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What Would it Take for the Earth Creature to go to Church?

*A Theological View of the Youth Consciousness, Ethic, and Spirit*

Atticus Muller

Project Advisor: David Woodyard

Religion Department

Denison University Summer Scholars Project

2020

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## Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgments ...</i>	1
<i>Introduction ...</i>	4
<i>Section One: What the Data Tells Us ...</i>	8
<i>Gen Z and Politics ...</i>	9
<i>The Generational Gap ...</i>	12
<i>Demographic Changes ...</i>	14
<i>Sustained Areligiousness ...</i>	17
<i>Section Two: The Youth Consciousness Meets America ...</i>	19
<i>The Ethic of Gen Z and the Spirit of Youthfulness ...</i>	20
<i>The Unholy Alliance ...</i>	23
<i>Crisis in the American State ...</i>	28
<i>Section Three: Relinquishing and Receiving ...</i>	31
<i>Putting the Church In the Action ...</i>	31
<i>Section Four: Agency in New Mental Models and Manifesting the Ethic and Spirit ...</i>	38
<i>Womanist Intersectional Analysis ...</i>	38
<i>Young Agency ...</i>	43
<i>Soil, Bodies, and God ...</i>	44
<i>Hidden Autonomy ...</i>	50
<i>The Environment and Leaving Things Better ...</i>	53
<i>Section Five: The New Praxis ...</i>	59
<i>Prophetic Activism ...</i>	60
<i>Meeting the Two Narratives ...</i>	66
<i>What Will a New Church Look Like? ...</i>	67
<i>Breaking Down Modern Interpretations ...</i>	67
<i>Rigorous Environmentalism in the Face of Individualism ...</i>	75
<i>The Dyad in Activist Theology ...</i>	80
<i>Conclusion ...</i>	86
<i>Works Cited ...</i>	89

## Introduction

In a review of religious studies, many theologies exempt themselves from a dialogue with generations. Young people, now participating in religion less than any previous generation in American history, are one of the leading causes of the decline in religiosity across the United States.<sup>1</sup> Generation Z has shown to be the least religious generation by far, with only 25% attending church once a week or more, compared to the national average of 39%.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, 45% of Gen Z say that they rarely or never attend church, compared to even 35% of Millennials.<sup>3</sup> Students at Denison University, where this research was conducted, indicated that nearly 45% of the student body was agnostic, atheist, or “nothing in particular.”<sup>4</sup> This drastic decline, while certainly discussed in academia, is rarely, if ever, discussed within the Church. Even in its discussion, the consensus seldomly accurately represents the reasons as to why this drop has occurred. Most arguments center on the belief that young people are naturally more rebellious than when they are older and are more likely to distance themselves from traditional institutions between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. While this is undoubtedly true historically, Generation Z must be understood in light of the contemporary world—a world that is unrecognizable and unfathomably complicated to nearly all other generations.

The United States has become vulnerable to a dominion of dominating social hierarchies and unsustainable economic practices, justified and authorized by a twisted rendition of the Biblical tradition that has found itself deeply embedded into the politics of the Christian right.

<sup>1</sup> Melissa Deckman, “Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show,” Religion in Public, WordPress, February 10, 2020, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Djupe, “Is College Bad For Religion? How Religion Fares at Denison,” one twenty seven, WordPress, September 14, 2017, <https://onetwentyseven.blog/2017/09/14/is-college-bad-for-religion-how-religion-fares-at-denison/>

Profoundly complicated, intense forms of systemic oppression, not just in monetary forms, but also in philosophical understandings of *who* the United States *is* and what the United States is *supposed to be*, perpetuate notions of superiority and exceptionalism. Generation Z is simply antithetical to this culture of the United States. Declining religious participation is one of the many facets of this generational gap in action. However, this research will be able to pursue only some elements of other aspects of the age disparity in popular institutions. Where popular American society upholds and defends an obnoxious denial over much of the country's (and the world's) injustices, Generation Z seeks out equity and justness—as the data presented later will illustrate.

The United States has surpassed the threshold for allowing the consequences of intolerant religious teachings, in many forms, to exist perpetually in social institutions. Young people recognize this foolishness and are no longer willing to tolerate and adhere to tradition and the normality of prejudiced customs. Monolithic, linear images of both common American institutions, such as the strong religious tradition, frequently endorse dichotomies unsubstantiated in both the Biblical tradition and popular American culture. Meaning, ironic practices of violence and domination, such as hierarchical understandings of sex, race, language, and class, often contradict the Biblical tradition that over 65% of the country claims to endorse!<sup>5</sup> This research will detail these practices in more detail in the later sections. How, then, is it fair to expect young people to practice a faith tradition that is not accurately reflective of what is actually being practiced and taught in the church?

It is not. God's awesome sanction of the earth cannot survive on platitudes of greed and ignorance of the many moral dilemmas that face the planet every day. Ultimately, Generation Z

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace, Pew Research Center, Pew, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

seeks to challenge and change this notion. A God-fearing country cannot push religiousness through generations without a radical redesign of the core misconceptions and functions of the said religion. Dogmatic assumptions regarding young people's behavior, almost always detailed and written by older generations with close to no conception of the intricacies of the young generation, fail to accurately reflect the complex juxtaposition of intense despair with a tremendous hope found within Generation Z. This dyad, the virtual crux of the young generation's entire development, is necessary to realize the ignorance behind the lack of stewardship towards Generation Z.

This research will bring attention to the prejudicial failures of the Church that is now clinging to its dwindling youth involvement, and bring forward a new appreciation of the young consciousness that has too often been ignored. This project will provide reasoning as to why the Church has lost its credibility, trust, and participation from young people—which will be the main focus of this project. This project will argue that the decline in youth religiosity is due to the fact that young people are able to objectively view the current state of civil religion as an evil entity, and that through the young consciousness we will be able to promote a holistic vision of the Church, one that has hyperfocus on the wellbeing and development of welfare for the future and of the young people of the Earth.<sup>6</sup> By bringing the Biblical tradition up against the prevailing consciousness of the standing economic, political, religious, and social orders, this research will identify how at odds with the tradition is from what is being practiced. Moreover, by doing so, we will be able to identify the similarities between Generation Z and the actual Biblical narrative, as well as the clash between Generation Z and the dominating ethos. It is also necessary to emphasize here that there are instances throughout this research where, by the

<sup>6</sup> Atticus Muller, "Summer Research Proposal," Proposal, Granville, Ohio, 2019.



nature of studying a rather new topic, there is simply a lack of scholarship. In these instances I will be speaking objectively from my own voice and encourage readers to trust the validity of the youth experience, even if it is not necessarily documented in academia.

## Section One: What the Data Tells Us

Growing research illustrates the dramatic decline in youth religiosity and the rise of “nones” over the last several decades. Conventional wisdom suggests young people will return to religion *vis-à-vis* the ebb and flow life-cycle effect; however, our research contends that Generation Z has, and will continue to, break this trend (and not for reasons traditionally thought).<sup>7</sup> While Gen Z displays characteristics and patterns similar to Millennials and Generation X (such as those who identify as religiously unaffiliated and as politically independent), the shift away from organized religion, politics, and a transition into a modern, technological world suggests this is more than a typical phase of generational rebellion, and instead a generation-bending moment in American history.<sup>8</sup> Simply put, Generation Z has grown up in a world unlike any other. From two decades of war and the post 9/11 world, the expansion of the internet and social media, two once-in-a-lifetime economic collapses, and an unprecedented decline in mental health, the path of Gen Z has been unyielding and utterly contrary to the progressive ideals that so many within Gen Z hold. It is why, then, that this research is necessary. The following paragraphs detail the relationship between the decline in religious affiliation and age cohort in data. Our evidence suggests the following truths, that (a) young people are significantly more likely to be religiously unaffiliated than previous generations, (b) that once unaffiliated, young people stay areligious (loosely defined as being aloof to religion in the sense of participating, attending, and believing) at an unprecedented rate (Cooper et al., 2016), and (c) that the alliance between the Christian right and political conservatism (specifically the nexus of abortion and women’s and gender issues) has drastically

<sup>7</sup> Ryan P. Burge, “What is the Life-Cycle Effect? Does it Appear in the Data?” Religion in Public, WordPress, September 4, 2019. <https://religioninpublic.blog/2019/09/04/what-ist-the-life-cycle-effect-does-it-appear-in-the-data/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

altered religiosity among young people (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2018). Diversity and other demographic dissimilarities between Gen Z and previous generations must also be emphasized and will be detailed below. This essay will begin with Melissa Deckman's discoveries on new data for Gen Z. This section is by no means meant to cover the data in its entirety, merely to present it as is necessary to understanding the core of this research.

### *Gen Z and Politics*

Deckman's research is in-line with previous findings. She concludes that 38% of Gen Z is religiously unaffiliated—similar to the 38% of Millennials who also identified as areligious.<sup>9</sup> While this number is consistent, the number of actual Gen Z church attendance is far lower than previous generations—with just 25% of Gen Z attending weekly or more.<sup>10</sup> Deckman notes that while African American church attendance is still the highest among her research, 29% of black Gen Z Americans report being religiously unaffiliated—a difference of 12% between older African Americans.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Deckman's findings also show that women are more likely to report less church attendance than men, which is a somewhat ahistorical trend compared to previous generations.<sup>12</sup> This oddity is attributed to several factors. One, Betsy Cooper's research finds that women are twice as likely than men to say harmful religious teachings on LGBTQIA+ individuals were a significant factor in choosing to leave religion (40% to 20%, respectively).<sup>13</sup> Deckman's findings also indicate that women are equally as likely as men to report being

<sup>9</sup> Deckman, Melissa, "Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show," Religion in Public, WordPress, February 10, 2020, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert P. Jones, "Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back," PRRI, PRRI, September 22, 2016. <https://www.prii.org/research/prii-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/>.

religiously unaffiliated—also a break in historical trends (women are historically more religious).<sup>14</sup> Two, dominant Christian sects in the U.S. continuously report higher average sexism than those who identify as religious nones (Djupe, 2019). Specifically, Evangelical, Orthodox, and Mormon groups report the highest levels of sexism.<sup>15</sup> Another component, and perhaps one of the more influential reasons for religious decline (other than those previously listed), is the growth of progressive ideologies among younger generations. Briefly shown in the data by Cooper, left-leaning orientations, and dissatisfaction with religious teachings are the leading causes of religious deprivation among young people.<sup>16</sup>

Djupe and Neiheisel found that in cases where a state banned same-sex marriage and the Christian right was visible (when the perception of power was more substantial), the rate of “nones” increased dramatically, and in some instances, the rate of nones rose over 6%.<sup>17</sup> However, in cases where states did not pass a ban, Christian right influence on nones was limited or absent entirely.<sup>18</sup> This relationship, popularized by the 1994 Republican Revolution (where religious identities and political affiliation became more harmonized), moved American religion to become increasingly polarized. Now, in 2020, the influence of politics on religious affiliation is staggering. Following the 2016 presidential election, 14% of churchgoers indicated leaving

<sup>14</sup> Deckman, Melissa, “Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show,” Religion in Public, WordPress, February 10, 2020, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>.

<sup>15</sup> Paul A. Djupe, “Support for Women’s Equality Across Religious Groups Varies Considerably,” Religion in Public, WordPress, June 17, 2019, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2019/06/17/support-for-womens-equality-across-religious-groups-varies-considerably/>.

<sup>16</sup> Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert P. Jones, “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” PRRI, PRRI, September 22, 2016. <https://www.prii.org/research/prri-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/>.

<sup>17</sup> Paul A. Djupe and Jake Neiheisel, “When Winning is Losing: How the Christian Right Undermined Religion in the US,” Religion in Public, WordPress, August 1, 2018. <https://religioninpublic.blog/2018/08/01/when-winning-is-losing-how-the-christian-right-undermined-religion-in-the-us/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

church post-election (10% of Evangelicals, 18% of mainline Protestants, and 11% of Catholics also reported leaving their church), a rather large portion of congregations.<sup>19</sup> The argument that people are leaving religion because of politics is indicative of a more significant force that connects both issues. Religiously disconnected Americans are increasingly disconnected citizens (Cooper et al., 2016)—with 34% of unaffiliated voters saying they were paying little or no attention to the election while 56% of white Evangelical Protestants saying they were.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, 26% of unaffiliated voters said they were not registered to vote (compared to only 10% of Evangelical Protestants), and in 2012, despite making up well over 20% of the public, only 12% of those who were religiously unaffiliated voted (compared to Evangelical Protestants making up only 20% of the public but consisting of more than 26% of the voters).<sup>21</sup> While conventional political participation is broadly defined and is undoubtedly essential in determining the country's course, this research seeks to understand participation in various forms, but in the limits of this essay will be unable to do so here.

The overwhelming majority of young Americans are shifting further to the left, and more criticize right-wing rhetoric.<sup>22</sup> Despite “left” and “right” being determinants of dualistic ideology, their use here is necessary, in part, because of the clear generational gap in conventional politics between young people and political leaders. This gap, for example, is evident here. Only 30% of Gen Zers approve of President Trump (including only 56% of

<sup>19</sup> Paul A. Djupe, Jacob R. Neihsel, and Anand E. Sokhey, “Did Disagreement Over Trump Drive People Out of Churches?” Religion in Public, WordPress, April 11, 2017. <https://religioninpublic.blog/2017/04/11/did-disagreement-over-trump-drive-people-out-of-churches/>.

<sup>20</sup> Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert P. Jones, “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” PRRI, PRRI, September 22, 2016. <https://www.prii.org/research/prri-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Parker, K. (2019, January 17). Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-o-key-social-and-political-issues/>.

Republican Gen Zers).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, according to Pew, only 14% of Gen Z believes the United States is the best country in the world, compared to 45% of the Silent Generation saying the same thing.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, over 54% of Gen Z believes the earth is warming due to human involvement, compared to only 45% of Boomers (with over 25% saying warming is natural), as well as only 38% of the Silent Generation agreeing (with 28% saying warming is natural with 16% saying there is no evidence of global heating at all).<sup>25</sup> Finally, and perhaps the most conclusive proof that Gen Z is supportive of a more community-oriented approach to society, is the 70% of Gen Z saying the government should be more involved in solving issues compared to only 49% of Boomers and 39% of the Silent Generation who favor a more individualistic society.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Generational Gap*

Moreover, the generational gap in politics is noteworthy, in part, because of the dramatic underrepresentation within both federal and local governments in the U.S., and one of the reasons why youth-led protests have increased in recent years (see March For Our Lives, Student Walkouts, Black Lives Matter, or The Sunrise Movement among others). While young people certainly have more outreach than they did even ten years ago (via social media and other internet avenues), young people are still insufficiently received politically. Following the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, which killed seventeen individuals and injured seventeen others, the political response was weak at best. Popular Christian Radio Host, Kevin McCullough, called the student response “irritating” and labeled the students as “angry, opportunistic...media hyped know-nothings [who] spout their misunderstood self-researched

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

‘facts,’ lead chants of ‘enough is enough,’ and then play the untouchables when someone calls them on their insecurities.”<sup>27</sup> Speaker Paul Ryan simply told Congress, “take a breath and collect the facts.”<sup>28</sup> Representative Tom Reed of New York stated, “A lot of members are just afraid to lead on this issue because of how it can motivate a primary opponent.”<sup>29</sup> Now, at the time of this research, there is not, and never has been, a federal policy response to the Parkland shooting despite one of the largest youth movements in the history of the United States.

The decades-long shift left is a part of the changing family and cultural dynamic in the United States. No longer are white men a majority (43%), and by 2050 white individuals will be a minority within the United States.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, declining divorce rates and later-aged marriages are fueling shifts in relationships. How do different generations comprehend this changing society? Gen Z responds better than any previous generation. 62% of Gen Zers believe increased diversity is “good” for society, compared to only 52% of Gen Xers. Individuals affiliated with the Democratic Party across generations mostly believe “blacks are treated less fairly than whites,” however, Republican individuals see a stark generational gap when asked the same question. 43% of Gen Z Republicans believe the above statement, compared to only 30% of Millennials and 23% of Gen X Republicans. Moreover, 61% of Gen Zers support the NFL kneeling protests, compared to only 48% of Boomers and 42% of the Silent Generation. Gender and sexual awareness have also skyrocketed under Gen Z. 35% of Gen Zers say they refer to someone using gender-neutral pronouns (compared to only 25% of Millennials). Furthermore,

<sup>27</sup> Cummings, William. (2018, March 26). *The Bubble: March for Our Lives protesters dismissed by conservatives*. USA Today. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2018/03/26/media-reactions-march-our-lives/460029002/>.

<sup>28</sup> Plott, Elaina. (2018, March 16). *Growing Number of Republican Leaders are Pushing for Action on Guns*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/republican-guns/555737/>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Cox, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” PRRI, PRRI, September 6, 2017, <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

only 15% of Gen Zers say that same-sex couples are “bad” for society (compared to 25% of Generation X saying the same thing).<sup>31</sup> Similarly, only 23% of Gen Zers say that society is “too accepting” of individuals who do not identify as a man or a woman—compared to 33% of Gen X and 41% of the Silent Generation also saying the same thing.<sup>32</sup>

### *Demographic Changes*

Mary Daly encapsulates the relevance of changing gender and sexual relations in 1976, “...a new sense of reality is emerging. That is, a counterworld to patriarchy is coming into being which is by the same token counter to religion as *patriarchal*. [Sisterhood] is the evolution of a social reality that undercuts the credibility of sexist religion to the degree that it undermines sexism itself.”<sup>33</sup> Changing family dynamics undergird the growing support of empowerment (76% of Gen Z women view more women running for public office as “positive” for society, compared to 54% of Silent Generation women agreeing).<sup>34</sup> Daly’s writing is reflective of her more extensive understanding of womanist movements—that empowerment is the antithesis of the current religious order, and incompatible within the standing Christian moral framework. Although Daly’s writing comes from earlier stages of feminism, her critique is valid and applicable to the present situation. Her word is not the last, but her pioneering in women’s liberation has transformed modern perceptions of womanism. Furthermore, demographic changes (and social and political opinions) reflect the growing inevitability of Daly’s writing.

<sup>31</sup> Parker, K. (2019, January 17). Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-o-key-social-and-political-issues/>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press books, 1976), 69.

<sup>34</sup> Parker, K. (2019, January 17). Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-o-key-social-and-political-issues/>.



She adds, “A logical consequence of the liberation of women will be a loss of plausibility of Christological formulas which reflect and encourage idolatry in relation to the person of Jesus.”<sup>35</sup> Christian obsession with events and dualisms is irreconcilable with a generation in which there is no dominating base capable of abusing them—as is Daly’s understanding. This will mainly be discussed in later sections.

In part with the more significant demographic shift, young black Americans, historically more affiliated than their fellow white, Asian, and Hispanic youth, are shifting away from religion as well (although at a slower pace).<sup>36</sup> What does this mean for the most robust religious community in America? Once at the forefront of the fight for civil rights and primarily led by theologians, the Black church has lagged in modern movements (notably the Black Lives Matter movement and the battle for gun control). Now leaving younger Americans to take up the fight themselves, the Black church is faced with the odd task of reimagining their role in light of the changing youth.

Following Freddie Gray’s death, Kwame Rose, a twenty-six-year-old political activist, and author described the Church as “at odds” with the grassroots work he was doing and added, “The Church makes you fight toward the system and engage the system...we’re not trying to change the system. We’re trying to build our own systems.”<sup>37</sup> Rose’s critique is one of the many growing dissenting views of the Church’s ability to tailor its historical stances with an ever-changing young generation. The remarkable uniqueness of Generation Z positions itself in a different cultural setting, unlike any previous generation. Because of this, it can view the Church

35 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press books, 1976), 69.

36 Daniel Cox, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” PRRI, PRRI, September 6, 2017, <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

37 Emma Green, “Black Activism, Unchurched,” *The Atlantic*, The Atlantic, March 22, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/black-activism-baltimore-black-church/474822/>.

and other institutions outside the dominant knowledge. Of course, it is impossible to receive radically new understandings of religious institutions without absolutely relinquishing the dualistic truths that constructed the status quo in the first place—and because of this, Rose’s understanding is so necessary. It is a *new* system that is required, not a rebranding of the current one. The Black church will undoubtedly have a significant role in determining social movements’ outcome, whether on the sidelines and in the backdrop or the action. However, involvement will be contingent on cooperation between both parties, and the time for reconciliation between them is running out.

The young generation’s ability to adapt will inevitably lead to a climax in terms of communal partnerships with religious organizations. Meaning, that while the Black church (and most certainly white, Asian, and Hispanic churches) have, to this point, failed to deconstruct absolute truths disconnecting younger audiences, there will become a crux to which religion will be left behind entirely, or it will be forced to change radically. Theologian Melanie Harris argues that this style of Western thought (one that is overly concerned with absolute truths) has “become addicted to dualisms,”<sup>38</sup> stating:

...it is important to note the dangerous hierarchical dualisms that function normatively in Christian and Western thought. These, which can often be found in black Christian Churches, can separate the earth from the divine realm. In dualisms, such as heaven vs. Earth, spirit vs. body, and male vs. female, we see that instead of interconnections between the realms, a separation takes place that places one realm (heaven) over the other.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 146.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Harris adds it is this exact dualism (ones that “discount the role of women in the Church”) that disconnects individuals from religion and theologies.<sup>40</sup> This thought is precisely the understanding necessary for this research: it is *not* that young individuals are rebellious, and therefore at a natural stage in life, it *is* that areligiosity is the result of decades of unsustainable church practices, domination, and power-over relationships. In the form of both human-to-human and human-to-nonhuman relationships, hierarchical dualisms are inconsistent with the emotional understanding and intelligence that Gen Z possesses. That intelligence, detailed in the data presented earlier, also transcends human form (see environmental data). New mental models of religion require this emotional trust. So, when imagining a religion that attracts Generation Z, liberation cannot come from a personal, monochromatic relationship within the Church. Instead, faith itself must be put into the agency of young people.

### *Sustained Areligiosity*

Finally, sustained areligiosity is perhaps the most significant effect in the transition of the religious landscape. Historically as they got older, religiously unaffiliated Americans reidentified as religious. However, now this trend seems to be breaking (Cooper et al., 2016). This phenomenon, historically known as the life-cycle effect discussed earlier, can largely be attributed to those born between 1945 and 1969, who also rarely became unaffiliated as they got older. Although the retention rate of affiliation has steadily increased for decades, Americans being raised without religion and retaining their areligiosity has now nearly doubled since the 1970s (66% and 34%, respectively).<sup>41</sup> Of course, this can be attributed to several factors. One, unaffiliated Americans are more likely to believe organized religion “causes more problems than

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert P. Jones, “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” PRRI, PRRI, September 22, 2016. <https://www.prii.org/research/prii-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/>.

it solves,” leading to less affiliation.<sup>42</sup> Two, areligious Americans are less and less likely to find a link between religion and morality, as only 21% of unaffiliated Americans believe “it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, only 33% say “it is important for children to be brought up in religion so they can learn good values,” (Cooper et al., 2016). As indicated previously, political motivators are also more likely to drive young Americans out of churches (and keep them out). Another explanation (albeit it is commonly misunderstood) is the advancement of technology, the internet, and social media, and with it, the advancement of progressiveness, social awareness, and emotional intelligence (empathy, compassion, understanding). Within the limits of this project, this essay will be unable to develop this possibility here.

Ultimately, data presents clear realities the dominant religious communities are facing in the United States. There are consistent trends that show the failures of both churches and societal influences in bringing young, dissatisfied individuals to church—but the data only tells a part of the story. As mentioned earlier, the contemporary environment provides an alternative to conventional understandings of religious traditions and political norms. *Instead of quantifying religious and political participation as just a natural rebellious decline, it is essential that it is viewed as a necessary appreciation of the efficacy of young people—that instead of strongarming a system into a non-complying, areligious and independent audience, the system should adapt to the changing population (not the other way around).*

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Cox, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” PRRI, PRRI, September 6, 2017, <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

## Section Two: The Youth Consciousness Meets America

*This is on us! For generations we have called the youth stupid, stripped funding from their programs, kicked them out of places, and ignored them. What would you expect? Don't lock your doors tighter, open your hearts wider. Spread love.*

*- Columbus street art during the George Floyd Protests*

In his writing, Walter Brueggemann describes the harrowing inevitability of American religion, where he alludes to the Pharaohs of Egypt, who, in all their wealth and power, provided just the *necessary* amount of goods and services to keep society in order—“static gods.”<sup>44</sup> Their apathetic paralysis created the least possible standard of living—that the illusion of prosperity was perpetuated by only the most-visible winners of a “society of order.”<sup>45</sup> Today, the bare minimum cultural order of American welfare is no longer feasible within the young generation, and the standard of indifference in American society is no longer sustainable. Here, the static gods of American mythos, capitalism, the Presidency, Manifest Destiny, and other such pillars of ‘classic’ American identity, rely solely on the self-serving interests that work just well enough for the dominant individuals to testify to its effectiveness. Brueggemann later wrote:

Thus the religion of static gods is not and never could be disinterested, but in inevitably it served the interests of the people in charge, presiding over the order and benefitting from the order. And the functioning of that society testified to the rightness of the religion because kings did prosper and bricks did get made.<sup>46</sup>

As mentioned in the previous section, the collapse of youth religiousness is not a typical symptom of the life-cycle effect, but rather a cultural breaking-point built by decades of religious

<sup>44</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

barbarism and intolerable economic practices. That most churches are utterly incapable of receiving Gen Z in any form, and that while the wealthiest individuals in the U.S. and around the world continue to corrupt more of the total wealth, the young people of the U.S. and the world are faced with unprecedented immobility, debt, and confusion. Further left aside by most religious institutions, who, unwilling to adapt to the changing expectations of Gen Z, will be at a loss once young people are *supposed* to return to religion, but choose not to.

*The Ethic of Gen Z and the Spirit of Youthfulness*

Thus, it is imperative that the identity of Gen Z is explained in full, including, but not limited to, the behavior, consciousness, and character of the most diverse generation in American history. This research's explanation is two-fold: that (a) young people are radically removed from the old order of cultural binaries and hierarchies, and (b) that Gen Zers collectively share a profound responsibility to safeguard the energy of the generations that come after them.

No longer are things absolutely clear, nor are realities totally unambiguous. Validity is not certain, nor is tradition. Gen Z no longer connects to an earlier age; instead, Gen Z is defined on its terms. The identity of Gen Z is, quite simply but necessarily, flexible. Where the Pharaohs and the capitalists sought order by endorsing a dichotomy of line-riding progressiveness and service to the “haves” over the “have nots,” Gen Z's vision for the United States and the world is nonbinary.<sup>47</sup> Hence, the *ethic*, “the rules of conduct”<sup>48</sup> for Gen Z, are malleable based on experience and are undergirded with pluralist respect, love, and agency. The *ethic* is empowering—equally apt at abdicating prior oppressions as acquiring understanding for those who continue to suffer. The *ethic* is equally damning to violent pasts and the continued support for wicked histories (such as the continued celebration of slaveholders and confederates in the

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>48</sup> “ethic,” Dictionary, Dictionary LLC, June 11, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/ethic?s=t>.

form of statues and monuments). See the demand to defund the police. The ethic of Gen Z is not a merely characteristic youthfulness, but a new order of *true* justice for both human and nonhuman players in the Earth sphere. Rewriting the ethical framework of the Church is contingent on decreeing the end of triumphalism and economic, political, and religious idolatry as we know it, while also reinforcing the need for the swift and open readiness of older generations to receive Gen Z fully and honestly.

As part of the more extensive research, reclaiming language (or moving away from particular vocabulary entirely) is as much a part of the Gen Z story as the generation's actual identity. Thus, while "ethic" may appear to be barricading the generation into a set of standards and beliefs, this paper wishes to reestablish the ethic (of Gen Z) as a proper, new way of imagining ourselves within the current order and within current linguistic barriers. The prevailing order's grip on speech is precisely one of the reasons why relinquishing (and reclaiming) is so important to the process of Gen Z. This will be discussed later in this research.

So, while the ethic of Gen Z serves as the framework for a conscious communal understanding of responsibility, there remains a guiding force that sustains the absolute *yearning* for collective fulfillment and prosperity in the face of absolute impediment for youth success. This *spirit*, or *ethos*, is the encapsulation of the young imagination—one that acknowledges the challenges that are already in place for both ethical and political reform (such as ingrained structural *isms* that are heavily reliant on the static order), and also one that is fully ready to embrace change (moving to community-oriented public safety, wealth redistribution, debt forgiveness, among other issues). The spirit of youthfulness is not yet specific to Gen Z. Still, it does, however, contain responsibility—*that despite unprecedented economic downturn and cultural disenfranchisement, the young people of the United States ride a wave of hope and*

*optimism for their futures*. Ultimately, the spirit relies on the unyielding task of *leaving things better* for generations after the next and is unforgiving in its pursuit. The spirit is the weapon in combating these structured isms, blockades to generational liberation, and, of course, is entirely antithetical to the force of civil religion in the static order.

At its core, the identity of America has been conscientiously misguided by the strategic abuse of both the economic order and civil religion and has been fundamentally reorganized to benefit the top-earners of the most complex, calculated systems of oppression in modern times. It should be undeniably apparent, then, that it is not only appropriate for Generation Z to resist in all forms the profound abuse of economic and moral disdain, but that it is also imperative that we radically deviate from the status quo and do so unapologetically, swiftly, and with unprecedented coordination. The system requires dismantling! Not reorganization, nor a simple change in leadership. The culture of the United States needs a sweeping re-realization of who we *want* to be and an immediate cancelation of the antipathy that our current one maintains. It is incredibly disappointing that this job continues to be delegated to one generation after another.

Nevertheless, while this generation is fixated on the tremendous amount of hopelessness surrounding it, Gen Z is also ironically filled with a tremendous amount of hope, idealism, and futurism. That in the times of great moral strife and challenge, it is and has always been, the young people of the United States who recognized and enacted change. Not because the youth were naive, uneducated, and conform to their friends and family, but because of their very identity itself—that young people and its spirit mostly refuse to entertain the destructive pattern of American religio-capitalist culture, and because they had seen their fellow peers, loved ones and Americans bludgeoned by the burden of giving to a system that in any other time or country would be laminated as an unspeakable horror of violent, state-sponsored oppression. The



American Psychological Association (APA) found that while 62% of Generation Z says that the current political climate is a source of great stress and that 61% of Generation Z disagree that “our country is on the path to being better than ever,” yet 75% feel hopeful for the future.<sup>49</sup> The profound sense of optimism found within Gen Z does not come from finding hope within current politicians or world leaders, but in the agency and spirit of Gen Z itself.

### *The Unholy Alliance*

The unholy alliance formed between the economic order and civil religion, the merging of divine symbolism and an economy that generates individualism, further exposes the generational gap in American society. Where the economic order reveals itself to be the proponent of a rugged individualist system, civil religion guides the authorization of it—as underlying religious terminology superimposes itself under the veil of justification.

Understanding how capitalist America fits into Generation Z is essential in bringing forth generational solidarity—that reconciliation between older generations and younger ones can be real and authentic. If older generations are going to hold nearly every government office, run nearly every business and cooperation, decide what is “law” and “order” for the country and the world, it is essential that they have the youngest generations at the forefront of their decision-making. If the *spirit* is not adopted by older generations, it is impossible for solidarity to occur.

The old way’s comprehension of American capitalism, the idea of the American dream, or “pulling yourself up by the bootstraps” ideologies are inconceivable in modern America. For example, the average cost of college has risen 260% since 1980, an on average jump from \$9,438 to \$23,872, while the Consumer Price Index (CPI) has only increased by 120%.<sup>50</sup> Even

<sup>49</sup> American Psychological Association (2018), *Stress in America: Generation Z in America™ Survey*.

<sup>50</sup> Abby Jackson, “This chart shows how quickly college tuition has skyrocketed since 1980,” Business Insider, Insider, July 20, 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/this-chart-shows-how-quickly-college-tuition-has-skyrocketed-since-1980-2015-7>.

after adjusting for inflation, purchasing power has hardly changed since the '70s, where purchasing power peaked (\$4.03 in the early '70s had the same purchasing power as \$23.68 today).<sup>51</sup> Despite productivity increasing well over 70% since 1973, wages have only increased by only 9.2% (where hourly compensation increased nearly equally alongside productivity from 1948 to 1973).<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, in the 1960s, a couple could spend less than 25% of their take-home income on a home, multiple cars, and send their kid through college on a middle-income salary.<sup>53</sup> That reality, “the American dream,” no longer exists. In fact, the belief that it does keeps the very system afloat, argues theologian Joerg Rieger. He adds, “Large [bodies] of people still hold onto this hope that anyone can make it to the top, a message that is also propagated in many religious communities across the theological spectrum.”<sup>54</sup> The partnership between the Christian right and political conservatism (mainly on the issues of abortion, gender, sexuality, and militarism but also more importantly on the economic order), has culminated in an overt discourse meant for and built off of dualisms and hierarchies (George W. Bush’s labeling of good versus evil comes to mind).

This economic hierarchy is primarily the foundation for generational hostility (where there is no communication, harmony, and sense of *spirit*). American capitalism naturally infiltrates the human system with individual, innate antagonism, lending those who profit (in any way) off of an abusive system to lose any sense of communal reality. This, of course, is expected as the economic order requires selfish pursuit and absolutely contrary to the *ethic*. The

<sup>51</sup> Drew Desilver, “For most U.S. workers, real wages have hardly budged in decades,” Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, August 7, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/07/for-most-us-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence Mishel, Elise Gould, Josh Bivens, “Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts,” Economic Policy Institute, EPI, January 6, 2015. <https://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/>.

<sup>53</sup> Josh Bersin, “Why Aren’t Wages Keeping Up? It’s Not the Economy, It’s Management,” Forbes, Forbes Media, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2018/10/31/why-arent-wages-keeping-up-its-not-the-economy-its-management/#461c73d0397e>

<sup>54</sup> Joerg, Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 42.

unsustainability of this system is becoming more apparent, as economic inequality has grown rapidly over the last forty years. Economist Gray Kimbrough illustrates the widening generational gap in his research. Kimbrough found that Baby Boomers, by a median age of thirty-five, had amassed 21% of the nation's total wealth, whereas by the time Generation X reached the median age of thirty-five, they had only amassed 9% of the nation's total wealth. While neither Millennials nor Generation Z has reached the average age of thirty-five, Kimbrough projects Millennials will only possess 3.2% of the nation's total wealth by the time they are of age.<sup>55</sup> Of course, economic depression leads to other personal shortcomings as well, as according to the APA, 62% of Gen Zers are stressed about rising suicide rates (while only 44% of all other adults share the same concern), 77% are stressed about work. In comparison, only 64% of all other adults say the same. 81% of Gen Zers, say they are concerned about money, while again, only 64% of all other adults share the same concern. Civil religion guides this faux-transaction of higher productivity equaling lesser payment as healthy when, in reality, this should be a moral outrage for everyone.

Here, this civil religion, the promotion of false American mythos, demonstrates the tremendous power of unchecked cooperation that mostly encompasses the majority of American government today, and has uniquely positioned itself as entirely inimical to the *spirit* of Generation Z. *The dominating feverish affinity of civil religion affirms and authorizes the hierarchical understanding of race, gender, age, human, and nonhuman players within primary social and economic spheres of the U.S.* More importantly, the relevance of the deliberate collaboration cannot be overstated. Civil religion is *not* a casual relationship between two of the

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Ingraham, "The staggering millennial wealth deficit, in one chart," The Washington Post, The Washington Post, December 3, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/12/03/precarioussness-modern-young-adulthood-one-chart/>

most powerful institutions in the U.S. Instead, it is the embodiment of the status quo. Theologian Mark Lewis Taylor adds, "...the Christian right's influence as an organized, dynamic force...lies in the way it purveys a long tradition of religious romanticism, giving divine sanction to American exceptionalism and thereby providing added public strength to nationalism..."<sup>56</sup> Discrediting civil religion's guidance for the economic order as an incidental relationship undermines the purposefulness and severity of its actions and especially lessens the impact it has had (and continues to have) on Generation Z. Further underestimating civil religion's effects on capitalism as an ahistorical dogma is also inappropriate. It is critical to recognize that the marriage between the two roles of civil religion and American capitalism has long continued under the pretense of classic American tradition. Specifically, while civil religion most certainly contributes to economic and political processes and opinions, it also has an equally destructive ignorance towards the *ethic* and agency of young people. That in the fight for progressiveness and social change, there is (and always has been) a conscious effort to ignore the desires and needs of the younger generation.

To make sense of civil religion and American capitalism within the current generation, one must further understand the American myth of individualism. Joerg Rieger further argues that American individualism is an illusion that "helps to buttress the power of the ruling class, as it allows this class to see itself in separation from the working class."<sup>57</sup> For our research, it is appropriate to interpret the above statement as a generational illusion, rather than class. The internalization of individualism generationally has blockaded empathetic responses to generational strife, and instead has perpetrated the upholding of malicious traditions as "this is what we went through, you can make it through it as well," or, "you're too young to *actually* get

<sup>56</sup> Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian right* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 54.

<sup>57</sup> Joerg, Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 50.

it.” It is not that young people are incapable of entertaining the attitudes and beliefs of generations before them, nor is it that young people are naive in their youth and therefore cannot see the *why* in tradition. It is precisely the opposite, that younger generations *do* see, and have largely refused to engage with the individualistic culture that has preceded them, and that older generations have, to this point, failed to see Gen Z in any form other than pompous kids. When older generations have become so accustomed to the destructive pattern of the lie of American individualism, it forces younger generations into isolated liberation. How, then, is it fair to expect younger generations to participate in a system when there is nothing for them even there? The myth of American individualism allows this, as it has become so ingrained in the culture of older generations that the lie itself has largely removed them from the action.

So, this research understands the significance of civil religion’s effect on Generation Z as a perpetuating force of unchecked capitalist individualism, that civil religion’s primary purpose is selfish fulfillment, and that selfishness is contingent on rigid enforcement of traditional roles and the intentional rewriting of the moral understanding. When exploring this influence, it is necessary to understand it as such—that the very ethic of Generation Z is at odds with current dominating religious and economic authority. Differing between this research’s understanding of civil religion and Christendom is also needed. The unspoken covenant of American hyperpatriotism and religious devotion grants the sentiment of American exceptionalism and the safeguarding of the civil religion—that warping national symbols with religious imagery (“In God We Trust,” the Pledge of Allegiance, “America the Beautiful,” and other such works) is always done in favor of the perpetuation of religio-nationalist myths. Civil religion, then, purposefully distorts the very identity of who we are as Americans and instead bolsters a religio-

capitalist relationship. In contrast, Christendom sees Christianity as the basis of the state, not as a tool for the state's reach of authority.

Accordingly, it is imperative that both civil religion and capitalism are deconstructed through the lens of Gen Z. For this, one must understand the importance of the proliferation of the unchecked American capitalism sustained by civil religion at the highest levels of the American State. The superimposing of religious symbols with American economic oppression becomes a *commodification* of religion itself—ultimately a tool used for the authorization of brutality (mainly via the economic order) and the promotion of self-idolization. Staunch capitalist, billionaire, playboy, President Donald Trump exemplifies this notion perfectly.

### *Crisis in the American State*

Reminiscent of Bush's religio-nationalist speeches, President Trump (who only received 37% of the 18-29-year-old vote in 2016), repeatedly uses theology-speak in accentuating nationalist language and policy. In his State of the Union address, Trump's policy was underscored by references to the "Almighty" and repeated uses of "God" in alluding to the abortion issue. In his abstraction of 'American' ideology, the President stated, "This is our glorious and magnificent inheritance. We are Americans. We are pioneers. We are the pathfinders. We settled the New World, we built the modern world, and we changed history forever by embracing the eternal truth that everyone is made equal by the hand of Almighty God,"<sup>58</sup> later stating, "In reaffirming our heritage as a free nation, we must remember that America has always been a frontier nation. Now we must embrace the next frontier, America's manifest destiny in the stars."<sup>59</sup> Moreover, take the example when Attorney General William

<sup>58</sup> "Full Transcript: Trump's 2020 State of the Union Address," The New York Times, NYTCO, February 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/us/politics/state-of-union-transcript.html>

<sup>59</sup> "Full Transcript: Trump's 2020 State of the Union Address," The New York Times, NYTCO, February 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/us/politics/state-of-union-transcript.html>

Barr, at the impression of President Trump, ordered the clearing of peaceful protestors of George Floyd's death by force so he could appear in a photo-op at St. John's Episcopal Church (a church that he has only ever attended once before), where he then did not pray, but held the Bible upside-down and backward, and then proceeded to leave. When asked if the Bible was his, Trump simply responded, "This is a Bible." Bishop William J. Barber II described the event as a "...shameful, heretical act of public idolatry."<sup>60</sup>

Expressing American mythos (generally nationalist speak) while stroking hyperpatriotism only fans the flames of underlying American fears (xenophobia, racism, sexism, ageism among others) and does nothing to reconcile younger generations. Instead, religio-nationalist speak only polarizes the U.S. and manipulates God for the civil religion. Trump's acknowledgment (promotion) of manifest destiny shows that civil religion is not only powerful but the current pinnacle of religion in the U.S. Moreover, Trump's attempts at trying to commodify religion as basis and evidence for his unorganized and dangerous administration are obvious, despite how outspoken the President is regarding his religious affiliation. See, for example, when asked what his favorite Bible verse was, Trump declined to comment, stating, "...I don't want to get into verses...the Bible means a lot to me, but I don't want to get into specifics."<sup>61</sup> Trump's rather unconvincing attempts to spout his religiousness despite his outspokenness, which is not necessarily invoked with depth or conviction, shows that the use of civil religion is a conscious one. Moreover, where President Bush's use of religiosity was more of a personal projection where he transposed his personal beliefs in the political sphere, Trump is simply capturing the authority of religion—which is partially why his use of it is so ineffective (as it is not believable

<sup>60</sup> Bishop William J Barber II, *CNN*, (June 2, 2020: Atlanta: Warner, 2020), Computer.

<sup>61</sup> Walker, Hunter, "Donald Trump just dodged two questions about the Bible," *Business Insider*, Insider, August 26, 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-refused-to-name-favorite-bible-verse-2015-8>.

nor honest). Congressionally, it is also interesting to point out here that only .2% of the United States Congress is religiously unaffiliated compared to 23% of the United States as a whole, the largest Congress-to-population gap in any religious cohort, with a total of 89% of Congress identifying as Christian (a rather low number when compared traditionally).<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> “Faith on the Hill,” Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, January 3, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/01/03/faith-on-the-hill-116/>



### **Section Three: Relinquishing and Receiving**

As stated in the previous section, the ethic of Gen Z possesses some greater visceral understanding of larger injustices throughout the country and the world. However, it is clear that while young people no longer need the Church to begin protests and resistance, religious institutions (or other large organizing bodies, although almost none carry the rhetoric as powerful) are necessary for maintaining the fight for weeks, months, years, and even just days after initial outrage. That despite the uniqueness of this generation's ability to use social media as a tool for social justice, movements up until this point have largely fallen short of their goals, or their popularity has abated after the "social trendiness" of the movement ended. It is becoming ever-increasingly clear that without a large organizing body, social movements will be unable to formally call for demands nor organize to the extent needed to force the dominant hand. Where Martin Luther King Jr was endorsed by the National Council of Churches and other influential organizations, Gen Z has been left to organize on their own. If Gen Z is unwilling to organize, and organized religion is unwilling to adapt to the modern circumstance, there can be no future by which both parties can survive—Gen Z will continue to grow up in an unsustainable world, and the Church will willow into smaller and smaller pockets throughout the country. Ultimately, what would the practice of the faith tradition have to look like for the young generation to value it? Is it that an articulation of the real Biblical tradition has been misconstrued, and that the present conception of tradition requires dismantling to reflect Gen Z? Or, is Gen Z so radically removed from the tradition that the very generation itself does not correspond to it? I argue that it is impossible to separate these two schools of thought and that only through reconciling them both will Gen Z and the Church appreciate each other's value.

*Putting the Church in the Action*

While this research understands that the two above questions cannot be answered without addressing the other, it is necessary to address each question individually and identify how both coincide with one another. To begin, we will examine Walter Brueggemann's essays on *relinquishment* and *receiving* and apply his work to our research. That old universal truths of good and evil and right and wrong must be removed to receive something different (Gen Z); this generation is radically at odds with the socio-cultural basis that prior generations have manufactured. Coincidentally, the Church has the same animosity towards this created reality but has been corrupted and co-opted to fit its antagonist. For the old way to fathom the possibility of a reality where young people return to religion, there must be an unadulterated resignation of what is "old" and "treasured," and that in turn, the Church must be comprehensively reorganized to promote *true* social activism and *true* justice.<sup>63</sup> Meaning, that the practice of a church where Gen Z is attending is free from binaries and unambiguous realities and where the *ethic* is embraced. *True* social activism and *true* justice will be explained further in the forthcoming sections. Second Isaiah notes:

Remember not the former things,

Nor consider things of old.

Behold, I am doing a new thing;

Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isa 43:18-19)

Explicitly, what requires relinquishing is the consciousness by which unambiguous truths inspire a reality where hierarchies are justified, and *things* are more valued than human fulfillment.

<sup>63</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Tenacious Solidarity: Biblical Provocations on Race, Gender, Religion, Climate, and the Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 3777.

Meaning, that this new reality is wholly reimagined through the embodiment of the actual Biblical tradition (see Second Isaiah) and that it is not a restructure nor an extension of the present, civil tradition. Melanie Harris, for example, identifies these fixed hierarchies as a “logic of domination.”<sup>64</sup> The unambiguous authoritarian sense of reality that the current order preserves serve as the authorization and justification for distorted “law and order” police brutality, the refusal to administer any more than the bare minimum of welfare, and religious fanaticism that treats gay kids and a women’s right to choose as the most despicable possible human acts despite the unholiness of the individualism being consciously embraced and encouraged by the Church. Of course, for Gen Z to *receive* the real Biblical tradition, it must be reimagined to reflect the body—not the other way around. Hence the reason why both questions must be discussed with attention to the other.

Brueggemann describes a “fissure,” a deep cleavage of sorts, in American society between generations, religious affiliation, ethnic background, language, and political ideology, one that transcends demographic and cohort and is “historic” in proportion.<sup>65</sup> He states, “This fissure signifies nothing less than a crisis in modernity and the jeopardy of Enlightenment rationality, that is, a dispute over what we know and how we know it.”<sup>66</sup> Brueggemann adds, “...it is not a surprise that *this deep fissure impacts the Church as it does every settled social institution* because the Church has come to have deep commitments to modernity with its habits of absolute truth claims and its own sense of settled reality.”<sup>67</sup> These commitments, seen in both the economic order as well as the political one, yield the old consciousness that is now separated

<sup>64</sup> Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 146.

<sup>65</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Tenacious Solidarity: Biblical Provocations on Race, Gender, Religion, Climate, and the Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 3777.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 3785.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 3811.

from the young one. Seen now generationally, this gap cannot be more apparent. As shown in the data presented in the first section, Generation Z is not only politically opposite of older generations but also culturally adverse to the economic and religious orders. Meaning, that the ethic of Gen Z is so far removed from the presiding cultural norms that it is seen as revolutionary extremism.

However, is this not the Biblical tradition? To combat the dominant order in all forms? It is just because of these norms that the ethic lies so far. The ethic is not radical, but the tradition itself! The spirit is not blind optimism, but the tradition itself! Where have the older generations been in allowing mass deafness and blindness to country-wide oppressions of police brutality, lynchings, crippling debt, redlining, and gerrymandering? Have they not seen or heard? The young generations have been shouting for decades! Yet since blindness and deafness to economic, religious, and political brutality have become so ingrained in the apathy of America, there has been little to no recognition of these cries. The tradition itself has become so distorted in the eyes of the masses and controlling order that the older generations have failed to see the very Biblicism in the youth they claim to have! Was it not the young people who ran to aid their fellow young protesters who were blinded, gassed, and killed by the state in opposition to state-sponsored police executions of African Americans? Was Jesus not also subversive to the dominant order by way of insurrection and protest? See the *King James Version*:

And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection. (Mk 15:7)

Or the *New International Version*:

They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. (Mk 15:27)

It is for this ironic reason that the old way of fixed realities being beyond debate must unapologetically be relinquished. It is the prophet's role to bring the new imagination, and with it, the dismantling of the old order. The irony of Christians showing less approval of the Black Lives Matter protests, and the civil disobedience along with it, shows how far the Biblical tradition has been perverted.<sup>68</sup> *The hypocrisy of the self-serving socio-religious order bathes in its own insincerity and does so consciously.* There can be no receiving, no reconciliation until the Biblical work of Gen Z is accurately reflected in the Church. Until religious institutions discontinue their now unconvincing attempts at molding younger generations, Gen Z will continue to be absent from the Church and instead in the action.

It is necessary to point out here, that the response to the provoking of socio-religious norms will undoubtedly be challenged to a large degree. Once old absolutes and old certitudes are jeopardized, Brueggemann states, the very threat of losing the old way will evoke “...a rough and raw season of anxiety, fear, and anger” from those who have benefitted from it—a “sense of being in free fall.”<sup>69</sup> This anger is expected. Why would those who have profited off of domination glee at the idea of those they have terrorized for generations becoming liberated? It is equally important to note that Generation Z may not even *want* to reconcile with the Church. If, however, the young generation does, the use of the new mission must come from the consent of

<sup>68</sup> Kim Parker, “Amid Protests, Majorities Across Racial and Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement,” Pew Research Center, Pew, June 12, 2020, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/06/12/amid-protests-majorities-across-racial-and-ethnic-groups-express-support-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>

<sup>69</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Tenacious Solidarity: Biblical Provocations on Race, Gender, Religion, Climate, and the Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 3795.

the youth. At the present moment, Gen Z is mostly abstaining from requesting the Church join them in social movements. This is, of course, because the Church has rarely, if ever, been an ally to young people, as a young gay individual is more scrutinized for being themselves than adult pathological racists and sexists are for being racists and sexists.

As stated earlier, Gen Z is fully capable of sparking country-wide dissent (see March For Our Lives or the Black Lives Matter movement), but lacks the overarching organization needed to sustain movements for both the demanding effort required of such movements as well as the social and political pressure needed to enact functional change. Thus it is imperative that religious institutions *dramatically shift their understanding* of social issues to embrace environmentalism, nontraditional notions of gender and sexuality, active anti-racism (among others), immediately to be more absorbing of Gen Z.

The “trend” of progressivism, the “cyclical” nature of youthfulness, is by no means ending soon, as the training, examination, and study that have prescribed rebelliousness and progressiveness as a natural stage in “maturity” has been done under the pretense of past generation’s socio-cultural understanding. Meaning, that the bootstraps world where the Silent Generation, Boomers, and Gen Xers grew up in no longer exists and that it would be foolish to assume that younger generations will put up with the inopportunity and socio-religious bigotry that previous generations have come to foster. Gen Z is only seen as “removed” from the tradition because of the environment that they have been brought up in (the one which older generations have built), and *not* because they themselves are radically distant from the Biblical tradition (in fact they are the closest). Religious institutions have failed Gen Z by largely refusing to reflect the values of Gen Z and have adamantly declined to show that they are entirely contradictory to the order and the callous way of life that capitalist and religious idolatry has

bred. If the pursuit of basic human fulfillment is seen as “radical” and “childish” then so help the consciousness that tries to survive without championing the youth.

#### **Section Four: Agency in New Mental Models and Manifesting the Ethic and the Spirit**

On the other side of relinquishment, there is also the embrace of the *ethic* and *spirit*—which will be developed below. Ultimately, the praxis of the new Church will not be based in subservient hierarchies and absolutes, nor will the new vision lack verisimilitude, but will be a tool for activism and true justice (as sought by the younger generation). For this to become a reality, there are several steps by which both the Church and older generations must take for the old way to become relinquished as well as for generational solidarity to occur. The first, and most important measure, is the structured new perception of Melanie Harris’ *womanist intersectional analysis*, which will galvanize American imagination to reconfigure the wider understanding of how the economic, political, and religious orders uphold and defend systemic, ingrained oppressions in American society. Specifically, Harris’ analysis will allow us to draw connections between gender and sexual oppressions with racism, and with environmental injustices as well. These associations will be the first step in recognizing the systemic abuses by the old orders and will certify both the *ethic* and the *spirit* as valid, discernable components of the younger generation. Once understanding from the perspective of Harris’ analysis is achieved, the hierarchies by which the current religious order has positioned itself will be exposed to the wider public, and from there transition will begin to occur to the new praxis (this will be detailed later in this research).

##### *Womanist Intersectional Analysis*

Dismantling the old way is contingent on understanding theologian Melanie Harris’ analysis, which perceives the experience as a “collective memory” of injustice. Harris’ work primarily revolves around African American women and environmental justice. However, her work regarding transformative liberations is necessary for this research. Her analysis is three-



fold, (a) recognizing the “parallel oppressions [of] women of African descent and the Earth,” (b) reclaiming African American environmental history, which in turn can generate agency and “self-recovery,” and (c) applying intersectional womanist analysis to bring together all those affected by systemic oppressions. It is the third point that needs emphasis for our research. Harris states, “...when access to basic human rights, such as health, education, and a safe environment (water, soil, etc.), are denied because of some form of discrimination against people, based on their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, nationality, or regional influence, then such womanist intersectional analysis is important.”<sup>70</sup> Here, womanist intersectional analysis can be interpreted as such, that multidimensional oppressions are the essence of both civil religion and the economic order. While individual oppressions are certainly destructive in their own setting and require deconstruction upon their individual terms, their origins can often be traced back to the underlying structural injustices of American society as a whole—*that civil religion and the economic order, the combination of institutional, purposeful injustices by the church and the ultimate power of the American political and economic state, uphold and defend these injustices relentlessly in favor of (not in spite of) their destructive behavior.* It is why, then, that intersectional analysis is necessary—as understanding domination via old way hierarchies (as structured entities) is only possible by those affected by it or by seeing those who have been (Generation Z has become more accustomed to the tragedies allowed by these hierarchies than previous generations as they have been most visible and most repetitive to them). For example, take how shocking the beating of Rodney King was to a national audience, now there are videos of police officers ruthlessly beating African-Americans nearly every day.

<sup>70</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 44.

It is because of this latter point that intersectional analysis is so necessary. At the time of this writing, Black Lives Matter protests have erupted across the globe and have been sustained in some form for over three weeks. George Floyd, who was murdered by Minneapolis police officers using an illegal chokehold, gasped “I can’t breathe,” drawing international outcry and comparisons to Eric Garner’s murder in 2014. Harris wrote of Garner’s death in 2017 and noted that the autopsy report for Garner revealed that not only did Garner die from the illegal chokehold also used on him, but also because he suffered from asthma. Harris stated, “...Eric Garner, like thousands of children and adults living in and breathing in non clean air, suffered not only because of racially motivated violence, but also because the air in his community robbed him of a normal quality of life: the right to breathe clean.”<sup>71</sup> While Floyd’s immediate death was only brought by the knee of racism, his death, along with Garner’s, has transformed the national narrative of systemic racism and the “environmental justice paradigm,” to which Harris states, “...[the paradigm allows us] to see the connections between social justice and environmental justice, and to hear these important earth stories.”<sup>72</sup> Now, as Floyd’s death has once again drawn the national media attention to the everlasting fight against structural racism, it is evident that Gen Z is very much in the streets (and where the Church is noticeably absent), and using unprecedented solidarity to join one another in doing so. This research will use the contemporary moment of Black Lives Matter to illustrate the flexibility, determination, and hope that Gen Z carries with them, and that through the intersectional understanding of multifaceted oppressions we will be able to see that the *spirit* that guides this movement is unbothered by the

71 Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 77.

72 Ibid.

obvious attendance of these protests—that they are led by and primarily made up of the most diverse generation of young people this country has seen.

Harry Belafonte, singer, activist, and former confidant to Martin Luther King Jr, said of this generation and the above notion:

Young people today have social media at their fingertips. They've been exposed to the everyday injustices that maybe some of us who are older were probably prevented from seeing because it wasn't being shown in the traditional media outlet. I remember the first time I witnessed police brutality was the Rodney King case [in 1991]. Now you're witnessing it everyday.<sup>73</sup>

Along with the economic and political reality where young people were born into, the visuals of domination have been so prominent in the social sphere that its existence is undeniable.

However, where older generations have largely allowed the repressive state to exist in its own sphere, too far distant from those who remain untouched by the machine of racism to notice, this reality is the only one that most of Gen Z has known. Now, at the intersection of Pride Month, Black Lives Matter, and Juneteenth, the intersectionality of those abused by the militaristic, racist, repressive (dominating) state is the crux of how Gen Z has come to live.

“Well, government? You've fucked with the last generation.”<sup>74</sup> Nupol Kiazolu, the nineteen-year-old head of Black Lives Matter of Greater New York, encapsulated the mentality that Gen Z shares to several thousand protestors during her speech amid the George Floyd protests. Standing just several feet away from her, the militarized police forces terrorized young people across the country for daring to stand up the way of life that the old way had grown

<sup>73</sup> Rebecca Bellan, “Gen Z Leads The Black Lives Matter Movement, On and Off Social Media,” Forbes, Forbes, June 12, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccabellan/2020/06/12/gen-z-leads-the-black-lives-matter-movement-on-and-off-social-media/#6fb29cba19a8>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

comfortable with. The juxtaposition of a young black woman fighting for *true* justice with the military might of the state facing her is not new to the United States. It is, however, a perfect picture for this moment—that the self-projected scare-tactic of a state-sponsored show of violence shows that the old order is absolutely petrified of subversive, young black women and that the standing order is soon perishable. It is also imperative to point out here the awesome influence that LGBTQIA+ activists have had on both the civil rights (and Black Lives Matter) movements as well as the stonewall moment and history of queer activism. That each of these movements is coming to a crossroads, together. See Marsha P. Washington, one of the most important figures in both the civil rights movement as well as the gay liberation movement, who pioneered both, only to be murdered in 1992. Now, however, at the junction between both of them, it is only fitting that Washington’s liberation is coming to fruition—see the tens of thousands of people who marched at Black Trans Lives Matter protests across the country in response to two black trans women being murdered within a week of one another.<sup>75</sup> It is this recognition that encapsulates both the *ethic* and *spirit* of Gen Z—that understanding intersectionality through the process of liberation is the only sustainable social contract. When one ruling cohort consistently dominates everyone beneath them, insurrection is inevitable. Now, older generations must adopt the same energy as younger generations have come to see as normal—that the *ethic*, the appreciation, and promotion of diverse identities and personalities, must become endorsed by the dominating religious authorities or Gen Z and future generations will continue to be removed. Relinquishing, and therefore the means by which young people may return can *only* occur when the tactics of the economic, political, and religious orders are recognized and thoroughly defeated in all forms.

<sup>75</sup> Anushka Patil, “How a March for Black Trans Lives Became a Huge Event,” The New York Times, NYTCO, June 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/nyregion/brooklyn-black-trans-parade.html>

*Young Agency*

The generational narrative has always been surrounded by the idea that young people *should* be doing something different because they are not like *us*. Older generations must retire this fallacy that believes that young people behave a certain way because of their youthfulness (and therefore ill-equipped agency). Instead, the old way must consider the ownership of the responsibility of societal failures that have led to a swath of issues facing the younger generation. Young people cannot vote, yet sixteen-to-eighteen-year-olds are taxed if employed—taxation without representation. Young people can no longer afford college, so they are required to take out loans, leaving them predestined to decades of economic servitude and an inability to access their true fulfillment. Young people no longer go to church, yet dominant religious institutions continue to influence policy and deny youth agency over their own bodies. The very existence of young minds and bodies, both in a sexual and nonsexual sense, are limited solely based on their age (which as a unit of repression only exists because of the old tradition's conception of some semblance of order) and are withheld from nearly all policy-making decisions (forty-eight U.S. Senators are over the age of sixty-five, with 147 U.S. Representatives also being over the age of sixty-five. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 30, is the youngest member of congress, who also happens to be one of the most progressive representatives, while Josh Hawley, 40, is the youngest U.S. Senator).

The lack of acknowledgment and service to the young agency by no means accurately reflects the power of it. In fact, one could make the argument that the denial of the agency respects it, but that more than likely is not the case here. Nonetheless, the young agency carries itself just as strong as older generations do, but as seen earlier in this research, is conducted in an entirely different sense, in that young agency is (for the most part) no longer angled for selfish

contentment (as the economic order has pushed older generations to do for decades), but instead is directed at communal prosperity. See, for example, the financial contributions to organizations since the beginning of the George Floyd protests. Young people (18-29) have donated more money (despite being the poorest) than any other cohort by more than double.<sup>76</sup> 21% of eighteen-to-twenty-nine-year-olds have said they have donated money compared to only 10% of Millennials, 5% of those aged fifty-to-sixty-four, and only 4% of those over the age of sixty-five.<sup>77</sup> Generation Z also leads all other generations in the participation of the protests, contacting public officials, and conversations with friends and family about race.<sup>78</sup> More examples will be detailed below; however it is important to understand that this agency is dramatically different from previous generations by its definition. In fact, our idea of agency has been so twisted in an economic system built to limit individual autonomy that our basis for normal behavior, or human “nature,” rather, has come to see disparity and prejudice as normal functions of a “democratic” society. These pillars of American culture must also come down.

### **Soil, Bodies, and God**

Noted here, “nature,” in quotation, characterizes our reality by how we define it. Human “nature” is only interpreted as nature, natural, insofar as the language of the term has established itself, and compelling humans have substantiated the phrase through comfortability and normality. The “natural order,” a creation of faux-order, is very much distinct from nature itself. Where nature is the space in which God created for humans to shepherd, love, care and cultivate, the “natural order,” much like the dualistic hierarchies in which the prevailing order maintains, is

<sup>76</sup> Kim Parker, “Amid Protests, Majorities Across Racial and Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement,” Pew Research Center, Pew, June 12, 2020, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/06/12/amid-protests-majorities-across-racial-and-ethnic-groups-express-support-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

organized purposefully to serve the duopoly of man and God over woman, the economic order and God over poor, and whiteness and God over blackness. It is because of the very human definition of ourselves that we have come to propagate a society of injustice and imbalance. The way we understand ourselves is of our design. If we, as humans, have come to regard this aberrancy as some sort of “correct” moral direction, who, besides the sculptors of the current order, is to say this crime can not be challenged and redefined? Daniel P. Castillo gives the illustration within the garden, which understands the tree of life’s location within the garden as significant.<sup>79</sup> Castillo states, “Read canonically, the tree of life symbolizes the wisdom of God,” and Augustine notes the tree of life “must be Christ himself.”<sup>80</sup> Castillo adds, “Having organized the garden in this manner, God sets the human person to the task of ‘cultivating and caring’ for the garden (Gen 2:15). In effect, God calls the human to cooperate with God’s wisdom, giving the person the symbolic vocation of ‘gardener.’”<sup>81</sup> Now, as agents of nature, humans are obligated to keep and promote the interests of the garden as we ourselves flow from it.

The functionality and purpose of the gardener in the earth sphere finds itself within the caretakers themselves. The space by which God created the garden, earth, is set up in a way so that the proliferation and degradation of this realm are equally likely to occur. The responsibility, or burden, of the human species, is so greatly beyond ourselves and extends far beyond the limits of our individual ambitions or indulgences. The human species, among other inhabitants of the planet, are accountable to the Creator for the success, or lack thereof, of the planet. Of course, however, human decisions are individual, sovereign, and distinct from the initial creation of the earth sphere. Agency, then, cannot only extend to our autonomous choices. Rather, agency in the

<sup>79</sup> Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 73.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

garden as a *gardener* is directed to the wider community as a whole, including, but not limited to, the earth itself. Just as God deputized the first earth creatures as gardeners who are responsible for the sanctity of the architecture of the garden, the humans that walk today carry that responsibility. The gardener today, much like the first two, have taken God's place within the created order and have had the Creator's power invested in them.

With the modern circumstance in mind and our understanding of the interrelatedness of the economic order and ecological transgression, we can see the human responsibility within nature. If we are to understand the nature of humanity within the realm of the garden, our current disposition towards the environment will be understood as so perverted from our original intent that our function will be unrecognizable. Seen as a part of the relinquishing process, the prevailing order, much like what Gen Z is currently doing in the form of the *spirit*, must admit the failure of their obligation. Conscious environmentalism *is* the Biblical tradition. Religious traditionalism *can* exist within ecological liberation. Much like today's protests resemblance to the Biblical story, environmentalism has been falsified as something entirely separate from the tradition. In fact, inaction in the face of environmental destruction ignores the very responsibility God bestowed upon humans! Castillo argues: "Fundamentally, this theology claims (in a manner that coheres with the views of *Laudato Si'*) that God creates the human person to live in communion with God, neighbor, and earth, and that the human person's corresponding love of God, neighbor, and earth exist as distinct but interrelated realities."<sup>82</sup> *Thus, the triangulation between these three realities is evidence of the economic and social oppressions shared between them; that aggression towards one is aggression towards all.*

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 68.



God, neighbor, and earth are all interconnected realities. The phenomenon that the dominant economic order has come to foster, identifying the earth as some sort of “other,” has granted commodification of the planet and has allowed its abuse to our benefit to the point where we have no personal obligation to keep the earth safe and secure. Of course, by treating any order as “natural,” we come to substantiate our own transgressions as normal and a part of the human process. This trickery could not be more harmful. Where the economic order and civil religion have brandished individualism as some sort of moral imperative, this alliance has also misaligned the human responsibility of gardener from our space within the created order. Theodore Hiebert claims that this function is human care for the soil (earth). However, Castillo adds, “...this claim is too constrictive. It is better to understand ‘the garden’ as referring not imply to “the soil” but also to ‘all that comes from the soil.’”<sup>83</sup> The space of the garden is the same construct as that of the earth creatures that inhabit it. Humans and the environment are *distinguishable* from one another, yet they are not *different* from each other; we, just as much as the rocks, trees, and birds, are all accountable to God by the way in which we garden the earth. Castillo adds:

Thus, to cultivate and care for the garden is to cultivate and care for the soil and all that comes from the soil...The intimacy of the relationship between the human and the soil is reinforced etymologically: God creates the human...out of the earth. Here, then, both love of earth and love of neighbor are constitutive of the vocation of the gardener.<sup>84</sup>

These realms of humanity and nature feed and go into one another. The face of God is the care of God in the space of God—the care of the earth in the earth space is the act of God.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 74.

Caretaking for the human realm within the garden requires specialized modes of focus. Where one body is inappropriately denied the right to fulfillment by some twisted reasoning, it must be the focus of the community to ensure that every extension of the garden is promoted and life is ensured. Again, Castillo reinforces the importance of this argument with the image of soil. He adds, "According to the narrative logic of Genesis's second account of creation, the human person comes to inhabit the image of God most fully through properly responding to God's call to love the soil, and all that comes from the soil, thereby enfleshing God's wisdom with the world."<sup>85</sup> So, humans have the ability to *choose* whether or not to answer God's call with love, but, of course, this call can still be misunderstood or ignored altogether. The Christian right, for example, has, at best, misplaced this mission with bigotry regarding sexuality and gender. If God's call is to love *all* that comes from the soil, it is the gardener's role to ensure this achievement. Domination in any form has shown to be acknowledged and disavowed by God, see the fall or any attempt to form categorical boundaries between one human being and another. Humans have been given the privilege of defining others, but this does not mean that using that privilege is a righteous act. If anything, abstaining from using *all* of our designated human power is the very logic behind environmentalism and a new social contract, let alone more righteous than using broad, stereotypical classifications as a form of identification (which almost always leads to discrimination).

Every designation in our human reality is of human creation. What is distinguished is created as a part of a hierarchy. Designation as a part of constructing a social construct serves only as the foundation for discrimination and privilege. Taking care of your neighbor's body is equally important as cultivating the soil, caring for the birds, and watering the tree. Therefore,

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 76.

both the reality of sexuality and gender and the earth are of the same fabric. Taking care of your brother's body, sister's body, their body, is part of the same ambition as caring for the earth, and all a part of our accountability to God. Distinguishing homosexuality as somehow alien to the human experience is just as radical as dismissing the earth as some entirely separate entity from the human realm. Which, by almost all accounts, is what the economic order is purposefully doing. The *only* way to make sense of human behavior generally is that each individual is autonomous and can make their own rational decisions. Of course, corruption of influential social institutions can affect decision making one way or another, but generally speaking, we cannot bind one another by a definition *we* have prescribed them. We can only allow each individual to define themselves. Once this agency is denied, it is our responsibility that God has entrusted gardeners with, to protect and empower the agency once again.

Embracing Castillo's idea of gardener is the embodiment of the *ethic* and actively works against the corrupted civil religion and the Christian right. Young Americans, shown continuously in the data, commit to protecting the holiness of the earth and the earth's extensions at much higher levels than that of previous generations. Moreover, as seen in the data presented in the first section (that will also be further elaborated on in the following section), Gen Z increasingly encourages and defends diverse and new sexualness, far more so than any previous generation. Time and time again Generation Z is, ironically, more reflective of the Biblical tradition than other age cohorts, and despite being seemingly uninterested in the idea of religion itself, young people continue to live up to the Scripture and advance God's will (albeit it may be unbeknownst to most of Gen Z). Protesting for the earth is godly, standing up to police brutality and systemic racism at Black Lives Matter marches is righteous, and consecrating oneself to

protecting the human rights of all sexual and nonsexual humans should be revered. This is Gen Z at its core.

### **Hidden Autonomy**

Our work here brings in the question of gender and sexual identity of Jesus Christ, and how denied sexual and gender freedom of young people is one of the many facets of the complex web of oppression that actively works to dominate the youth. Agency, as indicated above, is not only directed towards the community but also works directly through the question of queerness; that, despite the other factors of tyranny (economic, religious, political), the gender and sexuality of young people display a growing new understanding of both community and relationships (including both person to person and person to nonperson). We will begin by dissecting the Biblical tradition through queer theory and how not only does the sexuality of Jesus Christ relate to young people (much like the insurrectionist characteristic), but also how the agency of young people is further denied through the erasure of Jesus's sexuality and nonconforming notions of gender. Combining the updated understanding of agency with Harris' analysis will allow us to recognize further the intersectionality between race and age as well as gender and sexuality. While this research is unable to dedicate more to sexual theology, doing so will also allow us to display *specific* steps organized religion must take in order for young people to return to religion as a part of the process of relinquishment and receiving.

Theologian Kwok Pui-Ian describes the sexual images of Christ and Mary, that Jesus is displayed as a "sexually safe celibate" where Mary "assumes the role of the mother of the poor."<sup>86</sup> These images, while safe and conservative, do nothing to disturb heteronormativity. Pui-Ian writes, "Jesus can be seen as a social radical, but only as an asexual or celibate figure" and

<sup>86</sup> Kwok Pui-Ian, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 181.

quotes theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, that “[Jesus] has been dressed theologically as a heterosexually oriented (celibate) man. Jesus with erased genitalia; Jesus minus erotic body.”<sup>87</sup> Religious conservatism, mainly in alliance with the Christian right, reproduces this sexual covering (erasure) onto young people. The hiding of sexuality and the erotic do little (if anything) to foster healthy sexual habits, and instead believe the lie that traditionalism (heterosexual marriage, abstinence, binary genders, and so forth) is substantiated in the Biblical tradition. However, the dismissal of sexual agency and freedom are only valid in a categorical hierarchy. Althaus-Reid’s challenges this notion with the Bi/Christ concept. Pui-Ian states, “The concept of Bi/Christ is intended to disrupt the mono-relationship, challenge dualistic submission, and subvert the “normative vision” of heterosexual difference.”<sup>88</sup> She adds, “Instead of a Mono/Christ, the Bi/Christ has the potential to challenge religious groups, including the Basic Christian Communities, to organize themselves based not on homophobic theology and compulsory heterosexist relationships, and to bring about social transformation based on more egalitarian principles.”<sup>89</sup> It is this breaking with heteronormativity, which catalyzes both homophobic and sexist norms (both in the Church and in the rest of the social sphere), and invites individual autonomy in sexual decision-making and practice. By not challenging the heterosexual Christ image, the ultimate symbol remains “confirmation” that heterosexuality is the “proper” order. In contrast, by disavowing this imagery, religious institutions can invigorate youth agency and, in turn, foster a space where queerness is celebrated and protected.

Althaus-Reid further contends that “all theology is sexual,” and that despite feminist and liberation theologians frequently telling the necessity of *experience* in theology, sexual theology

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 182.

has rarely, if ever, been properly developed.<sup>90</sup> The newness of a more open sexuality requires a rethinking of past liberation theologies to be more inclusive of broader understandings of sexualness, especially in light of Generation Z and the example of the gardener. She argues that sexual experience is intensely connected to both economic and political structures by way of intersectionality.<sup>91</sup> Theologian Kwok Pui-Ian paraphrases:

She argues that sexual ideology pervades economic and political theories and undergirds the epistemological foundations of theology, including liberation theology. A social analysis that understands poverty in economic terms and ignores the sexual and genderized dimensions is not only incomplete but mystifies the complex web of human relations that both substitute and sustain the social conditions that keep the people poor.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, womanist intersectional analysis is not only necessary in presenting the gender and sexual importance in relation to the economic and political orders, but also underscoring the silence of sexual theology. That not only are LGBTQIA+ Gen Zers abandoned by most religious institutions, they are also noticeably absent from the theological text. Furthermore, by leaving sexualness out of the dominant discourse, both theologians and religious institutions are ignoring one of the primary reasons young people leave religion entirely. Data presented in the first section shows that 39% of Gen Zers left their childhood faith because of their church's teachings on gender and sexuality, where the adult average is 32% for the same reason.<sup>93</sup> In other words, theologies intentionally ignoring queer and sexual theologies are no better than institutions that do as well. Indeed, theologies abstaining from the sexual discussion uphold the dominant

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Cooper, et al., "Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back," PRRI, PRRI, October 22, 2016, <https://www.prii.org/research/prii-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/>

discourse and further deny young LGBTQIIA+ voices (also a denial of young agency). With a growing number of young people vehemently declaring, “*This is who I am. It is my choice not to submit to intolerance and subservitude.*” Interpersonal agency *should be the only factor* in determining authority over an individual's sexual and personal autonomy.

The prevailing social construct of gender and sexual identity is not only at odds with the Biblical tradition but also in stark opposition to the younger generation. The popular universals that older generations have come to establish as necessary and orderly must be let go in order to receive the new—that Generation Z is up to something entirely different than previous generations’ established social constructs. Generation Z is leading the fight for accessibility to the Biblical tradition itself, albeit this is more than likely unbeknownst to most of Gen Z as it is hardly the fight that many of which are fighting for, by promoting individual autonomy and through the intersectional analysis. Harris adds, “Flowing from an African cosmology that connects the spirit realm, natural realm (earth), and the human realm, the belief in the sacredness of the environment promotes an ethical mandate to care for the earth.”<sup>94</sup> The interconnectedness between bodies and the earth, seen in the garden image, are further described here.

#### *The Environment and Leaving Things Better*

As a part of her broader research, Melanie Harries outlines specific steps in understanding the ecowomanist method. This paper has already discussed one of those, womanist intersectional analysis, in the previous two sections. Here, this paper brings forward another step: “*Take Action for Earth Justice: Teaching Ecowomanism.*”<sup>95</sup> As mentioned previously, Harris’ work uses intersectional analysis to interpret the relationship between women

<sup>94</sup> Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 97.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

of African descent and the environment.<sup>96</sup> This paper will use this new step (as well as the analysis used earlier) to analyze the relationship between young people and the environment in light of the gardener vocation—that by ignoring the climate change issue, older generations in power further subvert and deny the agency and autonomy of young people. Combining this section with the previous one, the growing understanding of intersectionality between race, age, gender, sexuality, and the environment will be undeniable. Ultimately, this section will argue that the Church must actively work to redefine human beings as a part of the created order (not absent from it) as well as work to reimagine the connectedness and intersectionality between climate abuse, economic domination, and the inevitability the challenge poses on young people. While this research will be unable to go into the specifics of environmental politics and policy, this paper does recognize the challenges of enacting climate policy at the present moment. Even so, this section is simply arguing that religious institutions must play an active role in combating the climate crisis, as young people will hardly want to return to religion as their children (and they themselves) will soon be growing up in an uninhabitable world.

It goes without saying that young progressives definitively support climate action more than older generations. Surprisingly, however, growing data suggests that young conservatives (or Republicans) deviate from their party or ideology far more so than young progressives do. Pew research found that 34% of young Republicans believe that human activity has contributed to climate change a “great deal,” compared to only 14% of Baby Boomer Republicans saying the same thing.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, 52% of young Republicans believe that the federal government is doing “too little” to protect the climate and the environment compared to 41% of Generation X

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>97</sup> Cary Funk and Bryan Kennedy, “How Americans see climate change and the environment in 7 charts,” Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, April 21, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/21/how-americans-see-climate-change-and-the-environment-in-7-charts/>



Republicans and 31% of Baby Boomer (and older) Republicans.<sup>98</sup> Broadly, 65% of eighteen to twenty-nine year-olds believe that climate change is an immediate “threat” to human life, compared to only 28% of those older than sixty-five.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, Gallup found that 11% of eighteen to twenty-nine year-olds believe climate change to be the most prevalent issue facing the United States, nearly quadruple that of every other age cohort, and lastly, Gallup also found that a total of 90% of eighteen to thirty-four year-olds are “concerned” or somewhat concerned about global warming, where nearly a quarter of individuals fifty-five and older are skeptical of its very existence.<sup>100</sup> This data is important, in part, because it shows the concern for the earth, and the sustainability of life generally is nonpartisan amongst young people. One could make the argument that the seriousness of a climate catastrophe is one of the, if not the leading cause, for the embodiment of the youth *spirit* (which, to at least this example, is unbiased politically). Nevertheless, the promotion of earth justice (which will be detailed below) is one of the necessary steps in the process of relinquishing and receiving. Older generations must adopt conscious environmentalism in the form of activism for them to receive something radically new (Gen Z). To this, there is simply no other option. There is quite literally no greater threat to the existence of humanity as we know it than climate change.

Relinquishing the economic commodification (abuse) of the environment is contingent on reestablishing the social sphere’s attention to what the “environment” or “nature” is. Despite being written in 1988, Sallie McFague’s metaphorical understanding of ecological theology still

<sup>98</sup> Bryan Kennedy and Courtney Johnson, “More Americans see climate change as a priority, but Democrats are much more concerned than Republicans,” Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, February 28, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/28/more-americans-see-climate-change-as-a-priority-but-democrats-are-much-more-concerned-than-republicans/>

<sup>99</sup> Megan Brenan and Lydia Saad, “Global Warming Concern Steady Despite Some Partisan Shifts,” Gallup, Gallup Inc., March 28, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/231530/global-warming-concern-steady-despite-partisan-shifts.aspx>

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

applies today. McFague argues that humans are intensely “embedded” in the process of evolution, yet have been conformed to view nature as an object for individualistic gain.<sup>101</sup> She wrote, “...since Western sensibility has traditionally been nurtured by an atomistic, reductionistic perspective that separates human beings from other beings and reduces all that is not human to objects for human use.”<sup>102</sup> She adds, “We do not ordinarily feel indebted to birds and trees for our minds, but recognizing and appreciating that debt is an aspect of the new sensibility necessary for today’s theology.”<sup>103</sup> McFague’s anecdote is precisely what is necessary for challenging modern environmental challenges yet the repudiation for a healthy planet and sustainable ecosystem in most conservative discourse today (see young Republicans being outliers) has, of course, held this dialogue back from becoming more than a generational battle (see Greta Thurnberg and Mari Copeny as young leaders). This, along with the alliance between political conservatism and the Religious Right, has virtually cemented notions human over nonhuman as acceptable for economic gain. Somewhat ironically, dominant religious institutions have yet to include environmentalism in the dominant discourse, as preservation is rather prevalent in the scripture:

a land that the Lord your God cares for. The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (Deut. 11:12)

Or Matthew, among others:

<sup>101</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 176.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Mt. 6:26)

Only by intricately connecting ourselves with the passage of the earth will (a) humanity survive and (b) will religious institutions see young people return—hence why this research is necessary.

Here, Harris’ intersectional analysis is combined with earth action by stating, “...protesting the logic of domination and abuse in all of its forms, naming and resisting structural and individual forms of violence, and replacing them with *truth force* and love.”<sup>104</sup> See the murder of Eric Garner in our previous section. She later adds, this time quoting Pamela Smith, “...the subordinating and bullying of women, racial, minorities, the poor, and the marginalized, the term ‘ecowomanism’ expressed the burden of this perception on a woman of color.”<sup>105</sup> Here, ecowomanism recognizes the unique relationship between environmental abuse and the abuse of the marginalized, particularly women of color. Data collected by Green America found that people of color are exceedingly more at risk than white Americans in the face of climate change, with communities of color breathing in 40% more polluted air than white communities as well as 68% of African-Americans living within thirty miles of a coal plant (despite making up only 13% of the U.S. population).<sup>106</sup> In Flint, Michigan, the epicenter of the brunt connection between the economic order, racism, and the failure of current environmental policy, Mari Copeny (mentioned earlier) and other young people, among others, are leading the fight in demanding functional change. Young people are radically more empathetic than older

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>106</sup> Tracy Fernandez Rysavy and André Floyd, “People of Color Are on the Front Lines of the Climate Crisis,” Green American, Green America, June 28th, 2020, <https://www.greenamerica.org/climate-justice-all/people-color-are-front-lines-climate-crisis>.

generations, and this must be represented in dominant religious institutions. Moreover, individualistic presumptions that have carried previous generations are no longer applicable to Gen Z, and where environmentalism used to be seen as leftist extremism (even in 2013 only 30% of Americans thought that global warming was due to human activity), conscious environmentalism is now a trait of Gen Z. It should be the responsibility of the Church, not only to safeguard the sanctity of the planet but also to have the interests of the young generations actively in mind. Thus, adopting the *spirit* and purposefully working to leave things better for future generations is of the utmost importance and should be the primary objective of the Church and the utmost power the Creator bestowed to humans.

It is unclear whether or not older generations have enough time to properly reimagine environmentalism in their policies to see them in action. Reimagination and relinquishing do not occur overnight, and because of the immediate threat of climate change, the view of the action or inaction will only be left up to the youngest generations. Of course, this makes action, or even belief, by older generations difficult as they will hardly see the endgame of the effects of climate change. What is perhaps more showing of the *spirit*, or lack thereof in *most* of the older generations, is that these effects will primarily affect Generation Z's children and grandchildren, more so than they themselves—although Gen Z will still be of old age by the time climate change's devastating effects have taken shape. Then comes the argument from traditional politicians (on both sides of the political spectrum) that drastic action is not necessary for the immediate political sphere. It is radical to do nothing! To accept climate change as solely a natural occurrence ignores the most prevalent desires of young people! Denying climate change is the denial of young life, young agency, and young power. Ultimately, God has turned history over the discretion of humans and has invested humankind with the power of gardener.

## Section Five: The New Praxis

Several times throughout this research, we have mentioned the notion of “true justice,” “true activism,” and “new praxis.” It is here where these terms will be explored further. To do so, we will review how both the *ethic* and the *spirit* of Generation Z must be carried through the Church, further deconstruct the union between civil religion and the Christian right, and imagine the social implications of reshaping and reenvisioning dominant religious institutions to be more accepting and corresponding to Generation Z. Following this review, the above terms will be defined in full through a generational lens. Meaning, that on top of re-inventing the very basis of what the Church, including the very partnership found within it, must look like, there also must be a complete deconstruction of traditional forms of allyship. That the Church must not simply become a backdrop to the action, a form of recovery of sorts, but rather in the action itself. Finally, we will conclude with the image of the Church and Generation Z together, and how reconciling their relationship with Generation Z, the Church will be able to survive into generations to come. Ultimately, if religion in the United States seeks to survive beyond just static political ideologies and traditions, dominant religious institutions must resign *all* forms of political, economic, and social oppressors that stem from the Church. This includes either (a) the Church’s apathy towards the issue (see the environment), or (b) the Church’s active effort in devaluing young bodies and lives (see sexual and gender identities and abortion). A transition into a new praxis cannot occur until the barriers that have prevented Gen Z from participating are entirely removed. As a reminder of what was mentioned in the introduction of this research, there are moments in this section where there is a lack of published scholarship verifying the validity of some arguments. This is not a determinant of whether this research is based in reality or not, simply that the youth experience is valid, despite there being little to no discussion of the

youth experience from the youth in academia. Part of the process of realizing the fullness of Generation Z is entrusting Gen Z with their own efficacy, and this is a part of that process.

### *Prophetic Activism*

This research will now revisit an earlier example and emphasize the relevance of the Biblical tradition within Generation Z today. Following George Floyd's death on May 25th, 2020, protests erupted across the United States. For example, in Columbus, Ohio, hundreds of police in full riot gear, shields, grenade launchers, and on horseback, bruised, blinded, and even killed protestors in an array of chaos and bedlam. The gathering, initially unorganized and confused, resulted in the police retaliation being unorganized and confused. Tear gas was fired indiscriminately, flashbangs were fired haphazardly, and pepper spray was used arbitrarily and randomly. These protestors looked different than the aggressors. They were young, racially, ethnically, and sexually diverse. They were filled with anger, frustration, and sadness. Yet their despair was met with its partner, hope. They, the protestors, saw a *moment* to administer their agency back onto the prevailing order. This moment was the character of revolution, and again, it was led by young people.

Weeks later, the protestors returned with their shields. These screens were labeled differently than "police" or "riot." They had the names of the people killed by the Columbus Police Department on them, along with their murderer. The carriers of these shields stood inches away from a growingly aggressive police. Who, shoving, shouting, and dressed in full civil disobedience gear with the hand on their spray, arrived not as keepers of the peace, but again as a state-sponsored show of force meant to intimidate and terrorize the protestors. The age of the divide is perhaps what is most telling of the larger gap between generations. On one side stood the old white men, guardians of the old order, and obstacles to equity and justness. The other side

stood justice, diverse, and even more powerful than the state, for there were more of them than the old white men who stood against them. They stood toe to toe, and the police soon left. Not because they did their job, but because they failed, and justice did theirs. The very essence of Generation Z is not merely full of children and shallow-minded conformers, but one of *prophetic activism*. Helene Slessarev-Jamir wrote of prophetic activism in her 2011 book. She stated, “Prophetic activism is fundamentally concerned with the well-being of the marginalized both within the United States and within poor and violent regions in developing countries.”<sup>107</sup> She added:

Religiously constructed activism certainly has the capacity to sustain marginalized people in the face of great opposition. This brand of activism also has the power to create ethical foundations for solidarity between the politically marginalized and those with privileged access to political power. By evoking humanity’s sacred bonds with one another, religious organizing can straddle the existing gulf between places of marginalization and places of privilege.<sup>108</sup>

It is important to point out here that Slessarev-Jamir is writing from the perspective of religious organizations intricately working with social activist groups. However, she notes that these partnerships are largely faltering due to the decline in youth participation and the disconnect between the two narratives. Nonetheless, prophetic activism is still necessary for appreciating youth movements and religious activism as a whole. Prophetic activism is the key to channel Generation Z’s *prophetic passion* into larger forms of action. This research will argue here that the reason for this decline described by Slessarev-Jamir is not simply because young people

<sup>107</sup> Helene Slessarev-Jamir, *Prophetic Activism: Progressive Religious Justice Movements in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 292.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

randomly decided to end their relationship with their religious organization(s). Rather, because young people have recognized the wrongdoings of religious organizations and have actively decided to move away from them. Thus this leaves both parties, the religious institutions, as well as the young generation, at odds with one another. As mentioned earlier, it is entirely possible for Generation Z to cultivate a movement on their own, yet the sustainability of these movements on a large scale has yet to be seen, or rather beneficial in policymaking. The latter point is more than likely because of politicians trivializing youth movements. Be that as it may, this research further contends here that young people do *not necessarily need* religious organizations, or other large organizing bodies, to energize social movements, and young people certainly do not need to attend religious structures to have “moral guidance” or what have you. Instead, we contend that religious organizations need young people in order to function as avenues not only in prayer but also in forms of activism more so than young people needing religious organizations to sustain activism. Generation Z is capable of and is currently demonstrating their ability to have prophetic activism independent from religious institutions by way of their own biblicism in the contemporary protests. Religious organizations must respond to this phenomenon appropriately and generously by adopting the two critical characteristics of Gen Z: the *ethic* and the *spirit*. Prophetic passion is not nearly sufficient to carry out the message, but it is certainly a start.

As discussed in the previous sections, popular religious institutions must abandon the corrupted message that has pushed younger generations out of the Church. In order to receive the prophetic message that Generation Z is carrying, these religious institutions must relinquish the claim that the economic order, the Christian right, and civil religion have made over the Biblical tradition. In turn, the ethic and spirit must become essential components of the new praxis.



Subsequently, what would this form look like when performed? To begin, we must review the traits of both characteristics.

The ethic of Generation Z is the communal call for accountability over each human body and extension of the earth. To utilize an earlier example, the ethic is the job description and code of the gardener: intense, creative, responsible. The ethic is also unabashedly independent—hence one of the primary reasons for young people leaving churches and political parties. There is little to no regard for past traditions within the ethic, especially in the cases where there are dominating figures in play. The only tradition, in the historical sense, within the ethic, is being atypical and autonomous in the fight for the sustainability of the community. Likewise, the spirit is the undying hope for a better future. The spirit is allowing both hope and hopelessness to exist simultaneously, yet using one's hopelessness as an energizer for pursuing hope rather than despondency. Even in the face of near-absolute failure and distress, such as the current climate crisis, Generation Z is unyielding to the fear of failure and adamantly pursues a better future for generations that have yet to even grace the earth. How embarrassing older generations must feel that they have delegated this responsibility given to them by God! The near-complete erasure of this spirit from the Church is a shameful display of how twisted God's investment has become.

Critically, both of these characteristics are found within the Biblical tradition. There is some irony to be found in that Generation Z are carriers of the Biblical tradition, yet they attend Church significantly less than past generations and simultaneously are not authentically represented in the Church. See the *spirit* in the scripture:

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

(Rom. 8:24-25)

It is the human judgment and involvement in this liberation that will be the ultimate deciding factor on if humanity (earth) is to flourish. We must also consider that the spirit is not reliant on God's power because God has designated that power, the power to cultivate, to fail, and to achieve, to the human species. Where Generation Z sees this and works to challenge destruction, older generations have abdicated their responsibility and their hope. This may be attributed to the failures of religious organizations allowing the corruption of the tradition to ignore this duty. However, we must also challenge this notion as Generation Z has recognized this failure and *is actively questioning it*, not letting this perversion be maintained, unlike previous generations.

Later, Romans testifies to the *ethic*:

so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another  
(Rom. 12:5)

Romans signifies the reach of the garden that the body of the earth is replicated through each individual human, tree, and bird—a community of life. Moreover, Romans understands that the vocation is one of a gift; that the ethic is also the responsibility of upholding the holiness of the creation, a further example of Generation Z's congruence with the Biblical tradition.

*Meeting the Two Narratives*

Generation Z conveys and possesses all of the necessary passions and characteristics of making meaningful, impactful, prophetic change. Yet, Gen Z lacks the institutional framework to achieve success. As this research has mentioned previously, Gen Z aligning with religious organizations must come from the consent of the young generation. Kwame Rose has illustrated earlier that beliefs lie within Gen Z of completely moving away from the Church, regardless of how the Church manages to harmonize its views with Gen Z. The young generation can choose to reconcile its relationship with the Church if the Church is willing. But even so, the generation may choose a different organization entirely, or none at all, and all choices must be respected. Meaning that it may already be too late for the Church to attract young persons back to a setting of prayer. The Church may function both as a temple, to which Gen Z may or may not return to regardless, but also as an arm of activism, to which Gen Z can utilize. Rose's critique and concern are valid and noteworthy, as a part of Generation Z's independence stem from the previous domination emitted from the Church that has affected nearly everyone in Gen Z in some form or another.

This research assumes that if religious organizations organize themselves to be accommodating and beneficial to Gen Z and wholly removed from all past dominations and hierarchies, then Gen Z will seek to utilize religious organizations as a partner in activism. Thus, the new praxis of the Church will be centered in social, prophetic justice. Then, and only then, will Generation Z see themselves as a part of religion again. The narratives of both Generation Z and religious organizations *must find each other*. That is to say that the Church must get on message to be compatible with not only Generation Z but also the gospel itself. By aligning themselves with the young generation, religious organizations will give young movements durability and will be able to translate that work into meaningful forms of worship as well as

further activism. Slessarev-Jamir adds, “Many secularists would prefer that all mention of religion would once again be confined to the private sphere. This book demonstrates that there is a third option: religion can be and is being used to frame a progressive politics that prophetically calls for justice, peace, and the healing of the world.”<sup>109</sup> This research is in-line with Slessarev-Jamir’s call. Of course, this research also recognizes that if religion cannot be turned into a source of communal goodness rather than systemic oppression, then religion should be delegated to individual privacy.

By using the tools mentioned throughout the essay, such as Harris’ analysis or Castillo’s gardener image, we can appreciate the interrelatedness of all beings, including the earth, and how each of these beings feels the injustice wrought by impure and irreligious unions such as the economic order merging itself with religion. Thus, as this research has continually stated, these modes of multi-leveled oppressions can and must be eliminated. Not only for young people to return to religion, but also for prophetic activism to achieve success. Of course, relinquishing takes time, energy, and a constant focus on acknowledging histories and failures. Perhaps the continuous decline in religious participation will be enough to enact change from dominant religious organizations, but if not, it is unclear what will actually motivate institutions to restructure and resolve their repressive history. A new mode of religion in the United States will be founded on this basis, and that once the narratives of Generation Z and the church recognize that their true messages align, there can be a partnership built off of progressivism and communal prosperity. It is here where this image will be laid out in full.

*What Will a New Church Look Like?*

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 208.

There are three primary models by which the Church can be a center for youth prosperity and goodness. The first, and perhaps most crucial mode, is the reconciliation and recentering of LGBTQIA+ bodies within the Biblical tradition. Not only is this necessary from a practical perspective in the Church, as bigoted teachings on these individuals are one of the primary reasons for Gen Z abstaining from the Church. But more importantly, it is a moral imperative that *all* bodies born from the soil are treated as such: equally a part of the earth story as the conceptualized hierarchies were thought to be. Religious organizations must come to this realization as soon and as correctly as possible, as the following fashions will not be possible until all bodies are welcomed in the space. The second model, vigorous environmentalism, must be maintained by championing progressive social policies that not only extend to the protection and sustainability of the earth, but also to the protection and sustainability of the human body and all that comes from the earth. There is little point in welcoming young people back if the concern for the planet and its creations are not intensely upheld and sought after. Radically restructuring the conversation to communalism in spite of individualism being deeply embedded in both the economic and political order is perhaps one of the more difficult tasks in this process, but necessary. The Church must flip the script on political conservatism vilifying social welfare and caring for your neighbor. Finally, the third mode will integrate intersectionality with agency and invigorate youth activism, enacting the above modes through the wider American community as well as the rest of the world. Ultimately, prophetic activism is the way in which young people may return to religion.

### **Breaking Down Modern Interpretations**

Critically re-understanding homosexuality within the Bible is necessary for regaining both trust and participation from younger audiences. However, recognizing the severity of

dominant religious institutions' effects on sexual minorities is of the utmost importance. Simply changing or rewording the narrative of sexualness in the Bible will not suffice in reconciling the relationship between young sexual minorities as the consequences of bigotry have already been felt. Studies have repeatedly shown that young sexual minorities are nearly three times as likely to attempt suicide than a heterosexual individual, and Julia Raifman of Boston University found that between 2009 and 2017, sexual minority teen suicide rates rose from shocking 24.6% to 35.6%.<sup>110</sup> A distorted Biblical tradition has undoubtedly had a drastic effect on these numbers. Even if the Church did not directly affect any of these attempts, the lack of clear and positive messaging regarding young sexual bodies did not foster a supportive environment by any means. Purposeful negligence in light of catastrophe is nonetheless abhorrent. The horrific lack of appreciation for young bodies has affected youth participation for generations. Only by dramatically reconsidering the Biblical text will there be any chance of a return. Of course, there must also be continued and active reconciliation between religious communities and sexual minorities. Here this research will detail the most detestable examples of homophobia within the Bible and prescribe new, appropriate interpretations of these passages. If nothing else, the Church will return to the original message presented in the scripture.

To begin, this research must refocus our lens to the significance of language within the scripture, how vocabulary changed over time, and how societies present disposition on specific passages in the scripture is being shaped by a warped understanding of the original Biblical message. Perhaps most importantly for this research, we must understand that the language we use to describe many of our contemporary matters were formed and substantiated through

<sup>110</sup> Reuters, "Suicide rates fall among gay youth but still outpace straight peers," NBC News, Universal, February 12, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/suicide-rates-fall-among-gay-youth-still-outpace-straight-peers-n1135141>

dominant ideologies and orders. The term “homosexuality,” for example, was created in the late 18th century and had not a single mention in the Bible.<sup>111</sup> In fact, “homosexuality” was not added to English translations until 1946—when homosexuality was treated as a mental illness and when sexual minorities were drugged and put into asylums.<sup>112</sup> The language of sexualness did not even exist for homosexuality to be demonized when the Bible was written! Not to mention the obvious patriarchal notions of the time in which the Bible was written and translated. Yes, these notions are still heavily influential today, and certainly had an impact on even the most modern translations. The connotation of marriage as a “partnership” between two autonomous individuals has only recently become mainstream, whereas marriage up until lately was seen as an objectification of feminine individuals meant for servitude to the man. Our very understanding of marriage, let alone homosexuality, has been and largely continues to be shaped by sexism, homophobia, and a predominantly white, male society.

This research proposes here that if we have let this corrupted interpretation of the word of God become the prevailing understanding, are we not capable of righting and denouncing this wrongness? This perverted translation was only meant to legitimize the societies’ own hierarchical desires of the time and continued to be enforced by the hierarchical structures of today because of the legitimacy we handed it. If society failed to realize the word of God in the translations of the twentieth century, it is time society realizes this in the twenty-first. Nearly every popular, modern notion regarding sexualness was founded out of dominance-seeking. Even the act of sex itself has been twisted to the point of promoting dominance and one party’s

<sup>111</sup> “Homosexuality,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford, April 28, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/homosexuality/>.

<sup>112</sup> Adam Nicholas Phillips, “The Bible does not condemn ‘homosexuality.’ Seriously, it doesn’t,” Medium, Medium, July 26, 2015, <https://medium.com/@adamnicholasphillips/the-bible-does-not-condemn-homosexuality-seriously-it-doesn-t-13ae949d6619>.

control over the other. One of the most intimate human acts, for nearly all of history, has been used to objectify, depersonalize, and to deny agency to individuals. Sex rarely, if ever, has been meant to promote love, intimacy, or pleasure for *all* participating parties. This obstruction is why this research must examine the most egregious examples of when modernity (primarily the Christian right) has failed young bodies and allowed homophobia as commonplace within the Church. In particular, this research will review and deconstruct the six most popular passages conservatives use today to justify homophobia and sexual domination.

The first, and perhaps the most commonly used narrative, is the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah. Never explicitly stated for their sins, members of the Religious right have taken it upon themselves to create the narrative themselves. It is clear that before the events of Genesis 19:5 that Sodom is an immoral city and that this was widely known:<sup>113</sup>

But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the LORD exceedingly. (Gen. 13:13)

However, the sin remains unclear. What is shown within the passages is the transgressions taken against the two messengers of God and Lot, none of which were stated to be homosexual relations. When the violent town mob approaches Lot's home, are they punished for being violent, raping Lot's daughters, or for prior sins unmentioned? Even if the mob had sexual intentions with the messengers, their desire was nonconsensual. There is an equally likely chance, or perhaps even more likely of one, that the mob was punished for their desire to rape and dominate rather than the belief that their intentions were homosexual. Why is the unlikely

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.



chosen to be used as evidence for a hierarchical order of sexual identity? Could God not have stricken down the city for sexual perversion and rape? Past sins of greed and hoarding of wealth? Inhospitability? The answer is unknown, making this claim unsubstantiated and solely based on biased presumptions of the modern era.

The following two passages illustrate rather flagrant mistranslations. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, for example, is one of the most referred to works regarding homosexuality and the disavowment of it:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men (Cor. 6:9)

Functionally, modern translations of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 misunderstand the Greek words *arsenokoitai* and *malakos* as “homosexual,” “men who have sex with men,” or other various interpretations. However, the word originally translated to various forms of exploitative sex such as incest, perversion, and molestation.<sup>114</sup> Activists Ed Oxford and Kathy Baldock note that *arsenokoitai* and *malakos* were originally first misunderstood in the 1946 Revised Standard Edition, the first English edition to use the word homosexuality.<sup>115</sup> Baldock later wrote of the team that translated the 1946 edition, “...the team’s translation of *arsenokoitai* and *malakos* combined as ‘homosexual’ was originally done in ignorance and lack of understanding as to

<sup>114</sup> Kathy Baldock, “How and When Homosexual Was First Introduced into the Bible,” Canyonwalker Connections, Canyonwalker Connections, November 25, 2017, <http://canyonwalkerconnections.com/word-homosexual-first-introduced-bible/>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

what a homosexual is and what homosexuality means that was typical of the time.”<sup>116</sup> Other interpretations allude to *arsenokoitai* and *malakos* as meaning “pederasty,” or the Greek practice of old men possessing young boys as sexual objects.<sup>117</sup> 1 Timothy 1:9-10 also shares this mistranslation:<sup>118</sup>

for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine (Tim. 1:10)

It is inappropriate, at the very least, to prescribe the dominant order’s hierarchical desires onto a text as powerful as the Bible, even more so in light of the rising mental health crisis among sexual minorities. While the 1946 translation team may have just been ignorant, as Baldock states, their ignorance has had detrimental effects on the very livelihood of young bodies. 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians signify, rather clearly, the powerful effect language has and the power of the text.

Levitical passages 18:22 and 20:13 also share damning assumptions with equally damaging effects. Leviticus 18:22 denotes:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Lev. 18:22)

Whereas 20:13 states:

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Adam Nicholas Phillips, “The Bible does not condemn ‘homosexuality.’ Seriously, it doesn’t,” Medium, Medium, July 26, 2015, <https://medium.com/@adamnicholasphillips/the-bible-does-not-condemn-homosexuality-seriously-it-doesn-t-13ae949d6619>.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them. (Lev. 20:13)

Biblical scholar Idan Dershowitz notes several flaws within the interpretations of both passages. While both are presumed to have been written several decades or even centuries after the original writing as well as have included more than one writer, Dershowitz states that original, earlier passages of Leviticus allowed sex between two men.<sup>119</sup> Dershowitz highlights two specific instances where this editing is apparent. The first, “The nakedness of your father and the nakedness of your mother you shall not uncover; *she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness,*” and the second, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s brother, you shall not approach his wife, she is your aunt.”<sup>120</sup> He believes that these two passages are indicative of “editorial intervention” due to the awkwardness of the phrasing.<sup>121</sup> Both of these passages make *uncover nakedness* obsolete in the homosexual sense, rather denouncing heterosexual incestual relations.

In fact, these two exceptional passages are steady with other mentions of prohibiting incestual sex. Dershowitz concludes by noting that even if the original text disavowed homosexual incestual relations, that does not necessarily denounce homosexuality entirely.<sup>122</sup> Leviticus is consistent with previous passages this research has discussed that violent domination and sexual objectification and perversion are prohibited—not homosexuality.

<sup>119</sup> Idan Dershowitz, “The Secret History of Leviticus,” The New York Times, NYTCO, July 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/21/opinion/sunday/bible-prohibit-gay-sex.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

The last example, Romans 1:26-27, is rather simple to dispute. The passage states:

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup> In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Rom. 1:26-27)

It is clear here that the passage is again discerning lust, sexual objectification, and domination—again in line with previous passages. Moreover, given the context in which the passage occurs, we can infer that this sexual abuse also comes from socioeconomic domination as well. Romans 1:26-27 refers to uncontrolled acts of sexual lust, abuse, and exploitation.

It is of the utmost importance that these passages are dissected between religious organizations, for these passages used by the Christian right are not based in reality and have been formulated by contemporary discriminations and biases. Terrorizing sexual minorities has, for almost all of modern history, been an aspect of religious institutions. It is rather obvious, then, why young people would choose not to associate with organizations such as these. As it has been noted, simply rewording, retranslating, or outright ignoring these harmful passages is not enough and could be further damaging to the relationship between young people and religion. What is required of religious organizations is active reconciliation with young people. This includes, but is not solely limited to, refiguring the modern text to be more applicable and appropriate to the contemporary environment and original tradition, joining communities of sexual minorities in the fight for justice and equity, and reconfiguring the traditional message to fit Generation Z. Meaning, that if young people are to return to religion, reconciliation must be

more than language adjustments, and instead must be an active effort to support, promote, and defend *all* young bodies.

### **Rigorous Environmentalism in the Face of Individualism**

The second mode, rigorous environmentalism, cannot be discerned without also challenging the economic order—which has commodified and objectified human bodies as well as nonhuman ones in an effort to maximize profit. This research has dissected economic individualism and ecological theology through Melanie Harris’ ecowomanist steps as well as Daniel Castillo’s garden image. However, this deconstruction has mostly occurred separately as if unrelated. Here this research will further bridge the intricacy of economic individualism with the environment to better understand its relationship, as well as how the Church must play a role in defending and upholding the sanctity of the earth. This research has previously noted that the Church has been a willing proponent of individualism, especially in relation to the economy. Now, as a part of the new praxis, we will look at how the Church can reverse this stance and orient itself to be a defender of young people and the earth by aligning itself against the exploitation of both spheres. We will begin by advancing Castillo’s examination of the “technocratic paradigm,” labeled by Pope Francis.<sup>123</sup> Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato si’*, “...the technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings.”<sup>124</sup> Disassembling the economic order by way of recognizing the profitability of the environment and human bodies relies on challenging the conception of

<sup>123</sup> Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 142.

<sup>124</sup> Punzi, Vito L. 2018. “A Social Responsibility Guide for Engineering Students and Professionals of All Faith Traditions: An Overview.” *Science & Engineering Ethics* 24 (4): 1253–77.

objectification itself, which has been deeply embedded into nearly every social institution we know today.

Castillo's investigation into the paradigm roughly concludes by recognizing the objectification of the soil, and all that comes from the soil.<sup>125</sup> Here, Martin Buber's conception of "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships becomes rather clear. Buber argues that an "I-It" relationship with human and nonhuman entities, such as the earth, reflects an "egocentric instrumental existence," whereas by viewing the soil and the bodies of the earth as "I-Thou" we can interpret the interrelatedness of all beings—both human and nonhuman.<sup>126</sup> Perhaps most importantly within Buber's thinking, is the reality between the I and the Thou. This space, occupied by God, is within the very materiality of existence. The prevailing interpretation of the Biblical tradition is implicated in its failure to uphold this existence, with the economic order being the most egregious example. Notably, Castillo remarks that the evolution of the market economy obstructs the way in which society views other institutions and entities.<sup>127</sup> Castillo quotes Karl Polanyi, stating, "within a market society, society runs 'as an adjunct to the market. Instead of the economy being embedded in social regulations, social relations are embedded in the economic system.'"<sup>128</sup> It is clear that the economic order functions to impede all other factors of society, as is its purpose. Within a capitalist society, especially within the United States, commercialization, objectification, and consumption naturally lead to domination and competition.

<sup>125</sup> Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 243.

<sup>126</sup> Hadar, Linor L., and Oren Ergas. 2019. "Cultivating Mindfulness through Technology in Higher Education: A Buberian Perspective." *AI & Society* 34 (1): 99–107.

<sup>127</sup> Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 144.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

By the disposition of the capitalist economy, the economic order naturally evolves into “creative destruction,” as economist Joseph Schumpeter states, and seeks to destroy and build anew from different avenues and exploits to profit from.<sup>129</sup> For instance, Macarena Gómez-Barris denotes this “plunder” as “extractive capitalism” and states, “an economic system that engages in thefts, borrowing, and forced removals, violently reorganizing social life as well as the land by thieving resources from indigenous and Afro-descendent territories... continually perpetuates dramatic social and economic inequalities...”<sup>130</sup> This extraction then, means human and natural life are exploited as commodities of labor and are then “relegated to the position of ‘subject,’” rather than a full status as a citizen.<sup>131</sup> In the United States, for example, field laborers in southern California are disposed to detestable work environments to the brink of death, yet are forced to only serve the economic order. Or, take for example individuals who are required to work multiple jobs because the minimum wage in the United States is not capable of sustaining a decent standard of living—all in the face of a global pandemic where the federal government has seemingly abandoned its citizens. As we have seen earlier in this research, the intersectionality between the environment and racism, whether seen in police brutality or by the initial effects of climate change, is detrimental to the sustainability of younger generations. Pope Francis later states in *Laudato si'*:

... Some circles maintain that current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems, and argue, in popular and non-technical terms, that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth.

They... support their deeds by showing no interest in more balanced levels of production,

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 148

a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations... We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth.<sup>132</sup>

The Church must *reify* the soil, and all that stems from it. Namely, popular religious organizations must reexamine the way in which the soil and the soil's extensions are viewed and taught. If these appendages (humans, trees, birds) are not being preserved, then that organization is more than likely serving the economic order rather than the Divine. Of course, that institution is then neglecting its responsibility as gardener and devaluing the entities of the garden. Practicing being in the image of God is the output of God's relatedness with the earth. A human relationship with the dirt should be no different than the relationship with God. There is effectively, outside of our society's declarations and labeling, no difference between the garden and neighbor.

Castillo later writes of unchecked consumerism and consumer culture and the unforeseen consequences of it. Castillo's examination may even explain the reasoning behind ignoring the climate catastrophe, and how by challenging consumerism, we may also challenge the ignorance regarding climate inaction. Castillo states, "... the culture-ideology of consumerism proclaims that the google life is found in the consumption of goods and that for human persons to be 'fully alive' they must consume. Consumer culture, then, functions to increase and accelerate the material pressures that human populations collectively place on the biosphere."<sup>133</sup> By warping 'human nature' into serving economic processes and functions, the technocratic paradigm, as

<sup>132</sup> Punzi, Vito L. 2018. "A Social Responsibility Guide for Engineering Students and Professionals of All Faith Traditions: An Overview." *Science & Engineering Ethics* 24 (4): 1253–77.

<sup>133</sup> Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 184.



Pope Francis notes, becomes further embedded in reality. To put this culture in light of Martin Buber, Castillo adds that “consumerism normalizes and exalts the transactional ‘I-It’ relationship while marginalizing and denigrating the personal ‘I-Thou’ relationship.”<sup>134</sup> So, when consumer culture has become so intricately connected to the embodiment of all structures and practices within human society such as universities, employment, income, and housing, challenging this notion becomes increasingly difficult. Because of this deeply rooted flaw in American society, the climate crisis, as Castillo notes, shatters the idea that this social consciousness is appropriate, morally correct, and natural. That once the life of consumerism is revealed to be “fraudulent,” the basis by which economically successful Americans have situated themselves will be shown to be frivolous and cosmetic.<sup>135</sup>

The mass gathering of private property, the hoarding of wealth, or the “American dream” has purposefully been misguided by the concept that economic individualism is now related to a higher purpose. Adam Smith, for example, believed that private property was an innate right given by God.<sup>136</sup> Material consumption then and the pursuit of more and more wealth could be assumed to be a human right, yet of course, this thinking is not based in the reality of tradition with the Gospel in mind. So, why does capitalist individualism come to dominant religious spheres? If we refer back to Karl Polanyi’s conception of the economic order within other established social institutions, we see how this effect came to be. It is the behavior of capitalism that naturally infects social order with competition, domination, exploitation, and abuse. Religious institutions are infected only insofar as they are willing to be, and this, much like how capitalism originally came to influence the Church, can be reversed. Comparable with the young

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>136</sup> Joerg, Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 142.

generation and religion, repairing relationships comes in the form of understanding the interrelatedness of oppressions, as Melanie Harris indicates. Joerg Rieger adds, “The primary concern of justice is, thus, not so much helping those in need but overcoming oppressive relationships and learning how to relate differently—both to other human beings and to God.”<sup>137</sup> Reevaluating relationships to mend injustice is the exact premise of the fundamental disconnect between current standing religion and young people in the United States. Where the young generation, guided by the unyielding spirit, is focused on the safeguarding of future generations to come and is actively against the prevailing reality, the Church finds itself caught between the two; too often on the side of the oppressor. Fundamentally, this gap in ideology has preserved the decline in religiosity in the United States. In an era where cultural and political partisanship is seemingly at an all-time high, structuring relationships on foundations of communal fulfillment and welfare should be commonplace within the Church. Generation Z’s underlying ideology is the constant concern for justice, and the Church must match this.

### **The Dyad in Activist Theology**

As stated previously throughout this research, the primary mode for new religious participation must come from these organizations aligning themselves with social movements. Reinvigorating religious allyship may appear in new forms. Churches, ordinarily at the front of social movements, or absent entirely, must reconsider their role as a partner to young leaders. Churches do not necessarily need to lead these social movements, as Generation Z has shown they are more than capable of producing leaders. Instead, religious organizations must provide the structure for these leaders to organize, communicate, gather, and inspire. J. Craig Jenkins and Charles Perrow wrote of the necessity of organizing in their 1977 study of

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 139.

farmworker movements. They stated, “[What really matters to the organizers of a movement is] the amount of social resources available to unorganized but aggrieved groups, making it possible to launch an organized demand for change.”<sup>138</sup> To which Jenkins later wrote in 1983, “[mobilization can be understood as the] process by which a group secures collective control over the resources needed for action. The major issues, therefore, are the resources controlled by the group prior to mobilization efforts, and the processes by which the group pools resources and direct these towards social change.”<sup>139</sup> Georgia State professor, Allison Calhoun-Brown, wrote of these studies in relation to the Black church and their resources regarding the civil rights movement. Functionally, Calhoun-Brown writes, the Black church provided the resources to a movement that otherwise would have faltered. In light of the Black Lives Matter protests, which may be the largest civil rights movement in history,<sup>140</sup> it is necessary to ask: where are the churches? Here this research will detail the similarities, and differences, between the original civil rights movement and the movements of today. Ultimately, is the Church off message? Or do the young movements of today not align with the Biblical narrative?

Professor Barbara Savage illustrates that the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ‘60s was one that fostered an environment in which *all* peoples, religious or not, were able to participate despite the Black church being such a leading force within it. She adds, “[the civil rights movement] was itself a religious movement to those who lived and worked within it, including many who did not and do not consider themselves religious.”<sup>141</sup> She later adds,

<sup>138</sup> Calhoun-Brown, Allison. "Upon This Rock: The Black church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (2000): 169-74. Accessed July 20, 2020.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Larry Buchanan, “Black Lives Matter May Be The Largest Movement in U.S. History,” *The New York Times*, NYTCO, July 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

<sup>141</sup> Vaughn Booker. "Civil Rights Religion?: Rethinking 1950s and 1960s Political Activism for African American Religious History." *Journal of Africana Religions* 2, no. 2 (2014): 211-43. Accessed July 21, 2020. doi:10.5325/jafireli.2.2.0211.

“Southern Black churches provided a common culture and a sanctuary to a movement that represented a coalition of Southerners and Northerners from different economic and social backgrounds, different generations and political philosophies, different races and religions.”<sup>142</sup> Vaughn Booker paraphrases Savage’s work, recalling Fannie Lou Hamer who dissented against “[Black religious and political elites who] ‘rejected ecstatic religion as primitive and antithetical to activism, against those who believed that men led and women merely followed, against those who believed that fear would overpower faith.’”<sup>143</sup> Here, Savage details the necessity for denouncing hierarchical religious processions within activism. This is noteworthy, in part, because of the danger of movement hijacking, where corrupted allyship distorts the original qualities of the movement. Conversely, in a partnership where religious organizations meet young activists at the table free from domineering ideologies and biases, then these religious institutions can introduce frameworks that young activists can build off of.

As was previously mentioned, Savage’s conception of the civil rights movement existing as a religious movement is essential. This description, somewhat similar to the social movements of today, represents the fundamental flaw within religious leadership today. Where the original civil rights movement was able to capitalize on a *prophetic moment*, churches today still remain absent despite the Black Lives Matter protests carrying such a heavy weight behind them. Identifying the theological aspects of social movements today is rather easy, as the similarities between the Biblical tradition and them remain strong. However, the notable aspect of messianism remains absent. Utterly dissimilar to the movements of the mid-twentieth century, contemporary protests do not garner national leadership or national movement figures. Where Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, and Angela Davis, among others, were able to organize and

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

function through either the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Nation of Islam, the National Council of Churches, or another religious organization, young leaders today are reliant on local partnerships and online organizing (which is not necessarily a detriment to an event's success). That being the case, the *relationship* between young people and religion in itself is, at the time of this research, still fractured.

Throughout this research, we have made it clear that Generation Z is functioning religiously, separate from religious organizations, by promoting communal welfare, ecological theologies, and through prophetic activism. Transqueer activist and theologian Robyn Henderson-Espinoza may describe these characteristics as "Activist Theology." They state, "Activist theology is a movement grounded in the politics of becoming that takes protest, revolution, and radical social change to be at the heart of what it means to follow the ways of Jesus, and it is also a theological commitment."<sup>144</sup> They add, "Activist theology looks to the stories of Jesus as a means of confessing that resistance to power structures that dominate, oppress, and extinguish human flourishing is the theology and social practices (ethics) that enact radical social change."<sup>145</sup> Although Generation Z is not explicitly mentioned in Henderson-Espinoza's work, their description of modern social movements in light of the Biblical tradition is noteworthy and applicable to this research. While Generation Z is not yet specifically looking towards the stories of Jesus, their actions reflect what otherwise would be inspiration from the Biblical text. Barbara Savage's and Henderson-Espinoza's work becomes noticeably similar when each author details the caution for corruption in movements. Where Savage underlines prudence around religious institutional hierarchies and bonds, Henderson-Espinoza stresses abstaining from religious idolatry. Instead, Henderson-Espinoza argues that activist theology is

<sup>144</sup> Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, *Activist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 1003.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

centered in the basis of “supporting the stories of resistance that help us all unhinge from empire in strategic ways and, at root, is grounded in creating a more loving world, where democracy enables us all to engage in civic life and celebrate social healing.”<sup>146</sup> Accordingly, where both the civil rights movement and Generation Z meet is at the nexus between a movement for radical social change and the nonreligious religiousness of that movement. However, where Generation Z is unable to familiarize itself with the civil rights movement is, effectively, at the foundation of organization, hence why it is of the utmost importance for popular religious organizations to manifest themselves in light of the young generation, and to *actually embody* the Biblical narrative.

It is important to emphasize here another characteristic of activist theology, that at “[the] heart of activist theology is incubating sustainable change by responding to the needs of the world, instead of responding to the failings of the Church.”<sup>147</sup> Where this new praxis may become diffused is by reorienting church practices to the benefit of solely the Church or solely members of that church. A new praxis is centered outside of monetary or personal opinions on one’s affiliation or denomination. Instead, as has been mentioned previously, the new praxis is founded on *true justice* and *true activism*. Meaning, that true justice is centered between appreciating the agency of the individuals to which the Church is allied with, while simultaneously developing the intersectionality between multifaceted layers of subjugation (whether it be brought by the economic order or some other form of prevailing dominance). Moreover, overtaking a movement is the antithesis to what allyship is supposed to be, and can become rather performative and unsubstantial if done this way. In this light, true activism can then be abridged by following the Biblical narrative in line with Generation Z and being

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 1063.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 1070.

respective of the needs and wants of the young generation. Responding to the failures of the Church, as Henderson-Espinoza describes, is an internal function of the religious organization rather than a responsibility of young people. Responding to the needs of the world, then, *is* the responsibility of young people (as outlined in the ethic and spirit), as well as the Church.

Accordingly, both the Church and young people are bound by the same responsibility—a dyad.

The religiousness of Generation Z is not shown in its religiosity, rather its behavior. Where the Church is predominately found to be intricately attached to the preservation and consumption of American exceptionalism, Generation Z is so colossally removed from the overbearingness of that empire that its behavior is seen as radical. It is time for religious organizations to refamiliarize themselves with the tradition they claim to teach. Where has the radicalness gone since the civil rights movement? Reclaiming this past behavior, as mentioned above, is not the duty of the persons who have been subjected to the deliberate negligence of religious organizations, but the responsibility of all within it. Providing the basis for radical social change is the fundamental function of a church, yet this obligation has seemingly been forgotten. Now, in light of the new revolution generation, the Church must come to recognize its original operation or see itself dwindle into being obsolete.

## Conclusion

This essay's impressions on the necessary changes within the dominating religious ethos in the United States are challenging, to say the least. The point at which young people and the religious order stand now are too far removed from one another to expect a natural return to institutions or to pick up religion anew entirely. These scenarios, already unlikely by the traditional sense of young rebellion, are further made even more unlikely by the dogmatic institutions that have prevented youth development for decades. Young people may force religion to change, whether that be by simply not going to church or by actively moving the Church's hand. Both of these sequences can occur simultaneously, yet, as said in the previous section, activist theology and prophetic activism come independently from church involvement. Furthermore, these ideals stretch far beyond addressing the needs and wants of the church, and by way of the *spirit of Generation Z*, seek to leave things better for future generations of all beings of the earth.

Reimagining the church to actually embody the function of its religion is not some radical experiment, rather a cancellation of the debased teachings that have been infused with the economic order and conservative politics. American individualism is not synonymous with, nor is it compatible with the Biblical narrative. The powerful ethos that perpetuates the belief that it follows a pattern of systemic choices built to enforce dualistic world views and unsubstantiated hierarchies. Breaking free of this mold, relinquishing opinions and beliefs of bigotry while unlearning racist, sexist, and homophobic behavior is ambitious but necessary. There is no path where Generation Z chooses to believe in a God that, by all practical means and purposes, proactively harms the health and safety of many of the generation's brothers and



sisters. But this harm comes from corruption and selfishness and is unfounded in the actual tradition. Thus this God requires a resettling, a reclaiming.

These changes will be explicitly outlined once more here. Only by radically addressing the Biblical tradition will the old way be able to recognize and relinquish the dualisms that have been determined through biased and intolerant readings of the Bible. This step, above all others, is most necessary. In being able to receive Generation Z and anything resembling what Generation Z desires, older generations must realize the failures that unsustainable church practices, as well as economic and political ones, have created. This world, the result of these failures, is the world that Generation Z was born and raised into. Moreover, philosophical and cultural notions of tradition must also be retired. Beliefs of malicious tradition, such as the “this is what we went through you should as well” that was discussed earlier, is not only dangerous but entirely unnecessary. The following steps are all variations of fully realizing the uniqueness and abilities of Generation Z. Seeing, and enabling the agency of each young person within the United States and around the world, particularly in the areas of gender and sexuality, is not only significant for the Church but also culturally as well. Embracing the agency of young people is acknowledging and admitting the significance of both the *ethic* and the *spirit* of Generation Z. Empowering young people will not only benefit the current inhabitants of the earth, but also all of the future. Thus, once both the absolutes and domination of the old way are relinquished, receiving Generation Z in its full form will be momentous. Finally, once the hierarchies are reorganized and dismantled, and young people are appreciated in full, the new practice of the Church must promote the sanctity of the earth and all that stems from it. Not only this, but the teachings must dramatically orient themselves against the standing political and economic orders, and must not stray away from the difficult conversations surrounding them. A setting that

sets itself at odds from the prevailing social orders is not only in line with the Biblical tradition, but also precisely where Generation Z stands.

The Biblical behavior of Gen Z, while not particularly recognized as such by standing religious orders nor young people, is significant in this moment. In the midst of a global pandemic, the largest civil rights movement in history, the brink of economic collapse, and the most desperate time in the history of mental health, young people continuously show that they are fighting for goodness. Despite all the evil that surrounds this moment, Generation Z stands at odds from it. The Church can see itself wherever it may please, so if the Church desires to stand away from Gen Z, so be it. But if the Church wants to functionally behave as its Scripture entails it to do, then there should be no question that religious organizations will do everything in their power to embrace young people. In the case where a church already appreciates young people, then it is also that church's responsibility to challenge other spaces. So, in the question of what it would take for the earth creature to go to church, the answer may be that young people already are. If we understand the earth and the proliferation of the earth and all of its creations as a holy responsibility given by God, young people are certainly upholding their duty. Thus, the earth is the young person's temple, and the physical location of a church is a single gathering space. Calling young people and bringing young people to this location requires an internal reflection of what this space is providing. If the holy responsibility is not at the forefront of the church, then young people will stay at their distance, but even in the case that they do, young people will stay awesomely powerful.

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