in the afterlife required a clarification of
what religion entails for a believer.*58*

Despite their convergences and divergences, these authors thus redeploy common
and familiar conceptions of what religion is. How then are they overcoming the
enduring critique of religion and the secular as European or Christian categories? The
answer seems to be in arguing that it is the premodern texts or thinkers they are
engaging that are themselves making the distinction and using the categories. Dressler
et al. are particularly concerned with qualifying their reliance on Hodgson on this front.
They emphasise that the "etic distinction, which we use as observers, between either
religion and non-religion or religion and secularity is matched by a variety of emic
distinctions used by Muslim social actors."*59* They demonstrate further prudence in
choosing not to define religion at the outset, but to let each author, in their respective
article, employ "a social constructivist approach that conceives of the religion of Islam
and the degree of its distinguishability as an empirical phenomenon understood as the
result of social world construction."*60* The reliance on emic analogues to legitimize the
concept of religion, as much as the secular, is similarly clear in the work of Abbasi, as
well as both Jackson and Fadel who present their work as an excavation of what legal
theorists and jurists have explicitly expressed in their scholarship.

**Secular(ity)**

I begin this discussion with Asad whose secular is both modern and conceptually
very different from the secular of the new wave, but whose divorce of the secular from
secularism, I contend, constitutes a major opening for these authors to revisit and
reuse the secular. While he recognises that Christianity—in introducing a transcendent
God against the gods of the Greek directly involved in nature and society—created
the potential for a differential space exterior to the supernatural realm of God, this
potential was only actualised in modernity through the construction of a secular
space.*61* The secular for Asad is thus modern, and specifically a modality of power. It

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*61* Asad, Formations, 27.
regulates and reconfigures subjectivity along multiple cultivated values and sensibilities, and it is intricately tied with the project of modernity.

The secular does not take on this meaning for our later authors. Drawing more directly from the work of Jose Casanova, the secular for them designates sites and practices of differentiation, ontological or epistemic in the first order, and consequently institutional. Unlike their conceptions of religion, which coalesced around similar principles, ontological and epistemic differentiations of the secular are mutually exclusive. Thus, for Jackson there is nothing in the Islamic secular that is not religious because it is still a site in which Muslims act with a kind of God-consciousness. Therefore, the secular is only differentiated from Shari'a as different epistemic modalities. Dressler et al. similarly understand the institutional differentiations of secularity in premodern Islam as owing to epistemic difference implicated in "among other reference problems . . . securing political power or dealing with competing truth claims."

This framework is fundamentally different from Fadel for whom the secular derives epistemically from the same sources as the religious, but while the latter is ontologically devotional, the former is concerned with material preservation. Any attempts to bridge the two distinctions is an extra-legal act of piety and thus in itself a devotional, not a secular act. The difficulty with this distinction of ʿibādāt (rituals) and muʿāmalāt (transactions) along the dividing line of devotion/worship are those instances in which the transactional takes on characteristics of the ritual and vice versa. If, as he states, transactional matters are indifferent to the actor's inward disposition, then how do we understand the legal distinction between valid prayer (a prayer that checks all the required acts) and an accepted prayer (where one's intention is clear and focused) where it seems the inward disposition is irrelevant to the legal validation of the ritual act? Similarly, if only a transaction can be initiated and then abandoned without any consequences, then how do we understand supererogatory fasting, an entirely devotional act, that one can initiate and abandon mid-day without any consequences either?

I argue that to define the secular as an ontological differentiation is a more difficult task, and that Fadel's inflexibility is what weakens his argument by contrast to Jackson, or even Abbasi. Abbasi, like Fadel, argues that the secular is conceived by premodern Muslims as ontologically differentiated from acts of devotion, ritual, and those derived from Divine law, but only in the first order. This means that, by a simple reorienting

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62 For example, Jackson writes that "the secular is simply differentiated from religion in Casanova's depiction, whereas it is differentiated from the shar'i in my working definition of the Islamic secular." See Jackson, "The Islamic Secular," 11. According to Fadel, "Casanova has identified three forms of secularization that are characteristic of modernity: institutional differentiation, privatization of religious belief, and the decline of religious belief. He argues that while all three of these modes of secularization are present in modernity, only the first—the institutional differentiation of various social spheres from religious institutions, such as the market, the state, and the economy—is a universal prerequisite for modernity." See Fadel, "Islamic Law."

of one's intention, a secular act of *dunya*, like "the perceptual, the bodily, the mental, the outward, and all the things of human life (like food and sex)" can become similarly devotional and thus an act of *din*.

This flexible relationality allows for a more robust conception of the secular. It also helps us revisit what the ontic distinction between a secular and a religious act can be. The secular is not the mundane in the quotidian sense, for many rituals and social functions are quotidian, a formulation Lapidus had difficulty conceiving, but rather the secular is that act undertaken by a Muslim not for the purposes of *din*.

In my analysis, the weakest conceptions of the secular are precisely those that raise epistemic differentiation to the ontological level. In their respective articles, Salvatore and Yavari slide in and out of claims about how un-Islamic a practice is, precisely because it is epistemically drawn from non-revelatory sources. It is difficult to see how Salvatore can argue that Qur’anic verses can be woven into secular *Adab* stories without "altering the inherently mundane [read: non-religious] teachings of the genre.”

Similarly, it remains unclear how Salvatore can sustain a distinction between *Adab*’s focus on its subjects’ cultivating a capacity to discern between good and bad, or harmful and useful, and the same focus of *Hadith* and other revelatory texts.

Similarly, Yavari’s claim that governance and politics are secular because Muslims kings were considered successful not when they were pious but when they were able to rule with wisdom and discernment is yet another baffling remark that seems to dismiss how often regal piety was precisely defined in terms of wisdom, good discernment, and the bringing about of social welfare and the common good.

**Function and Relationality**

Two questions that any discussion of the secular triggers are of its relationality and function, if only because modern secularity takes on an explicit positionality, ranging from indifference to antagonism towards, religion, and has a primary regulatory function over the latter. In this section I look at how these two points figure in conceptions of the secular that I have considered. Most striking is Jackson’s, where the determinant relationality is not secular/religion, but secular/revelation. He is also keen

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64 Abbasi, “Did Premodern Muslims?” 198.
65 Lapidus writes that “finally, there was an ambiguity in the concept of secular and sacred. The ordinary functions of Muslim community life and the daily activities of scholars and holy men involve activities which come under the purview of Islamic law and Islamic morality, but constitute from our point of view the realm of secular affairs. Business, administration of trusts, property issues and inheritances are only a few examples. The domain of the Muslim religious community which embodies the Islamic ideal is, by virtue of Islam itself, the realm of the mundane.” See “State and Religion,” 20.
to argue against the claim that religion regulates the realm of the secular since the Islamic secular is already religious; yet one wonders whether his concept of the secular does not really draw from revelation, at least since in this standard definition of revelation, surely it is knowledge of God, and the desire to remain within God's adjudicative gaze (derived from revelation), that allows the secular to "remain" Islamic.69

This desire to be Islamic, and to cultivate virtue, is perhaps what leads Salvatore to qualify his distinction of Adab from Hadith as only soft, whilst still understanding it as an epistemically secular counterpoint, contrapuntal and harmonious, not alternative.70 This concept of the soft distinction, in turn, is shared by Dressler et al. to further their argument that "secularity" is helpful in countering the "exaggeration and homogenization of the religious dimension of the lives and societies of Muslims."71 Again, here the point is to highlight epistemic and institutional differentiations of Islamic and non-Islamic acts in the lives of premodern Muslims.

In fact, it is precisely devotional sensibilities and an orientation towards the divine that, Abbasi argues, allows for the transformation of a secular act of dunya into an act of dīn.72 In his analysis, some premodern Muslims posited that dīn and dunya was a framework of differentiating aspects of reality that were not mutually opposing, and other often saw dīn as above dunya, and thus could regulate it or bring it into its fold in an inverse of modern secularity's regulatory functions.73 It is only Yavari who argues that, much like its modern counterpart, premodern political secularity meant that religion was employed in the service of government, where it was necessary for a secular power to regulate diverse clerical opinions and to effectively rise above the chaos "which ensues when decision making is left on the basis of hearsay to an indeterminate and changing group of people keen to settle scores."74 I find this regulatory reading dubious, in as much as it uncritically adopts the secular vs. lay authority struggle of Medieval Europe and fails to recognise the intricate way governance was often constructed as Islamic piety. Apart from Yavari, then, it is clear that none of the authors offer a conception that is a simple translation of modern secularity. The consensus is that the secular in premodern Islam neither regulates religion nor is necessarily related to it (as in Jackson) as is the case with modern secularism that mediates religion as one among many different identities.

69 Jackson, “The Islamic Secular,” 2.
70 Salvatore, “Adab,” 41.
Frameworks: Political and Intellectual Commitments

In part two we have seen how locating the scholar’s respective intellectual and political commitments illuminated how they came to conceive of the secular. Lewis wrote as an Orientalist; Hodgson was concerned with the overarching comparative framework of civilization; Asad continues to carry the lantern of postcolonial and anthropological critique of Orientalism, modernity, and Eurocentrism; and Ahmed was concerned with including diverse Muslim voices as equally valid for any conception of Islam. The scholars of the new wave can be equally understood through their own commitments, and it is striking that they share many of these commitments with the likes of Asad and Ahmed, and yet they offer divergent conceptions of the secular. Multiple Secularities, for instance, is a project that aims to divorce “Western Modernity” from “secularity” to show how Muslim secularities today are the products both of internal socio-historical processes as well as the colonial encounter. The project is committed to analysis through emic taxonomies, as well as a comparative framework. It therefore situates itself somewhere between Asad and Hodgson, and it seems that whenever the comparative framework is more dominant, it comes at the expense of critically assessing how relevant the conceptual secular is to its identified Islamic emic analogue.

The desire to let Muslims speak for themselves is a point on which both Ahmed and Abbasi converge but reach starkly divergent conclusion. It is indeed curious why, if the emic commitments are identical, and the texts studied Islamic, they do not arrive at the same argument. I suggest that, beyond the differences between Abbasi’s analogous framework and Ahmed’s overarching commitment to finding cohesion among Islamic contradictions, the answer might lie in their sources; specifically, the different Islamic traditions on which they center their work.75 Whereas Ahmed primarily deals with philosophical and Sufi texts, a small selection of Persian political theory, and creative artistic expressions while deliberately paying little attention to legal work, Abbasi looks at Islamic law, exegesis, and non-Persian political theory and pietistic literature. Similarly, Jackson and Fadel’s definitions of revelation, far more limited in comparison with Ahmed, may be attributed to their training as scholars of Islamic law and their exclusive reliance on legal and jurisprudential work.

More telling, however, is their explicit interest in the social and political conditions of Muslims living in the West, in secular or secularizing nation states. Jackson ends his article with a suggestion that while Islamic law is the domain of the specially trained jurist, the realm of the secular, in as much as it relies on non-revelatory modes of

75 According to Abbasi, "analogy on the other hand look for categories or terms that do the same kind of work within similar contexts … [and] it does not necessarily follow that they [Muslims] did not articulate and develop an analogous categorization of their own." See “Did Premodern Muslims?” 188 and 190.
human assessment, can be the realm of "the people." This statement helps us understand why the secular is only epistemically and not ontologically differentiated in his conception, as it will allow Muslims to engage in the public sphere of government and administration without acting as if God does not exist. This dynamic perhaps is what makes it difficult for Muslims, in his reading, to take part in public discourse in the first place.

Fadel is equally concerned with the place of Muslims in non-Muslim countries, and in a separate article considers how Muslims can participate in Rawls' "emerging consensus." In my analysis, he ultimately offers a less robust conception of the secular because of the more polemic nature of his work. Fadel is not content to argue, as Jackson does, that the secular can be Islamic in intent while epistemically non-shari', but that revelation (and Islamic law) itself must bring about an institutional differentiation between the devotional religion and the material secular, so that his central argument that Islamic law was a catalyst and not an obstacle to secularization, still holds. This argument he bases on Casanova's definition of secularization as denoting a) institutional differentiation, b) the privatization of religion, and c) its waning, and his designation of only the differentiation being necessary for modernity. If Fadel can prove that Islamic law itself catalyzed that differentiation which is necessary for modernity, then perhaps he can definitively settle the debate on Islam's relationship to modernity. However, this argument feels like an exercise in the counterfactual. Even if one accepts Casanova's claim that differentiation alone is modernity's necessary condition—which I find reductive—it has become apparent from our discussion in the previous section that modern secularity as a mode of power is not in any way identical with secular differentiations in premodern Islam.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have reviewed and analysed a rich historiography of the secular in premodern Islam. I argued that conceptions of the secular are implicated in the knowledge-power nexus of modern scholarship, particularly orientalism, its afterlives, and critical responses to it, as well as the scholars’ intellectual and political commitments. I first offered a chronological review of the scholars under analysis to draw out the ways in which they were in vibrant conversation with one another. I then considered how a new wave of thinking about the secular in premodern Islam has redeployed and/or significantly innovated thinking about enduring definitions in the study of Islam, namely: religion, revelation, secular relationality, and functionality. I argued that these conceptions of the secular are neither all mutually exclusive, nor

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76 As Jackson writes, "cultural producers, and not jurists, will play a critical role in priming social realisation of the law's broader aims and objectives and, in so doing, engendering broader voluntary compliance." See "Islamic Secular," 17.

77 Fadel, "Islamic Law."
conclusively settle the debate one way or the other, nor, in fact, are they free from limitations and varying degrees of analytic deficiencies. I therefore hope to have shown that the secular is neither inherently inadequate, nor defunct, for the purposes of studying premodern Islam. I am guided here by Robert Bartlett’s assessment that what determines our use of any category should be its intellectual, and I would add political, value. In situating this historiography in relation to my own interest in questions of Muslim subjectivity, I hope to have shown the value in challenging our tendency to cede to modernity total explanatory power. Resisting this tendency opens previously foreclosed venues of inquiry, yielding much analytic value, the least of which is to nuance our understanding of exactly how and why modernity constitutes such a rupture from the premodern and significantly redefines and reconfigures Islamic being and experience.

REFERENCES


INTERROGATING WHITE MASCULINITY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISTIN KOBES DU MEZ ON EVANGELICAL NETWORKS, POLITICAL POWER, AND PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

Kristen Kobes Du Mez is Professor of History at Calvin University, where she focuses on religion, gender, and politics. Her influential 2020 book Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation examines a 75-year history of white evangelical masculinity, culminating with the Trump presidency.¹ This interview was conducted by managing editors Margaret Hamm and Laura Mucha. The transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity.

*The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School:* As emerging academics, how do you think that graduate students of religious studies can best internalize and incorporate the messages of your book into their own scholarship?

**Kristen Kobes Du Mez:** I was trained in a traditional history program. I didn't have much background in religious studies, and so I really approached my research just as a cultural historian. But what I found is that the field of the history of American evangelicalism had long been dominated by intellectual historians and more traditionally trained religious historians, many of whom were evangelicals themselves. Obviously they were intellectuals themselves. So many of their histories tended to focus on evangelicalism as a theological tradition. Much of this scholarship is really excellent work, and it played an important role, I think, a generation or two ago in introducing evangelicalism to outsiders who had never heard of it before—who just thought these are a bunch of “crazies.” There was a turn towards “let's take this seriously.” Let’s look for the logic behind these beliefs.

But I think that in some ways, maybe the pendulum had swung too far in that direction. What I wanted to do, as a cultural historian trained in the study of gender, was explain evangelicalism as it found expression more at the grassroots level, at the popular level, rather than a focus on kind of theological debates between pastors and seminaries. I

wanted to look at evangelicalism as lived experience as it finds expression in ordinary folks.

For that purpose, I was really drawn to seeing evangelicalism as a consumer culture to understand how people's values, how people's spirituality was actually formed. It's not just from hearing a pastor preach for 20 or 30 minutes on a Sunday. It's the Christian radio that you have playing in your house for maybe 30 hours a week. It's the Bible studies that you and your girlfriends or you and the guys from work are reading as God's truth—how to be a Christian man and how to be a Christian woman and wife. These products have played a really critical role for generations now in shaping evangelical identity and informing evangelical values. These are not disconnected from formal theological conversations, but they're much bigger than that. And sometimes they work against formal theology.

**How, if at all, do your religious practices or beliefs interact with your academic ones? How does your experience guide your research interests?**

I never really identified as an evangelical, but whether or not I am one really depends on how you define “evangelical.” I attend a Christian Reformed Church, which technically is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals. So you could put me in that bucket. But I grew up in a very distinctive ethnic confessional tradition in a Dutch immigrant community. So I generally defined myself against evangelicalism. Growing up, I knew I had this distinctive tradition.

Now that I've become a scholar of consumer culture, I realize that I was deeply enmeshed in the consumer culture of evangelicalism. Looking back, I listened to only Christian contemporary music growing up and I was familiar with evangelical consumer culture because the only bookstore in my small town was a Christian bookstore. My personal vantage point is right on the margins of evangelicalism, I suppose, or “evangelical adjacent.” I think that's reflected in my work through my own kind of personal lens. What does it mean to be an evangelical? What is this community? Theological beliefs are not the whole package, and there is a shared history. There's a shared sense of community, a shared identity that exists apart from any specific theological teachings. I experienced that as a conservative white Christian growing up. This identity is apparent to people on the outside or on the margins—for example, Black Protestants who might share similar theological beliefs on certain doctrines but do not identify as evangelical, because they clearly recognize that evangelicalism as it exists, as a religious and cultural movement today, is very much a white religious brand.

Because I teach at a Christian undergraduate university, I meet a lot of evangelical students. I've taught there for 16 years now, so I’m able to keep an eye on change over time. I can observe who my students are that are coming into my classrooms, what
they're reading, how they understand their faith, how they understand their faith tradition. It was, in fact, students who more than 15 years ago introduced me to some of the literature that ended up being at the heart of *Jesus and John Wayne*, especially John Eldredge's book, *Wild at Heart*. I think that by being around these communities, close to these communities, maybe sometimes with one foot in these communities, it gives me a particular vantage point.

**How do you think about presenting your research in a way that's accessible and engaging for both the academy and the general public?**

When I first realized I needed to write this book, I knew right away that it needed to be accessible. There are a lot of people that I wanted to reach. I knew I wanted to go with a trade publisher. That's a great way to make sure that your writing stays accessible. Your editor will make sure it does. But it actually wasn't that much of a struggle for me, because a few years back, I was convinced to join a blog at *Patheos* called *The Anxious Bench*.

I originally didn't want to. I had no extra time. The scholar who invited me said, I know you're going to say you don't have time for this, but she said, “Trust me on this. You're going to find that the more you write for this blog, the more productive you're going to be in your academic writing as well.” I totally didn't believe her, but I'm terrible at saying “no.” So I did it, and she was right. I mean, the first blog post took me an entire day to write, and now it'll take me an hour or two to write one. The speed I gained really helped to turn around this book on a very short time frame. But more than that, in blogging, I learned to fight for your readers’ attention. You know, as somebody who skims all kinds of things online every day, you're always looking for an excuse to click away, like, “OK, I think I got the gist of it.” I knew I had to fight for that attention. Every paragraph, every transition, whether I was writing to academics or to laypeople, I mean, we're all in the same boat now. More and more, I find that my own reading habits have changed. I wanted to keep the prose engaging and to keep readers with me, because you always have to fight for that. I think that's one of the things that I did in *Jesus and John Wayne*.

At the same time, I'm an academic, and so I didn't want to write a memoir. In fact, I really resisted for a long time putting that little bit of personal history in the introduction and I only did it after multiple nudges from my editor. I study the evangelical subculture. I study gender. There's this genre, particularly for women who write on Christianity, in which their authority comes from their experience. The memoir is very popular, and you have to bring your whole self. I study female bloggers and so on, so I wanted to make super clear—that's not what this is. This is an academic study. This is history. I'm going to tell you what happened. I didn't want to bring myself into it because I didn't want readers to mistake the genre and, especially as a female
writer, didn't want to give any sign that it was something it was actually not. But I gave in, and I think it was a very good choice. It situates me as the writer.

I think the rest of the book holds up well enough on the scholarly front to make clear that this is not just my thoughts as I lived this life. It really is a scholarly work. I was told by another historian who writes popular trade books that what you're going to find is you're going to embed very smart, historiographical arguments in your trade books, and they're going to be there, and they're going to be ignored. You just count on it. And I have to say, that is absolutely not my experience with *Jesus and John Wayne*. It's been really remarkable that on the popular level. People are embracing it. But in academic circles, those historiographical interventions are recognized. I think that's why we're talking right now. I'm not quite sure how that ended up working out, except that maybe I had a bit of an easy target again, because the historiography was really in need of a corrective. This book is a very different history of evangelicalism than what has come before, but it is one that viscerally connects with people who have lived it.

**This book is a kind of “patchwork quilt” of microhistories. What make you decide on this structural approach? How do these multi-microhistories facilitate your argument?**

I think this really gets to this question of what evangelicalism ultimately is. I mentioned that I came to see it as a consumer culture, which I did. But that's just part of the answer. It's a consumer culture alongside a system of networks and alliances. I had these big pieces of butcher paper, with sticky notes and Sharpie lines all over it to map out the network of evangelicalism, because that's really what evangelicalism is. It's not a theological rubric. Ultimately, it's these connections. It's these relationships—who's platforming whom, who is endorsing whose book, who is publishing which books, who's distributing those books, what kinds of things do you do to get excluded from these networks and alliances, and what kinds of things can you do and still be embraced. So that's really the question that was at the heart of the book. I did not set out to redefine evangelicalism. I did not set out to contest the Bebbington Quadrilateral at all. In fact, early on, I just assumed I would stick the Bebbington Quadrilateral into the introduction and then go on and do whatever I was going to do, because that's what historians of evangelicalism seemed to do. At a certain point, I just realized it was not working for me, not getting to the essence of what I'm looking at.

It's really important to understand who is connected to whom. One of the real themes that runs through the book is the question of who is marginal, who's fringe and who is mainstream. That's a conversation that I think we need to keep having because I think that those relationships keep shifting. But that's what's different by really looking at evangelicalism as a popular culture and as a series of networks. Because if you're looking at it through institutions, through theology, it's pretty simple, right? You go to
Wheaton College, you go to the major seminaries, you go to the SBC [Southern Baptist Convention], and you can say, “OK, there we have it.” But this is much more complicated. I think it gets much closer to the reality that people experience, and how they get defined out of evangelicalism—what that looks like. It's not being excommunicated. It means Lifeway Christian [Resources] won't carry your books anymore. It means Christianity Today isn't going to publish you anymore. Those are the kinds of things that I started to pay attention to.

The implicit argument of the book is that gender anxiety transcends everything else in American commercial and political life, which is radical in a world where religion and the family are considered private. How did your training in gender studies shape this perspective and the book as a whole?

If there is a kind of central theme, it's a question of power. It's a question of the relationship between Christianity and power, between white evangelicalism and power. That's where gender comes in, because gender is also always about power. It can look different ways, it can take different shapes, but masculinity in particular is linked to who has the right and duty and privilege to exercise power. Patriarchal power is at the heart of this story. And yes, very clearly, this is not limited to what happens inside the Christian home, which is often how the advice literature is marketed. This is “family values evangelicalism.” It sounds very private. It sounds very sweet. What could be wrong with that?

But looking at this literature, it didn't take sophisticated theoretical frameworks or a deep immersion in gender studies for me to just read in these books or these sex manuals—lots of Christian sex manuals, advice on how to be a Christian wife, how to be a Christian father. Right in front of me, in plain text, the authors were making clear that this was important not just for the family and not just to be faithful Christian men and women, but it was also important for the fate of the nation. It was important for a strong military defense. If you aren't raising your little boys right—teaching them to play with guns, teaching them to fight, not emasculating them—they are not going to be able to defend America, by which they mean defend Christian America. It is that blatant. I was really surprised by these books’ blunt statements about the stakes of being a Christian wife: you have a role to play in the future of the American nation. I just hadn't realized that they're very explicit about it. Of course, you can bring in gender studies, and you can bring in analyses of power and contextualize it more. But it's really quite blatant that this isn't just personal—it is absolutely political and is ultimately about who has the right to wield power.

In the book, you talk about how there's this belief that “perilous times necessitate ruthless power.” You identify the shift from the rhetorical polish of the Reagan era to a crassness post 9/11. How would you situate Trump in these
shifting masculinities, as well as the role of digital space in facilitating these rhetorical changes triggered in the aftermath of 9/11?

By the late 1990s, the “Mark Driscoll era,” we had the pendulum swinging back to militancy. September 11 just exacerbated that trend. That's when we increasingly see this crassness that no longer needs apology. It's a crassness that is evidence of masculinity, of having leadership capacities. But Driscoll was pretty fringe, he was so out there, misogynistic, and yet also incredibly influential for a generation of young pastors and young evangelical men. That's the chapter “Holy Balls,” of course.

Driscoll was really important in pioneering digital ministry. That's where the depths of his misogyny and crassness and cruelty, frankly, came out most clearly—in that anonymous space where he was “William Wallace II.” Online spaces have probably exacerbated this, have let men role play these militant characters in theological debates, certainly because it's really hard to live this militancy out in your daily life. I kept that in mind—it's something I probably should have brought out more clearly.

But the guys who are reading these books about being warriors and storming the gates and slaying their enemies and glorifying the military, the vast majority of them are probably wearing khakis and polo shirts. They're reading books in a Bible study. They probably would not try to live out this behavior, most of their wives probably wouldn't go for it, and many of them probably wouldn't go for it themselves. For some of them, they're thinking, “If this is what it takes to be a Christian, I'm out of here. This Bible study group is not for me.” It just is not a great fit for, I would say, the majority of men. But that doesn't mean it doesn't shape them or their values and certainly shapes their ideas of leadership and who, then, ought to lead. It bolsters this idea of the alpha male, and there's a sense of inferiority that develops in many men who recognize they are not wired for that, but they have been told that that then you must submit to the authority of the one who is—whether it's your pastor, evangelical leaders, or somebody like Donald Trump, who comes in and “has the balls” to lead. These online spaces allow men to act a certain way that they might not get away with otherwise. It helps spread these teachings and develop a sense of community that is, in many cases, gender segregated.

These are largely male spaces, so it's an exclusive group. There’s a sense of shared identity and shared privilege that is created across digital spaces. Then you've got the larger echo chamber of Christians who have long championed separate media—Christian news, Christian magazines, Christian publishing. Social media has facilitated that even more, depending on your position. For younger evangelicals today, I see social media working in a way that doesn't reinforce this ideology, these values, as much as I think it disrupts the power of the evangelical subculture really define their values. I think that's something that's different from young people today as opposed
to when I was growing up in the 1990s. In some ways it creates echo chambers, and in other in other ways that can open people up to views outside.

**What do you think about last week’s coup [January 6th, 2021] and the direction conservative evangelical masculinity might head next?**

It's really hard to know where conservative evangelicals are heading next, where the country is heading next. On the one hand, what we saw was shocking but not surprising, particularly if you've been paying attention to the rhetoric for especially the last two decades—that we need to fight, that the threat is dire, that we don't need emasculated men, that we need warriors in moments like these. We need men who are not afraid to use their strength, men who know how to use a gun. That's part of essential training for a boy become a man. You need to be uninhibited. You need to be courageous to fulfill your role as protector, your God-given role.

That's a pretty powerful kind of faith formation that, if it doesn't lead directly to actual violence, does nothing to restrain people from violence, and it makes it very difficult to actively denounce violence. It will lead to a lot of, “Well, maybe they went a little too far, but something had to be done.” I'm hearing quite a bit of that in evangelical circles. The people who are denouncing the violence are largely those who were already speaking out against this administration and have been for four years.

At the Capitol you saw a lot of Christian symbolism. The prayer offered by the Proud Boys before they headed on to the Capitol sounded awfully evangelical, if you know what to listen for. It certainly could have been offered in any evangelical church this past Sunday without raising an eyebrow. It's really hard for me, as somebody who has studied this for years now, to predict where people are going to draw the line. They've been steeped in this kind of militant warrior masculinity, culture wars mentality for a very long time, and Trump has only escalated it.

Then you also have the “fake news” phenomenon. Evangelicals have not trusted the mainstream media for generations. Now, more digital spaces mean more access to conspiratorial thinking, and the enthusiasm with which evangelicals have latched on to conspiratorial thinking is again shocking, but not surprising. When you have somebody like Ed Stetzer asking why are evangelicals so easily fooled, I don't know that “fooled” is the right word. They are also actively creating these alternative spaces and they have discounted “mainstream media” for a long, long time. We have to go back and really understand how even respectable evangelicals have been complicit in allowing this to fester. We have to go back decades to understand that.
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