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Jessica Crabtree
Denison University

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Narrative Theory: Hope of Revival for the Dying Church in the Face of Empire

Jessica Crabtree

Project Advisor: David Woodyard

Department of Religion

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Abstract

The importance of narratives within individual lives and collective groups and movements often governs the way that society functions. Narratives can serve as a powerful force in either cementing or combating oppressive ideologies. Within the context of the church narrative and metaphor have the capability to either revive or condemn the church body as it currently exists within American Empire. In several studies, it has been made clear that the membership and attendance of church services has decreased in the Millennial and Gen Z generations. Previous research demonstrates several paths the church may take in response to its overall decline in attendance among the younger generations, however it is clear that in order to bring about the revival of a dying church system, the integration of younger generations must take place. This research can be interpreted in several ways to determine the best path forward to bring about the revival of the church. Through the consideration of narratives at play both in the religious community and society at large, it is possible to pinpoint the direction the church could take in order to deconstruct its entanglement with empire while at the same time returning to relevance among the rising generations.

Introduction

As an increasing number of people from the millennial generation and younger begin to refrain from identifying themselves with any religious affiliations, speculation has risen as to whether these “nones” will bring about the secularization of American society and alongside it, the death of the Christian church. In spite of this potential future, it is the denominational churches such as Methodist, and Presbyterian that are especially at risk.¹ However, it may be a good thing that the church is ‘dying’ in a sense. The Christian church as it currently exists within the United States of America has been transformed by the presence of American empire into Christendom, a blending of the Christian tradition into the imperial agenda. Christendom is a distortion of the authentic Christian tradition that intertwines biblical symbols with the agenda of empire in order to use them as a justification for empire’s actions. So long as empire maintains its hold over the Christian tradition, an authentic view of the tradition within the American context is impossible.

In attempting to take a legitimate look into the Christian tradition, an obstacle immediately becomes prevalent in the form of Christendom. A proper representation of the tradition cannot be reached so long as Christendom remains in place. This raises questions about what it would take to dismantle the Christendom that grips the church. One would have to consider how to dissolve Christendom while restoring the authentic tradition. There are two kinds of history to keep in mind during this process as well. One is the history and cultural tradition contained within the tradition itself that must be restored to prominence, and the other is the colonial history ingrained into the empires from Rome onward that Christianity played a part in. Both histories must be addressed. Further, it raises questions about how the church could be

¹ Andersen, Ericka. “Thank God, American Churches are Dying.” *Wall Street Journal*. 2020: accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/thank-god-american-churches-are-dying-11582243546>.

reconstructed in order to once again become an effective agent of change and weapon against the imperial agenda. In order to explore these possibilities and analyze how the future of the church in America may look, one must begin with the analysis of narrative theory. Due to the impact and influence that narratives have on one's understanding of life and the world around them, dedicating time to narrative definitions, and some of the ways it can play out is worthwhile.

Then, it will be possible to transition to some forms of narrative such as ultimate concern which determines an individual's priority and path in life. This concept is an example of the ways that the narratives people tell themselves about themselves and the world affect the way that they live their lives and interact with others. The content of an ultimate concern is specific to each individual and has the power to dictate one's actions. Communities may also have an ultimate concern that binds them together as well, playing out on both an individual and communal level. Tillich also uses ultimate concern to make the claim that no one is an atheist on the grounds that whatever someone treats as ultimate then becomes their god.² Ultimate concern can also be used as a tool to analyze how narratives and counternarratives may spring up around the same event within different groups. With this groundwork laid, it is also necessary to determine the limitations of language and translation especially as they pertain to attempting to capture the events and content that has occurred.

Keeping these ideas in mind, we can lay out the nature of empire and its actions within its borders and outside them as imperial control spreads. In the context of American Empire, dominating narratives and justifying actions through the tradition of Christianity has led to the creation of a dominant consciousness that has claimed possession of the nation's agenda. At the center of this imperial mindset and control lay more specific narratives such as exceptionalism

² Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology: Reason and Revelation Being and God*, The University of Chicago Press, 1951, 12-13.

and Manifest Destiny that also tie themselves to a consuming individualism that grows out of the capitalist economy set in place. Finally, discussions of metaphors as well as their limitations and benefits can occur, especially as metaphors for God justify specific aspects of the imperial agenda.

With this final piece of foundation in place, it is possible to turn to the metaphorical death of the church and explore the ways in which Christendom must be cut away. Given the complex colonial history of the church, it is difficult to determine how to eliminate the oppressive influence of Christendom while reclaiming the authenticity of the tradition itself. This can be done while exploring metaphors comparing the death of the church to the death of Christ, allowing for a clear view of how the tradition may resurface in its historical context. By including the historical, political Jesus, one can then determine how the church may once again become effective as an agent for change and be energized against empire in order to combat individualism and rediscover the responsibility that we should have toward each other as parts of the same community.

Narrative Theory

The politics of language, narrative, and translation saturate daily life both as an individual and as part of a collective. They make up every aspect of communication even if the elements themselves slip beneath the radar. Used to process and archive information both in the written and spoken form, the narrative is the medium through which people are able to understand themselves, the world, and their experiences. This is evident in the suggestion and correspondence of narrative formation and the retention of memory begin at roughly the same age in human development. Not an entirely proven coincidence, the notion nevertheless has

some significance in the way that narrative affects comprehension of the self and the experience.³ Though narratives are most commonly thought of as elaborate pieces of creative writing or storytelling, for Abbott, narratives also make up the internal assumptions that influence our interactions and behaviors. For the purpose of this work, it is necessary to differentiate between the term ‘story’ and the term ‘narrative’ as the two should not be used interchangeably. At first glance the two appear to be one and the same however there are subtle differences worth noting that will be useful to a further understanding.

For Abbott, the term ‘story’ refers to an event or a series of events that progresses forward in time.⁴ The definition for story in this work is best fleshed out alongside the definition for narrative so that one may see the similarities and differences between them. Narrative is the form given to a story or the way it is told. It is a representation of what has happened that cannot fully capture those events. For example, while story can only progress forward in linear time as events occur in order, the narrative structure of a story may choose to rearrange the events in flashback and cut or add details in order to create meaning or resonance. The narrative is the way in which one chooses to represent events. Many scholars have conflicting views regarding what the parameters are that constitute a narrative. The one consensus among them that a narrative must consist of action or verbs.⁵ Something has to be *happening*. According to Abbott’s broad definition of narrative, only a single action must be present.⁶ For example, a sentence as simple as “The child fell,” could be a narrative so far as it represents an event that has occurred.⁷ One of the defining differences between the two is the capability for representation. A story can be

³ Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3.

⁴ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 17.

⁵ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 4.

represented into many forms while retaining a core element that makes it recognizable as that specific story.⁸ Narrative on the other hand is the representative form. The example that Abbott highlights in terms of representative choice is the story of Cinderella which is recognizable contained within numerous books, movies, and other mediums.⁹ The core elements of story remain in place while the writer may choose to change the setting to space, or the characters into modern day students rather than royalty and peasants. Despite having wildly different details involved with each individual representation, the story is still recognizable as Cinderella while the narrative structure has changed.

These elements of representation do not only apply to fictional narrative, although those do have power to influence the collective consciousness. They also apply to the narratives of history, religion, and theology. One such example can be found in the Exodus story within scripture. Many groups identify themselves and their struggles with this story of God bringing the Israelites out of slavery and into the promised land. However, these interpretations can greatly vary as different agendas are applied to the text in order to use the narrative as a justification. One group making use of the Exodus was the Civil Rights Movement within the United States. Using the Exodus story as a lens through which to examine their own present situation and struggle, they were able to use the text as an energizing force to draw the community together and into action, using language concerning the promised land to assure participants that the fight for rights and freedom would be worth it. However, in another scenario, the Exodus is identified with pilgrims coming to America seeking religious freedom. Though this group began in the scripture and identified themselves with the Israelites, their interpretation ignores the destruction of Native peoples that occurred at their hands in order to

⁸ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*

achieve the freedom and power they had been seeking. In this way, interpretations of the same content can be warped by agendas to come out looking entirely different despite having origin in the same text.

In defining these two terms it is also necessary to differentiate between some of the elements making up each one. Abbott uses the terms “constituent” and “supplementary” events to describe some of the information that may make up a story.¹⁰ The constituent events within a story form its core. If these specific events were not included, the story would no longer be recognizable as itself regardless of narrative form. Supplementary events on the other hand, fill in details and provide information without necessarily driving the main course of the story forward.¹¹ Without these events, the story would still be recognizable, though considerably less rich in spite of the same events taking place. Changing the constituent events would drastically alter the representation, while altering the supplementary events would change the narrative structure rather than the core representation. Some other elements to consider that were briefly touched on before are ideas of description, and action. Where description is an element of story that enhances the events told, description alone does not make up a narrative. In order for a story to become a narrative, there must be actions or events that are being represented. In other words, the story itself is what ‘is there’ or what happened, whereas the narrative is a representation of what is there or what happened. With this distinction, it is also important to acknowledge that in representing any events, there is never a way to achieve an exact account. There is no way for the representation to fully capture what is there due to the representation being colored by the implicit biases of the one recounting the events in speech or in writing. For the purposes of

¹⁰ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 22-23.

¹¹ Ibid.

examining narrative and its role within theology and American Empire, concern will fall less on narrative length and more on distinguishing the narrative from the story.

Narrative interpretation and perspective also carry an immense importance when it comes to navigating the recorded narratives surrounding any story. The interpretive element of narrative is one of those with the most ambiguity attached, and also raises the question of what can be considered “the truth” if such a concept could even prove to be valuable. Truth and authenticity of narrative are some of the most contested factors in attempting to interpret history, religion, and other fields of study. In order to properly discuss interpretation and its complex navigation, it is necessary to establish the difference between truth and fact. For example, if a murder takes place with witnesses, one thing that is certain is that there has been a death. This is a fact of the story, however the narratives told by the witnesses are likely to all be wildly different. One may state that the victim had their hands raised and was compliant before being killed. Another may claim that the killing had been self-defense because the victim had been approaching the killer to attack them. Even addressing the two people as “victim” and “killer” are forms of interpretation despite the intention behind the terms having been to simply differentiate between the two people involved. This is an example of many ‘truths.’ To some extent each witness believes their interpretation to be the truth, filling in motive and guessing at the intention between each movement made by either party. Other than the core facts: one person is dead, and the other is the killer, nothing more is certain with only eyewitness accounts to reconstruct the events. This is a further example of the how a story may be transformed into many different narratives depending upon the form one chooses to give it.

Ultimate Concern

In interpreting the world and its events into a series of narratives for our personal comprehension, there are specific perspectives that groups and individuals bring to the table based upon the context of their environment and the identities that they associate themselves with. However, one element that has significant power over many of the perspectives ingrained into a person is a concept from Paul Tillich's work called 'ultimate concern.' This is the concern that rises above all others in an individual's life to determine the ways in which they react to the world around them, and in terms of narrative, creating a lens through which they interpret.¹² Shaping one's understanding of life through the narrative of ultimate concern speaks to the power that narrative can hold over the life of an individual.¹³ Tillich in describing the nature and effects of ultimate concern, emphasizes the totality of commitment and priority that must be given over to an ultimate concern, even at the sacrifice of all other concerns.¹⁴ The inherent power in such a narrative can be the driving force behind individuals and collective depending upon the content of the concern.

Great risk accompanies these concerns as well since one's entire life and stability can be staked on one thing. Treating something as ultimate which is not, can result in the destruction of a person's entire being.¹⁵ Holding that which is finite in the position of the ultimate subjects an individual to the inevitable collapse of that ultimate under the weight of their being.¹⁶ The finite gives out beneath the weight where the infinite would be able to support an individual. In order to understand the consequence of placing faith in that which appears to be ultimate, but turns out

¹² Tillich, Paul. *Dynamics of Faith*. World Perspectives: Volume 10, (New York, Harper and Brother Publishers, 1957), 1.

¹³ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 1-3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 6-7.

¹⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 211.

to be only finite, it is necessary to understand how faith is a centered act of the total personality. The act of faith requires the total engagement of every part of the personality which in turn amounts to more than the sum of its parts to impact the whole of the personality and the dynamics of the personal life. An act of faith encompasses both the conscious and unconscious mind, rational and nonrational, cognitive and emotional, transcending each polarity and element to form the center.¹⁷ Discovering this lack of ultimacy in one's ultimate concern can destabilize the center of their being bringing about an emptiness. In addition to this decentering, it is necessary to establish that which has true ultimacy combines the objective and subjective in that the ultimate in its infinity is both subject and object at once transcending beyond both as well.¹⁸

Since the surrender to that which is perceived as ultimate encompasses the total personality, faith in what is finite has the potential to bring about the destruction of one's center of personality. For example, one who holds their nation as their ultimate could be consumed by emptiness if their nation ultimately fails to provide the essential support expected from one in that position. A potential example of this is the uncertainty that spread across the nation after 9/11.¹⁹ Previous to that attack, no such incident had taken place on the mainland of the United States in many years. One common narrative set in place by empire allowed citizens to view the United States as all powerful and an overall extremely safe country without any military threats.²⁰ With the event of 9/11, the solid ground of United States security had taken a critical blow, revealing a vulnerability that had not been visible before.²¹ A narrative that was previously viewed as sure crumbled in the face of 9/11 which was an 'unthinkable' event. The nation could

¹⁷ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 6-7.

¹⁸ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 11.

¹⁹ Taylor, Mark Lewis. *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right: Post 9/11 Powers and American Empire*. (Augsburg Fortress, 2005) xi.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

not fathom how anyone could attack them since they perceived themselves as a world superpower.

Though the concept of ultimate concern does not appear to connect directly with an understanding and redefining of faith that is valuable for demonstrating the impact of individual narratives upon groups and societies of people, there are several significant ties that can be illuminated. As narratives are constructed, they create the reality in which individuals and collectives function. Nothing happens until it is talked about, in the sense that narratives surface what is there in reality and only through narrative can one understand their lives and the world. As ultimate concern is the one thing that an individual is willing to stake their entire life and being on, the ultimate has influence over the personal and collective structures of narrative.²² The ultimate determines the perspective of each individual and influences the way their own personal narratives are constructed. This connection makes the risk of having an ultimate which is finite even more extreme as it will not only destroy a being when it fails but will also fundamentally alter the way in which an individual views and understands the world and their own experience.

One issue within the construction of ultimate concern in Tillich's writing is that he remains within the abstract realm of thinking at all times. Classified as philosophical theology, Tillich does not apply his concepts to a concrete scenario in spite of his emphasis on the importance of situation when doing theology that is relevant.²³ Exploring the dangers of specific contents of ultimate concern has the potential to speak further to the current situations in which the theology is being done.²⁴ He provides limited examples of how certain contents of ultimate concern may affect the individual, touching upon ultimate concern in a nation or in wealth,

²² Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Reason and Revelation Being and God*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1951) 211.

²³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3-4.

²⁴ Ibid.

however he does not deliver these examples with any level of specificity or context to fit them into.²⁵

Tillich keeps his work contained within the abstract realm, which has both risks and benefits. One of the benefits of this strategy is that the framework maintains a constant state of potential. By lingering in abstractness, there is constantly the *potential* of being applied to a situation with none of the risks or misinterpretations that may accompany such an application. There is also a type of universality to the frame of ultimate concern so long as it remains a concept rather than concrete. The risks involved with this strategy are that the framework can be adapted or twisted to serve the agendas of others. There is also the idea that accompanies narrative that nothing may exist or happen outside of our direct experience until it has been represented. By keeping ultimate concern in the realm of the abstract rather than applying it to specific representations, it cannot become relevant to the theological situation that needs to be addressed. This abstraction also has an impact upon interpretation and language. In the abstract realm, though the theory is kept clean from potential contamination that could accompany association with a specific example or context. This lack of association, however, leaves the readers free to interpret the work into their own situations, potentially contaminating the theories on their own.

Interpretation and Language

Translation and interpretation are large parts of both the studies of theology and religion as well as elements that contribute to the ways that narratives are able to impact lives. An important factor of these elements in connection to narrative to keep in mind is that there is

²⁵ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 11-12.

always something lost in translation. Translation between languages has obvious drawbacks as there are plenty of concepts that cannot be translated due to their exclusivity to a specific language. Even when translation is attempted upon these exclusive concepts elements of their significance will inevitably be lost or eliminated when considered outside of their original context. One such example is the many faceted definition of love found in Greek. While in English there is only a single word, “love,” to account for many different types and aspects. In order to comprehend in English, the terms “eros,” “agape,” or “philia,” love on its own is insufficient though it embodies an aspect contained within each of the terms. The English word love has to be modified in order to give access to the Greek, adding modifiers in order to come close to the original meaning. “Eros” becomes “passionate love” or some similar variation, while “agape” transforms to selfless love, but even these attempts at translation fall short due to the concept of love already prominent within the English speaking context. Each of these words in both the English and the Greek are simply representations of the existence of ‘love’ however none of them may fully capture its existence due to the gap between representation and reality. All language is part of a representation of what is truly there, all also falling short in some way as it fails to fully capture the contents it seeks to represent.

Between individuals speaking the same language interpretation occurs as outside contexts such as body language, connotation and personal experience are taken into account during conversations. Partially due to the fluidity of language, the same words spoken by different individuals can take on different meanings or connotations depending upon the way they are said or the context they are spoken in. Interpretation combines language connotation, individual perception and the choices involved in creating a narrative. It is important to consider that each person recounting events or engaging in a piece of writing, especially when it comes to religion

that is so deeply involved in their lives, they do not come without some implicit biases or contextual perspectives already in place and that these viewpoints may be either conscious or unconscious. Though the word bias tends to take on a negative connotation, here it is possible to be positive as well, while a negative form may stem from manipulation or imposition of an agenda upon or in creation of a narrative. An example of a conscious bias could be a scholar examining a narrative through the lens of feminism or gender in order to achieve specific interpretations. This element of narrative combined with narrative shape can be connected to Kwok Pui-Lan and her argument that there is no pure way to examine the biblical tradition.²⁶ By this she states that each individual is examining the tradition through their own lens which is shaped by their environment and many elements of their identities.²⁷ Applying this argument to the framework of narrative, each individual must produce their own interpretation of the narrative in order to create meaning within the context of their own lives.

Empire and Dominant Narrative

The question still remains how the navigation of narrative connects with empire, specifically within the American context. Narratives are constantly employed within empire both as justifications for its implementation and action as well as to keep its people ensnared within the biases it carries. Abbott argues convincingly for the powerful driving force between narrative and human desire, but arguably even stronger is the power created when narrative is bonded to fear.²⁸ In terms of empire one could point to mistrust of Muslim persons after the events of 9/11. In religious traditions sending missionaries to other nations comes to mind. Further engaging

²⁶ Kwok, Pui-Lan. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 144.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 43.

with Kwok's argument, her experience with missionaries that were sent to her home nation demonstrates many of the dangers present with dominant narratives bent upon controlling the minds of others. Taking care to illustrate this example as an act of empire, it is worth noting that it is unlikely that the missionaries themselves had any malicious intent, however it was the case that had managed to deliver, not the Christian tradition, but the tradition packaged in Western values and culture as though the two were indistinguishable. Treated as though her own culture played no part within the Christian tradition, Kwok then had to rediscover the tradition through her own lens as she began to understand the contours of the false narrative she had been fed growing up in a church that did not feel like home.²⁹ This is one of the many ways that narratives born of empire impact nations abroad.

Imperial acts of control in the form of narrative control also exist within the empire's official borders, as depicted by Kelly Brown Douglas. Outlining the experience of being black in America, Douglas employs the story of the unjust killing of Trayvon Martin to give shape to the reality that black Americans have been forced to live.³⁰ Douglas deals with two conflicting narratives in the course of her book, the white Anglo-Saxon myth used to provide justification to empire for a mindset of white supremacy, and the death of Trayvon Martin which highlights the injustice inherent in such views. Within American society, the white supremacy narrative is prevalent in the collective consciousness, leading to both the criminalization and demonization of black bodies.³¹ It is this type of control over the perceptions of others that lead to Douglas' assertion that whoever controls the narrative, also controls reality through the creation and enforcement of laws and ideological frameworks.³² According to Abbott, "We impose the stories

²⁹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 62.

³⁰ Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Orbis Books, 2015), vii.

³¹ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 50.

³² *Ibid.*

that give our life meaning,” and in the case of American Empire, these stories are turned into narratives that justify a way of thinking that holds white bodies in higher regard than people of color.³³ This imposition comes in the form of narrative interpretation, as the story is fit into a narrative structure that serves the agendas of those structuring the narrative.

Implementing the white supremacy narrative into the collective consciousness of a nation grants permission to empire for the demonization of people of color. In this case, the narrative achieves a justification to suppress those who exist outside of the ideals and norms that the narrative establishes for society. This process manifests itself within legislature as well, creating discriminatory laws with the purpose of defending the ideal state that the narrative mandates. Combining elements of religion and collective consciousness, the justification empire has employed allows for the construction of the ‘stand your ground’ laws which are necessary to understand in order to see clearly the amount of power provided by these ingrained narratives.

The stand your ground laws are in place to provide rights to defend the self and the property against threats to the safety of one’s life and possessions, however these laws are twisted to cover not only ‘reasonable threats’ but also perceived threats as well.³⁴ This leaves individuals with a right to defend themselves against anyone they *think* may be a threat, and it is this allowance and mindset that led to the unarmed black boy, Trayvon Martin, to be shot and killed in the street.³⁵ Through the demonization of black bodies with the narratives put in play by American Empire, the fears of the dominant white society are played into so that not only are they capable of perceiving threats where there are reasonably none, they are also capable and

³³ Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 22.

³⁴ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

justified in the imperial context to defend themselves from the very existence of the differences that they fear.

Addressing the conflicting accounts of life within the American context, one is able to discuss the ideas of narratives and counternarratives. These conflicting accounts reaffirm that there is no monolithic interpretation of any event or context as well as the idea that with any narrative representation, it is impossible to truly capture what is there. This raises the question of which interpretation comes closer to getting it right in terms of how the world should function in light of the narratives they employ. It is also possible to discuss the nature of conflicting narratives in terms of Tillich's ultimate concern. The content of one's ultimate concern has the power to determine the way in which they view all other representations within their lives. It can become a lens through which an individual views the world, coloring all else that they may see. This element can determine which interpretation of events one may deem authentic. For example, Douglas' accounts of both the dominant narrative and counternarrative raise important points about the interaction of narrative with both identity and truth. The dominant narrative holds the most power within society, having been ingrained into the collective consciousness of most members.³⁶ However, if the dominant narrative is found to be unjust or lacking representation of all societal groups, often counternarratives will spring up in its wake to battle against this imbalance of power.

Dominant narratives create reality and in doing so affect the many groups that they involve in their control. This lack of control can result in a questioning of the self and identity. Since narratives have such power over memory formation and understanding our own experiences, having narratives imposed upon a group that does not reflect their identity or

³⁶ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 50.

experience has the potential to cause crisis. As Abbott rightly states, “it is only through narrative that we know ourselves as active entities that operate through time.”³⁷ In Douglas’ context, black Americans have a narrative of demonization and criminalization forced upon them. In Kwok’s context, Asians are confined to Western values and stereotypes in the name of religion blended with cultural and political agendas. When a group is not in charge of their own narrative, it can jeopardize their collective identity as wider society fails to view them in the way that they view themselves. In these situations, counternarratives will inevitably spring up as the driving force to help these suppressed groups reclaim their identities.

In terms of power, narratives carry immense amounts of influence. From individuals seeing through the lens of their ultimate concern, to groups attempting to create a reality in their favor, narratives shape our understandings of ourselves and the world. This highlights both their advantages and their dangers. Narratives can be used for control and the reinforcement of harmful beliefs and stereotypes as easily as they can be used to reclaim a heritage or tradition from the ways they have been corrupted. Awakening to the importance and power of narrative, one is able to see how empire can control the thoughts and perceptions of those under its power. Empire does not only involve strong military actions but also the ideology of its people. Through this understanding, it is then possible to dive into metaphors for God, as well as the blending of Christianity and politics into Christendom to see some of the specific justifications empire receives from its narratives, and from there to search for ways that this control can be dismantled.

Empire in the American context spans the religious, economic, and political spheres, casting a wide net of control over many groups of people. Twisting the Christian tradition to

³⁷ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 130.

serve the purposes of imperial activity, American Empire has spun a twisted web of narratives that define the collective consciousness of those touched by it. Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny are used to spark the widespread dominant narrative of America as a superpower that consumes the collective consciousness of its citizens and nations around the world. Taking part in imperial action that consists of violent military acts as well as ideological domination, these narratives supply both the power and belief necessary for them to do so. The range of scholarly reactions and analyses of empire vary wildly based on a range of issues from race to economics depending upon the lens through which they examine the narratives in play.

Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny

To understand the origin and nature of American empire, one must explore two key concepts that feed the justification of empire building. These are exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. Beginning with American exceptionalism which is America's view of itself, it can be defined as a belief that America as a nation has 'gotten it right,' and therefore has a responsibility both to its own people and to the rest of the world to spread its gifts to everyone.³⁸ By 'getting it right,' this means that America's systems, institutions, and ideologies have an exceptional status over any other way of doing things, and by introducing and implementing these systems elsewhere, they are doing a service to the world in the process.³⁹ Exceptionalism also assumes that America has knowledge of what is best for all, assuming that it is their obligation to impose their knowledge without taking other cultures or contexts into account. This ingrained belief contributes to many of the oppressive systems of empire in place to maintain control.

³⁸ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 9.

³⁹ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 15.

The narrative of Manifest Destiny recounts the traversing of the Atlantic by European immigrants coming to establish colonies in North America.⁴⁰ This account of the pilgrims fleeing from religious persecution in England is often overlapped with the Exodus found in the biblical text. Using the text as a lens to examine their own situation, this overlap then associates the pilgrims' religious persecution with the slavery endured by the nation of Israel before being led out of Egypt by God.⁴¹ The Exodus is invoked in order for the pilgrims to understand their own journey. This association also insinuates that through the chosen status of Israel within the Old Testament, they are chosen as well due to the perceived likeness of the two situations. This chosen status comes into play again and again throughout the establishment of the United States as a nation, authorizing the treatment of Native peoples, and westward expansion.⁴² This is the core of Manifest Destiny, that the American people are engaging in a mission from God in order to expand from coast to coast in the new world. This representation of America's founding provides a cover for the harm caused in the process of destroying the Native American peoples under the guise of the greater good.

These terms come together to create a mindset which exemplifies the idea of America having been chosen for a mission from God.⁴³ With this justification of having been chosen in place, the actions of empire become for the purpose of furthering God's will and purpose despite any harm the oppression may cause. Returning to the Exodus, America may justify its actions with a claim that God has led in that direction, much as God led the Israelites out of Egypt. Stephen Webb uses American providence in combination with exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny as a basis for the justification of imperial activity within the economic and political

⁴⁰ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 95-96.

⁴¹ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 8-9.

⁴² Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 93-94.

⁴³ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 8-9.

sphere.⁴⁴ For Webb, providence provides enough of a reason to buy into empire. Using these narratives to provide a groundwork for imperialism, Webb confirms the advantages of empire through the destiny of the nation as chosen by God for a greater mission.⁴⁵

Returning to questions of truth and authenticity, it is possible to analyze the nature of the Christendom present in American empire. Based upon a blending of the political, economic, and religious spheres, Christendom twists the Christian tradition to suit the agenda of empire. Blending the political and economic spheres leads to a distortion of the tradition from its original meaning, allowing it to be captured and put to use for others. Richard Horsley in his analysis of the Christian tradition, argues that only an interpretation based strongly within the historical context of the biblical text can be considered an authentic version.⁴⁶ Though there is no one way to interpret the biblical tradition, as shown by Kwok with her acknowledgement of the lenses through which people examine the text, there are interpretations that twist the meaning of the text for their own personal gain.⁴⁷ One such example can be found in the Manifest Destiny narrative as it attempts to compare the pilgrimage to America to the Exodus story.⁴⁸ This interpretation does not fit in light of the historical context due to the nature of oppression as well as the actions taken by the pilgrims in their treatment of Native peoples.⁴⁹ Where the Israelites had been confined in slavery to Egypt, they fled into the desert to escape their oppressors, following God forward into the promised land. However, in the context of the pilgrims, and America's foundation, Native Americans were forced from their homes and destroyed. Here, the original

⁴⁴ Webb, Stephen H. *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission*. (The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004) 30-31, 38.

⁴⁵ Webb, *American Providence*, 2-3.

⁴⁶ Horsley, Richard H. *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*. (Fortress Publishing, 2003) 57-58.

⁴⁷ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 144.

⁴⁸ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 147.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

story in the biblical text has been twisted in order to authorize the founding of America, despite the distinct gaps in the overlap of the two scenarios leading to an inauthentic interpretation.

Avoiding these misinterpretations make it more important to find a grounding within the historical context. Reading a verse of scripture out of the context of its full text, and further outside the historical context in which it was written, one has the ability to interpret the words in far more ways than these contexts would permit. One example of taking scripture out of its textual context is a quote from 1 Timothy that often gets misinterpreted stating, “money is the root of all evil.”⁵⁰ However, reading this quote within the context of the rest of the passage it becomes clear that the intended meaning was that the love of money, or greed, is the designated root of evil.⁵¹ In terms of the historical context of the tradition, one example can be found in the description of Jesus in the temple. The text describing Jesus overturning tables in the temple can be compared to attacking systems within a modern Christian church confining Jesus to the religious sphere as a spiritual teacher, however this comparison cannot be considered authentic due to its lack of alignment with the historical context.⁵² Acknowledging the historical context, one notices that the temple extends beyond the religious sphere in many regards. The priests of the temple were appointed by the state, incorporating political agendas.⁵³ Within the temple, sacrifices could be purchased, and taxes were collected for the state as well, pulling the economic order into the mix.⁵⁴ With this context in mind, it becomes clear that an attack upon the temple does not only criticize the religious sphere but also the economy and the state as well. In turn, Jesus is transformed back into the political figure found in history rather than the

⁵⁰ 1 Timothy 6:10.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 55-56.

⁵³ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 32.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

spiritual teacher often found in modern church interpretations. Grounded in both the textual and historical contexts, the number of authentic interpretations is greatly limited in order to preserve the integrity of the narrative being interpreted.

In light of these dominant narratives often causing oppression against minority groups and those who go against the norms defined within the imperial context, counternarratives often arise in opposition. Counternarratives are attempts by these groups to regain control of their own identities and realities through redefining the reality that empire has predetermined for them. These counternarratives are often an energizing and uniting force for these groups of people, encouraging them to act and move against their oppressors by first reclaiming the stories that have been twisted for imperial usage. One such example can be found within the Civil Rights movement which employs the same Exodus story used by the Manifest Destiny narrative but applies it in a different way. Where Manifest Destiny cannot be viewed as an authentic interpretation, the Civil Rights movement fits with the original narrative of the Exodus. The Civil Rights movement demands equality and freedom without oppressing any other groups of people in the process and uses the Exodus as an energizing force to throw off the burden of oppression.

The actions of empire typically occur within the political, economic, and religious spheres simultaneously. Though it is common to think of empire and its agenda solely in terms of violent colonization and military control, one must also acknowledge the ideological control that empire is capable of building over its own people and other cultures. Webb refers to these concepts as hard and soft powers.⁵⁵ Technology and military advances are classified as hard powers as they control aspects of the physical world as well as the potential distribution of resources and information, especially in terms of the Internet and weapons production. Soft

⁵⁵ Webb, *American Providence*, 113.

power on the other hand is more subtle but equally if not more important.⁵⁶ Soft power consists of ideological exports and the transfer of culture that America is able to produce through pop culture such as Hollywood, and the music industry, but also through missionary work that spreads religion and Western values.⁵⁷ It is through this transportation of ideology that imperial narratives gain traction for control over many groups and nations.

Individualism and Community

The result of these dominant narratives is a twisted version of community and individualism. When turned beyond the borders of the nation, America claims a responsibility toward the global community, attempting to micromanage other nations by implementing governmental systems, spreading a capitalist economy, and maintaining high military presence under the guise of peace. However, this sense of global community does not stem from a true compassion for others, rather from a sense of righteousness. This means that the American empire believes its systems, procedures, and ideologies are the best in the world not only for themselves but also for other nations and therefore must be implemented for the good of all. This mindset, though it appears to be for a ‘greater good’ or for the global community ignores the needs of other nations and resorts to domination as America takes on a parental role claiming to know what is best for others as well as themselves.

There is also an individualistic mindset that exists within the economic, political, and religious spheres within the American nation. This element of empire eliminates the responsibility community members and neighbors are intended to have toward each other. Within the religious sphere, individualism takes the form of a Christian practice confined to the

⁵⁶ Webb, *American Providence*, 113.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

private sphere. This is a practice that focuses only upon individual salvation and the fate of the eternal soul. Concern for eternity ensures that these types of Christian practitioners stay focused upon a future that is incapable of taking place while they still live and breathe upon the earth. This direction of thinking distracts from the suffering taking place now in their communities and in the world. Rather than address oppression and injustices taking place before their eyes, religion in the private sphere is confined from taking part in the political and economic spheres although it is intertwined with both. This individualistic mindset keeps the Christian tradition from acting as a weapon against empire. Economics and politics cannot be criticized within the church of Christendom as patriotism and piety have been so thoroughly blended together that to criticize one is to criticize the other as well. A religion that took part in the public sphere would be concerned with systemic oppression and inequality within their own communities as well as actively engaged in overcoming such injustice. If Christianity escapes the confines of Christendom to once again come up against the agenda of empire it will be able to achieve a status that is active in the public sphere and overcome the individualism that keeps it contained.

Individualism in the economic sphere is given rise by the capitalist system in place to convince people that if they put in enough effort, the system will naturally provide what they need to survive.⁵⁸ In a system that promotes consumerism and wealth accumulation, systemic oppression is often overlooked due to the narrative of the American Dream and work ethic. With the standard set in place by the system of capitalism, the pervasive narrative becomes one in which any individual with enough work ethic has the power to pull themselves up by their bootstraps in order to climb the economic ladder.⁵⁹ By this same logic, those who are poor can be blamed for their own poverty, condemned as lazy rather than acknowledging the systemic

⁵⁸ Rieger, Joerg. *No Rising Tide: Theology Economics and the Future*. (Fortress Press, 2009) 1-3.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

barriers in place preventing ascension to other economic classes.⁶⁰ The economy ties into the religious sphere in the curious lack of discourse between the two. One may not criticize the economic system within the church and one may not speak about the church within the context of the economy. Individualism at work in both the economy and the church also justifies the existence of prosperity preachers. The practice of preaching the prosperity gospel exploits individuals in poverty through their belief in the church. The prosperity gospel operates based on the principle that if one gives generously then one will also receive generously, with both the gifts and rewards focused solely in the financial realm. This claim is then supported using the example of the preacher who often owns a mansion and other very expensive items, while the members of the congregation have next to nothing. Absorbing the donations from trusting community members, these churches are permitted to thrive without regard to the people they have taken money from. Through an individualistic agenda produced by the capitalist economy, congregation members remain focused on their own potential financial gain and the church itself becomes richer without improving the lives of their congregants.

The political sphere operates as a combination of the other two involving a small elite class in charge and attempting to improve the future for only themselves. Paul Djupe addresses this perceived disconnect between the religious and political spheres, stating, “At the very least, religion has typically been treated—almost without question—as independent of the political process.”⁶¹ This supposed disconnection prevents the Christian tradition from critiquing politics and provides a layer of cover for interconnectedness of the two spheres. Through maintaining systemic oppression in the economic sphere and keeping up with the individualistic attitude

⁶⁰ Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 48.

⁶¹ Djupe, Paul, Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Anand E. Sokhey. “Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion: The Importance of Affiliation.” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 62, no. 1, (Midwest Political Science Association, 2018), 161.

cemented into Christendom, politicians are capable of using the distorted version of Christianity to justify their actions. They are also able to place blame on the poor for being poor rather than addressing the flaws in a system that keeps them that way.⁶² Through these religious and economic narratives, the policymakers may maintain their control over perceived reality to construct the present and future in a way that primarily benefits them rather than the whole of society.⁶³ By restricting the discourse between the Christian tradition and the economic and political orders, the biblical tradition cannot be energized as a weapon against the oppressive state of empire. These three separated yet intertwined spheres also reflect the contrast of how the Christian tradition was meant to interact with the imperial state. Returning once again to Horsley's historical Jesus and the temple, it is clear that a critique of the religious sphere is also a critique of the political and economic orders as well, and by confining Jesus to the role of a spiritual teacher, the true nature of the tradition is lost.⁶⁴

The proper relationship of the Christian tradition to empire in the American context is to stand in opposition to the attempted capturing and distortions occurring. According to Mark Taylor, the prophetic spirit functions as a source of power and energy for the Christian tradition.⁶⁵ The prophetic experience allows for the emergence of counternarratives to combat the oppression of the dominant order. The prophetic spirit illuminates the necessity for a counternarrative, while simultaneously providing the power for resistance.⁶⁶ This concept consists of a spirit that enables an expansion of possibilities for a future in which that counternarrative is brought into the dominant light. Where the dominant narrative restricts the

⁶² Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 48.

⁶³ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 74-75.

⁶⁴ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 55-56.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 105-106.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 105.

number of possibilities for a future that benefits the majority rather than a small elite group that maintains control.⁶⁷ Through the prophetic spirit, a counternarrative may take root and gain the momentum needed to continue with the spirit's energizing force. However, without this reclamation of the church taking place, the church risks nearing irrelevance as it continually fails to address the issues of its community.

The Death of the Church

With these distortions of the Christian tradition in mind, one must consider the state of the church within the United States as a whole. There has been an extended fear of growing secularization within the United States as many churches shrink in size and eventually close their doors for good, however while this may appear to be a death of the Christian church, as Ericka Anderson of the Wall Street Journal writes, these closings are occurring mostly in denominational churches such as Methodist.⁶⁸ This death of the is not necessarily the secularization that many churchgoers fear, as new types and models of churches begin to pop up in place of the more traditional and rigid denominations. According to Andersen, churches have begun to spawn in response to the specific needs of communities in the nondenominational category as more traditional church models begin to fade.⁶⁹ However, these new congregations tend to only produce alternate ways to serve services without taking steps toward the dismantling of Christendom.

The fear of secularization in younger generations has led to many theorizing about how the shift away from organized religion and traditional denominations will affect the nation.

⁶⁷ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 106.

⁶⁸ Anderson. "Thank God, American Churches Are Dying."

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Bianca Brooks, in an article from the New York Times comments upon her own experiences growing up within the church that had gotten her out of a domestic violence shelter.⁷⁰ These experiences provided her with a deep connection to the church that the Pew Research survey suggests is becoming more and more rare as the millennial generation slowly replaces older generations.⁷¹ Speculating upon what may be lost with the decline of organized religion, Brooks points to the responsibility for one another that the church had instilled within her, stating, “another’s well-being is inextricably bound up with my own.”⁷² In consideration of the before-mentioned rise of individualism within the nation, a decline in responsibility to one another could indeed be the case as Brooks suggests while churches that provide such values begin to disappear.⁷³

The death of the church has more significance than most likely realize, resulting not in the disappearance of the Christian faith, but the faith in a new structure. The rigidity and accompanying restrictions of many denominations maintain a traditional church structure rather than adapting to the needs and issues of the congregations themselves. They tend to remain wedded to the ways they have held since their founding and fail to address prominent concerns that communities are facing. It is possible that this ‘death’ of the traditional church model must occur in order for a revival of religion in the rising generations. The death envisioned by Andersen, however, is not the same as the one occurring in the church. Similarly, the revival that Andersen appears to see coming is one of rising evangelicalism. Andersen also addresses the rise of ‘nones’ within American society, people within the Millennial generation or younger that do

⁷⁰ Brooks, Bianca Vivion. “We Need a Religious Left.” *The New York Times*, 22 November, 2019.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

not identify with any religion.⁷⁴ It is still too soon to count younger generations as lost, as previous generations have also maintained a period of time after high school in which they leave the church behind until having children and getting married.⁷⁵ However, the classification of an ever-growing category of ‘nones’ must not be underestimated. According to the Pew Research Center, half of Millennials identify as Christians compared to upwards of seventy-five percent of older generations such as Baby Boomers.⁷⁶ Within the same study, four in every ten Millennials are categorized as ‘nones,’ marking a significant decrease in the number of adult Christians within the future of the United States.⁷⁷

Those who do not associate themselves with any religion do not only consist of younger generations as well in many categories determined by identities such as political affiliation. Paul Djupe addresses this group as well, examining the ways that politics are affecting the further “deidentification” of individuals from the church body.⁷⁸ Djupe points out the interdependence of politics and religion as politics impact religious affiliation.⁷⁹ A strong association with the Christian Right appears to be the cause of many politically left wing identifying people disaffiliating from the church, and then proceeding to deidentify as well. A disaffiliation is categorized as distancing oneself from the church community while deidentifying is a more personal matter that eliminates Christianity as one of their identities, choosing instead to call themselves non-religious.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Andersen, “Thank God, American Churches are Dying.”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Djupe, “Reconsidering the Role of Politics,” 162.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

The significance of political affiliation within the church is not typically addressed due to the perceived lack of shared influence between the two. However, as Djupe points out, there is a rise in the recorded number of ‘nones’ that corresponds to the growing presence of the Religious Right.⁸¹ As those who disagree politically with the Religious Right are exposed to its increasing visibility they are often driven toward disaffiliation and deidentification.⁸² The group of religious ‘nones’ are increasing more quickly among Democrats than Republicans, suggesting that the influence of the Religious Right has a significant impact upon which voices are heard within the church.⁸³ This allows the political sphere to maintain control over the beliefs of the church as well as its involvement in political activism.

In place of the many closing churches, new congregations forming new structures are rising up to take their place. These new congregations appear to steer away from the individualism of the church under empire, forming small communities suited to the needs of the specific needs within each group, going so far as to have home church meetings and forsake the typical church building.⁸⁴ The ‘needs’ these specific formats address tend to involve the comfort of the individuals, however, allowing them to form close ties with those they share common lifestyles or contexts with.⁸⁵ These congregations have the ability to place a significant amount of emphasis on these small specific communities and allow individuals to remain within their comfort zones rather than engaging with their communities at large. With Andersen’s focus on evangelicalism, it is unlikely that a new church based upon this model will seize the opportunity

⁸¹ Djupe, “Reconsidering the Role of Politics,” 163.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

⁸⁴ Andersen, “Thank God, American Churches are Dying.”

⁸⁵ Ibid.

for new growth and rebirth to occur within the tradition that has been captured by an imperial agenda.

These newly formed congregations show a form of piety in the growth of evangelicalism, however, this is unable to signify a necessary dismantling of Christendom in spite of its attention to the need of the congregations. Multiplying a church into many smaller units may appear to be beneficial and may be able to more create a space for a specific community, however reaching higher numbers of churches and members should not be the primary goal. The ‘needs’ of a community may pertain to the format of a service, such as moving into someone’s home rather than meeting within a sanctuary, or to allowing people of similar background to meet together. What this system does not address are the systemic and theological issues that a community must face across race, class, and other factors of their identities. Remaining locked into the agenda of empire will doom the church to fail to address the issues that a community deems important. The body of the church must become more than just a community of people that care for one another, though these types of relationships are important. They must become an active community seeking to combat oppression on a systematic level. Love and justice must exist together in the church to address the reality of the congregation.

A Future Revival

The state of the American church lingers on the precipice of revival or destruction and depending upon the path taken by younger generations to upkeep the traditions. This raises the question of what it would take to dismantle Christendom and return the Christian tradition to its proper status in opposition to empire. In order for the church to separate itself from Christendom and the control of empire, the church must reclaim the biblical tradition. At the same time, it is

necessary for the church to avoid going the route of Andersen's article title, in which she states, "Thank God, American Churches Are Dying."⁸⁶ It is possible that in order for the church to truly escape and once again become effective, it will have to die in a sense to resurface with new relevancy and power, however, this death is not the same as the one implied by Andersen. She boldly shows joy at the state of the church in her article title, expressing relief at the dismal outlook of institution within her article.⁸⁷ Andersen's view of death is one that would be the equivalent of the church permanently shutting its doors and abandoning the building altogether.⁸⁸ She fails to acknowledge that the church has been condemned to a slow death by empire and that this impending destruction should serve as a wake up call rather than a lullaby. The status of the church should function as a rallying cry toward the reclamation of the tradition and not the slow letting go of the church altogether. More than specialized evangelical congregations are necessary to reclaim the biblical tradition. The church must be revived instead of replaced by an evangelical agenda.

The death of the church should not be a true and lasting loss of the tradition but instead a transitional phase that will serve to facilitate the church's eventual revival. For this revival to occur in a legitimate manner that reclaims the tradition there are several steps that must be taken. First, the church must recognize its own dying state. With this realization it must acknowledge both empire's and its own role within its death so that both may be dismantled. After this motivation for the church body, it is necessary to begin taking steps toward a future revival. This motivation stems from the influence of the prophetic spirit.⁸⁹ The prophetic spirit acts as a force that will allow for the realization of a future that is underived from anything that the past may

⁸⁶ Andersen, "Thank God, American Churches are Dying."

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 104-105.

have suggested is possible.⁹⁰ This means that if one were to examine the events of the past, there would be no content to suggest the possibility of the future that has come out of that past.⁹¹ The nature of this aspect of the prophetic spirit is one of freedom as it allows for a determining of the future without the restriction of the past.⁹² The prophetic spirit is able to emerge in order to bring about this underivable future allowing the present to be overturned.⁹³ In the case of the church now, the prophetic spirit can allow for the dismantling of empire through the rise of powerful counternarratives to those that dominate the collective consciousness.

However, in speaking about the future, one must also remember that the future is not to be perceived as something far from completion, but rather as something that must be lived within the present.⁹⁴ Leaving the future in the future allows for complacency as the future is viewed as something that is to come rather than something that must be worked for and lived out in the present.⁹⁵ The future is something that bends back to influence the present day.⁹⁶ In other words, the future that one desires determines how they live and act in the present as they work to achieve that future as one awaits it.⁹⁷ It is capable of influencing the state of the present through the work of those that believe in it. Understanding that one must live the future within the present day allows the desired future to exist now, directly combating the individualistic Christianity that confines concern to eternity.

The argument could be made that the church in its bound state is already dead, so long as it is incapable of combating empire. however it is more useful to think of this death as a

⁹⁰ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 104-105.

⁹¹ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 106-107.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of Hope*. (Fortress Press, 1967) 139.

⁹⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 227.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

transitional state lacking permanence. The impending collapse of the church is not irreversible. It is doomed to stagnate and lose relevance until it is permitted to talk about and criticize the political and economic order. In analyzing how the church may 'die' in order to return, questions must be raised about what elements must be abandoned and which must be clung to. With a long and complex history from its origin to the present day, it is important to consider how much of this history can ever truly be left behind. The narrative and interpretations of the traditions can never be fully and completely correct as no matter how an interpretation is spun, it is still only a representation, however some representations must be inherently more acceptable than others. In order to determine how much of the church must be dismantled before it can begin again with new strength and power to become effective, first one must consider some of the metaphors and language used within the narratives of Christianity and Christendom, and the ways that they affect the tradition's interpretations.

The Importance of Metaphor

Metaphors are a powerful and dangerous portion of any narrative. They are capable of creating associations between groups and symbols, granting power and justifications in their wake. Returning to ideas of language and their connection to narrative, one concept to keep in mind while discussing metaphor is that no metaphor can completely get at the content of an event that has taken place. All language and by extension all metaphors fall short of capturing what is there and can provide only an interpretation of the events through a specific lens. Determining metaphors for God can be even more complex due to the inadequacy of language as well as the unforeseen consequences that it may have on society, privileging a specific group over another. Because there is no 'God-language,' all human language used to attempt to

describe God falls short by nature. Due to this barrier, one of the few ways that it is possible to discuss God is through metaphors that attempt to provide some semblance of understanding into God's nature. However, with these attempts, there are also risks involved as these metaphors have a significant impact on the perspective of society.

The lens through which we view the world have the potential to determine metaphors for God. These metaphors in turn also determine which identities have value within a society, able to create and justify hierarchies within a society as well. One of the main examples of this phenomenon is the view of God as both father and monarch that remains common within the mainstream church. Describing God as father and male as well places men in a higher position than others. This is tied to the idea that only men are made in the image of God while women are inherently lesser due to this lack of association with God's imagined body. It is this metaphor that provides a grounding justification for the systematic oppression of the patriarchy, placing men above the rest of the population.

The second part of the metaphor labelling God as monarch provides an explicit justification for both hierarchy and empire. The monarchical God is concerned with the matters of the world and rules over all allowing humanity to believe that no matter what problems may arise, God will take care of them.⁹⁸ This view dissolves the responsibilities that humanity has toward one another, and toward creation.⁹⁹ If God can be expected to solve all of humanity's problems, then there is no reason for humanity to even attempt to address them. Regarding large issues such as environmental collapse and world hunger, this perspective is particularly harmful as it justifies the continued disregard of nations and governments toward concerns that impact the entire globe. A king that is all knowing and all powerful knows what is best for all, and this

⁹⁸ McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. (Fortress Press, 1987) 65.

⁹⁹ McFague, *Models of God*, 64.

concept parallels the mindset of empire that presides over other nations with the assumption that their knowledge and systems are best for all without considering the needs of the other.

The monarchical view of God plays into ideas of exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny, reaffirming the chosen status of the American people. In a royal hierarchy with the king at the top, those with a chosen status are thought to be operating with the king's will and are therefore justified in their actions. This superiority stems from an understanding of God that can be aligned with empire. Another element of metaphors for God that must be considered are racialized elements that stem from a depiction of Jesus and God both as white. The obvious flaws in this metaphor are pointed out by James Cone as he demonstrates how depicting God as black places God on the side of the oppressed rather than aligned with oppressors.¹⁰⁰ This racial metaphor also relates to Kelly Brown Douglas and her description of the demonization of black bodies.¹⁰¹ Suggesting that God is white also creates the reality that white people are then made in the image of God while people of color are decidedly not.¹⁰²

In evaluating a metaphor to describe or interpret a given situation much consideration must be given to the reality that it will create. Metaphors have consequences whenever they are used due to the fact that every metaphor is incomplete. For example, it is not enough to simply change the perception of God to mother rather than father, although this could be an improvement. Simply switching from a patriarchy to a matriarchy would only transfer the weight of inequality to the opposite side rather than eliminating it. It is for this reason that McFague introduces a new trinity of metaphors rather than let one or another stand on its own. In many cases, a single metaphor in connection with a single narrative is not sufficient to demonstrate the

¹⁰⁰ Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. (Orbis Books 1986) 5.

¹⁰¹ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 50.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

desired content. In order to compensate for language's insufficiency, Sallie McFague employs the Trinity, but replaces each of the three aspects with new metaphors.¹⁰³ These new metaphors highlight the power that can be put to use for change. Rather than maintaining a system of father, son, and holy spirit, Mcfague describes mother, lover, and friend, providing plenty of examples for the way in which metaphors for God may direct attention toward a specific aspect or issue in society.¹⁰⁴

For example, mother and father both describe God, the creator. McFague argues that a mother as creator has more to offer, and a deeper connection to the creation.¹⁰⁵ This metaphor also includes an understanding of the earth as God's body, allowing for an interpretation through a lens of environmentalism that puts responsibility on humanity for the care of the earth.¹⁰⁶ This creates a sense of interconnectedness between and among God, humanity, and the rest of creation that is distinctly lacking within the structure of God as a father that presides over creation rather than a mother, intimately involved in it.¹⁰⁷ Functioning as mother, father, and neither at the same time allows for a wider view of God. This shift in metaphorical thought not only provides a sense of responsibility for and to one another, but it also dismantles the patriarchal roles that are justified so long as God remains depicted as only father. In this same way it is necessary to evaluate metaphors for God based upon their capability for dismantling empire and its hold over the Christian tradition.

In discussing the impact of metaphor on the church, it is necessary to understand that metaphors stipulate the way that we understand the action and involvement of God in society and

¹⁰³ McFague, *Models of God*, xi.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ McFague, *Models of God*, 104-105.

¹⁰⁶ McFague, *Models of God*, 76-77.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

in the world. Just as there are counternarratives that rise to combat the dominant, there must also be countermetaphors that rise to show what God does. There are many examples of these metaphors that exemplify the nature of God within the world. One prominent example can be found in the writing of James Cone in which he states that God is black.¹⁰⁸ In mainstream American Christianity it is common to see depictions of Jesus and Mary as white, especially around holidays such as Christmas as well as within the Catholic church. The black God on the other hand, depicts God as being on the side of the oppressed.¹⁰⁹ This image of God's blackness dismantles ideas of white supremacy and disrupts the dominant narrative.

In order to determine what it would take to once again make the church effective in American society, it is necessary to discuss the death of the church through metaphor as well. In addressing the death of the church, it is important to acknowledge what is meant by death. It is not death in the sense of forever shutting the church doors and locking away the tradition for good, never to be used again. Death for the purpose of this work is used in the sense of leaving behind empire's control and influence. This will allow for a new growth of the church to spring up for future generations. This is separate from Andersen's view of death and the church. As colonial elements of American empire are cut away, it will be possible to return to the historical source of the tradition. This will be necessary for younger generations to make themselves a part of the church. As they attempt to address globally scaled problems such as environmental pollution and decay, systemic racism, and world hunger, the tradition must stand ready to address these issues as well in order to remain relevant to generations with much fixing to do for the world.

¹⁰⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 66-67.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

The death of the church can be understood much in the way of the death and resurrection of Christ, in that the church must die in order to return as an effective entity. This parallel can be used to examine the nature of the church's future course in order to avoid destruction. First one must acknowledge that the church is worth saving so long as the tradition is being used for its proper purpose. To fully play out the connections of Christ's life to the church, it is first necessary to recall the historical Jesus.¹¹⁰ The historical Jesus must be rooted in the historical context of the time he lived to comprehend the significance of his involvement within the religious, political and economic spheres. This involvement also stems from Jesus's origins in Galilee, a land that had been conquered again and again by empires and constantly under another's rule rather than its own.¹¹¹ Situated at the entrance to the conquered territory, Galilee was subjected to some of the heaviest control, facing maximum oppression.¹¹² Due to this harsh treatment, Galilee also served as the location putting up the maximum resistance.¹¹³ In light of this context, it is no wonder that Jesus took on the role of a disruptive political figure with rebellion against oppressive powers influencing many of his actions. Coming out of this context of oppression, Jesus stands in direct opposition to the state and its policies. It is for this reason that he had to be executed in the eyes of the state.

The significant role of the state within both Jesus's time and that of the modern church must be addressed as well. Due to his political actions that went against the state sanctioned perspectives, Jesus was betrayed, seized, and executed. Since his ideas gained a following in opposition to the state, it became necessary for the state to take action in order to reclaim the ideological power they had been losing in the wake of Jesus's challenge to their authority. The

¹¹⁰ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 55-56.

¹¹¹ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 35.

¹¹² Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 37-38

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

metaphorical death of the church occurs in two phases. In the first, the tradition is warped to the interests of the state and becomes Christendom, placing patriotism and piety upon an equal level and bowing to the state's whims. In this phase, the tradition is stripped of its power to produce change or to stand in opposition to oppression and is forced to support it instead through the blending that occurs. In the second phase, the church slowly becomes irrelevant due to its incapability of addressing the issues that hold great importance to their congregation such the environment, or poverty. This is the state's way of maintaining power through forced compliance to its own policies and beliefs. So long as the church perpetuates the narratives of empire it cannot escape the slow death that the state has condemned it to.

As in the case of Jesus, the church is being executed by the state, as the state plays a large role in the death of the church. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the church has some responsibility for its own death as well. Through its own silence and compliance, the church has handed over the tools for the state to take control and do what it sees fit. In dying by the hand of the state only to return, Jesus ensured that the power of the state had been shattered and no longer maintained a hold upon him. Execution was an extreme display of the state's power demonstrating its sway over life and death. By overcoming this last resort of the state, Jesus breaks the power that the state held over himself and the others that may resist. The resurrection confirms that the state is not all-powerful and can be overcome. What this means in terms of the church is that the death it has been condemned to by the state is not absolute. There is hope for a resurrection of the tradition far beyond the insufficient viewpoint that Andersen has in mind. With a resurrection of the church in its proper context and a clear agenda of how it is meant to function, state control over the Christian tradition will not remain in place. Breaking free of empire's chains is possible through a return to the historical context and the authentic

tradition and the prophetic spirit energizing powerful counternarratives against the imperial agenda. From the death that is irrelevancy and powerlessness, the church will have the power to resurrect so long as it begins the process in the correct location.

Jesus also represents a form of radical resistance to the imperial agenda that the modern church is meant to embody. According to Taylor, Jesus in the form of the executed God is capable of giving a name to, “a whole life force that we can trace in suffering and resisting imperial, state-sanctioned violence.”¹¹⁴ This model of the Christ functions as a form of political resistance to directly combat imperial powers and agendas that are religiously supported.¹¹⁵ Other aspects of this model serve to continually form movements that sustain this rebellion in order to overcome the powers of imperial America.¹¹⁶ Tying this model to the church, Taylor’s executed God can be used as a representation for how the church should be acting and functioning in the struggle to combat empire.

Using the lens of Jesus’s death and resurrection, one may discern that the church’s proper position is in opposition to empire based upon Christ’s example. After his resurrection, a young man speaks to the women at the tomb, telling them that Jesus is going ahead of them and the disciples to Galilee and that they should meet him there.¹¹⁷ This aspect of the metaphor is important as it provides a comparative location for where one should be in order to follow Jesus’s representation of the church. Galilee itself as a choice meeting place is significant due to its status as a conquered land that had been overtaken by Rome and by many empires prior to Rome.¹¹⁸ By instructing the people to meet in Galilee, Jesus makes a direct connection with

¹¹⁴ Taylor, Mark Lewis. *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*. (Fortress Press, 2015) xxvii.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 35.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

oppression. In other words, to be where Jesus is and do what he is doing, one must find the place where oppression is occurring. Theology can begin in no other place. This idea of beginning in oppression can be connected to the modern church, beginning to outline steps that must be taken in order for the church to return to the political and economic arena as a strong player.

Where to Begin

Before beginning to do theology and address issues that will be faced by the resurrected church, one must determine the starting place. Both the lens and the location of a person are important when attempting to do theology. The lens that one looks through refers to elements of their identity and their lived experiences that affect the way they see the world. For example, one basic example of a lens could be a feminist agenda. Someone with a feminist lens may interpret situations or events in a very different way than one without it. Location, on the other hand, deals with the social order that an individual belongs to. There is some overlap between a lens and a location, however the social location or setting involves the lived experiences of an individual within a certain community or status.

Turning to scripture, one cannot read the Bible and gain an authentic interpretation without being in the correct location in order to do so.¹¹⁹ For example, theology done solely from an academic standpoint without lived experience would be difficult to get close to the content of reality. In other words, theology cannot be written in a library. This analogy means that only reading and studying an issue will not provide all the necessary information to understand as much as possible the issues that need addressed. In order to gain the necessary knowledge of an issue, one must be in the streets, interacting with those who are affected by the issue they want to

¹¹⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 9.

address. Without this front line experience, it would be very difficult to achieve any meaningful level of closeness to the issue.¹²⁰ Another such example is that the Bible cannot be read within the walls of the White House. Because the politicians are not out in the street engaging and working alongside the marginalized, they are not in the correct location to understand the biblical text and cannot properly interpret the meaning behind the message.

Based in the lens and social location, the proper place to do theology is from where God is and doing what God is doing. Returning to the story of Galilee, the claim can be made that God is with the oppressed. In order to meet with Jesus in Galilee, one would be travelling to conquered land. In addition to being conquered, Galilee was also one of the most rebellious of the lands conquered by the Roman Empire, and Jesus is in the mix there, involved in resistance. By that same standard, if one wishes to be where God is and doing what God is doing, then it is necessary to begin in oppression with those who are being marginalized and mistreated. Knowing where to begin, one may consider how best to proceed with the actions the church must take. There is however, a difference between communal and individual actions within the church. An individual that has been drawn into a church community and does good works is separate from the church body itself doing good works. A congregation must not simply point to a few active individuals when asked what kind of work the church participates in, but should rather be able to show what kind of work the entire church body may be involved in.

Action of the Church

The action of the church is one of the most important elements of the resurrected body as these actions show the involvement of the church in the wider community. Determining proper

¹²⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 9.

actions within the church must be decided with several factors in mind. The criteria include finding the correct context and location to begin their theology. With the knowledge of where God is located and what God is doing, the church can then assess the issues that are in need of addressing both in their local communities and within the nation at large. In discussing the impact of metaphor on the church, it is necessary to understand that the church should be defined by who Jesus was and is both in history and in the collective consciousness today. An understanding of Jesus that has been made particularly common in the mainstream church today is that of a spiritual guru or religious teacher. This perspective strips Jesus of the before-mentioned radically political actions that he engaged in when looking at the historical context. A church defined by a Jesus that is only a spiritual teacher is a church that focuses only upon the individual in terms of spiritual needs. This perspective enables the church to ignore physical needs such as food and shelter so long as a person's soul is cared for in eternity.

The role of individuals within the church is an important one especially in regard to leadership and the prophetic experience. The leadership of the church body is especially important in regards to action as the minister and clergy are the ones to guide the congregation to the path of the authentic tradition. Individual leaders have one the most complex roles within the church body, as they are capable of determining whether the congregation is active or inactive. A church with a minister who does not participate in the world beyond the sanctuary's walls would be difficult to motivate as the leadership in place is not guiding them anywhere. On the other hand, churches with good leadership can be energized to make great changes in the world around them. Turning again to the example of the Civil Rights movement, one example of an active and effective leader can be found in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The importance of the individual

stems from its ability to build and activate the community which is in opposition to individualism which would have the individual do good works for their own gratification.

Individual works may be in any number of categories from feeding the hungry to participating in protests to overcome oppression. These acts in themselves are useful, however with the participation of only one or a few, they have only a fraction of the effect that they could. The communal acts of the church should seek to target oppression at its core within the systems and institutions that keep people in positions of oppression.¹²¹ Often the church participates in activities such as beginning food pantries for a local community or building a home for a specific family in need. These activities are life changing for those who benefit from them such as the previously homeless family and the church should continue engaging in them. However, it is important to understand that these types of solutions are only a bandage on the surface of a much deeper wound. While they do immense good for the local communities, these solutions do not combat the issues that made the people hungry or the family homeless in the first place. The church must also look toward the root of the problem while maintaining support for its local community. Both large and small scale projects are necessary to enact true change rather than employing solely one or the other.

The communal actions of the church body as guided by the minister and clergy are those that have the most possibility to enact large scale change. Achieving a balance between the local community and national community as well as between the individual and communal is essential in order to become an effective church body. The congregation that takes a protest to the capital of a nation while people starve on their own streets are missing those who require help in front of their own eyes. Keeping this balance between the local and the national in mind, it is necessary

¹²¹ Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed*. (Orbis Books 1975) 39.

to strike a balance between the individual and communal as well. Depending upon the social and political climate, especially within a church operating from within the confines of empire, it is sometimes necessary to carry out tasks with a few selected individuals rather than the entire church body in order to slip beneath the radar of those in power. Delegating the people to their proper roles for the proper tasks also falls to the minister of a church. This is also an element of balance within the church between the individual leadership and the collective body.

The church's action must also have a continued motivating force in the form of worship. This may occur in songs or marching as the community comes together to celebrate both God in their midst and their common goal of change. Cone expresses the importance of experiencing the freedom of Christ in the church body, as the faith of the people is demonstrated in their song.¹²² This shared experience and expression is a socially transformative power that not only revitalizes the church body, but also allows for the identification of Christ's suffering with those of the oppressed.¹²³ It is through such songs connected with human suffering, recounting aspects of the Jesus event that have the ability to keep the church body going through the motivation of hope.¹²⁴ In this same vein, identification with the Christ figure through worship transforms these acts into inherently political actions.

Elements of worship through song have the ability to unite a community against the oppressive forces that would keep them contained.¹²⁵ There is a togetherness and community within the lyrics, the act of singing, and the marching conveyed by hymns and worship songs.¹²⁶ This is both a political and a divine event as the march conveyed through song is monitored by

¹²² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 100.

¹²³ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 109-110.

¹²⁴ Cone *God of the Oppressed*, 119.

¹²⁵ Brueggeman, Walter. *A Glad Obedience: Why and What We Sing*. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019) 171.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*.

the state, putting the participants in danger even as they band together to combat oppression.¹²⁷

This conveys the political aspect of the song, however there is also an element of divinity that ties the marchers to God as they are energized by the light and freedom they are walking in, which comes into direct opposition with the 'dark' of the oppressors they seek to escape or overcome.¹²⁸ Within the church, the presence of God is embodied within their worship. This presence in combination with the community created should be the source of strength for the church body to carry on with their rebellion no matter what kinds of risks or challenges come their way.

Viewing worship as an energizing form of resistance, one can see the power contained within the actions. Resistance movements require a source of strength in order to maintain momentum. As they come up against their oppressors again and again resistors need both the strength and hope to keep going and worship in the form of songs can have this energizing force. Gathering together for worship rededicates a group to its cause united in the freedom of God so that they may carry on with their resistance the next day and for as many days as are required to accomplish their goals. This is more than comfort that comes from belonging within a community but acts also as a motivating drive. This kind of belonging is not static but is characteristic of a group of people on the move. In the words of Taylor, this kind of belonging is described as revolutionary.¹²⁹ The prophetic spirit which is active within the songs of the worship challenges the people to keep up their mobility toward change.¹³⁰ The mobility of the

¹²⁷ Brueggeman, *A Glad Obedience*, 172.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 110.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

people is one that is dangerous to the powers in charge.¹³¹ Energizing the people rather than only comforting them will ensure that they may go on to continue their resistance.

Allyship and Social Media

In the terms of large and local scale activism the church must align itself with those who are in positions of oppression. In order to take this position, not only must one be in the right location to do so, but they must also be aware of what it means to be a proper ally if they do not come from a specific oppressive context themselves. The proper way to be an ally to those in positions of oppression is to put bodies on the line in defense of those people who are facing injustices.¹³² This activism is not for the gratification of the individual participating, but for work toward the genuine systemic changes that must occur in order to dismantle the oppression of empire. Those who do not have a background of oppression must work to understand the context and location that the oppressed are living in while at the same time acknowledging that they can never fully see through the lens of oppression without having experienced it for themselves. It is not enough to simply call oneself an ally. This solidarity must be expressed with actions rather than words alone. There are several qualities that characterize a true ally to the cause of eradicating oppression. One is that the person is willing to put things at risk for the cause up to and including their own lives. Putting their bodies on the line is the way to demonstrate that they are true allies. Another factor to consider is motivation. The person participating in the activism should not be using it to make themselves appear a certain way or to gratify themselves and attempt to make the oppressed feel grateful to them. They must also be careful to avoid

¹³¹ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 110

¹³² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 219-220.

overpowering the voices of the oppressed. The purpose of allyship is not to take over movements centered around issues that one has not experienced.

In recent years among the younger generations, it has become common to treat allyship as an act that can be contained within a social media post. Keeping one's profile up to date with the latest articles in circulation is enough to make one appear to be a "good" person. One who has the proper posts representing their support of the most recent issues is able to escape social ridicule without taking any further action.¹³³ This kind of virtual support for a cause has been called performative activism, which is the act of taking part in movements only for personal gain and attention, often with the intention of appearing to be a good person. The term 'performative' does not have inherently negative connotations, however since the summer of 2020 and the police killing of George Floyd, the term has begun to take on a derogatory meaning that indicates someone is slacking off rather than making a genuine attempt to further a cause.¹³⁴

While the posts and awareness spread by performative activism are not inherently bad, they can have unintended consequences if they are engaged in thoughtlessly. This type of activism involves posting about 'hot button' topics while they are prominent in the news in order to show awareness, and then quickly moving on when a different topic gains prominence without taking any further action. A flood of posts using trending keywords can drown out the voices of the oppressed and the voices of leadership within a movement. For example, during the Black Lives Matter movement during the summer of 2020, many users on the Instagram platform posted black squares to indicate solidarity, however this had an unforeseen consequence. Because users posted these squares with the same hashtags as the organizers of protests in

¹³³ O'Mahony, Aisling. "The Growing Trend of Performative Activism." *LaTrobe*. 6 November 2020, <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/mylatrobe/the-growing-trend-of-performative-activism/>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*.

various cities, critical information was lost. Instead, whenever those hashtags were searched, a massive number of black squares would appear with very little actual information.¹³⁵ In a sort a wave of trends, people posted black squares with little attention to the context or origin of the posts and ended up hindering the movement they were attempting to show support for.¹³⁶

There is a separation between these posts on social media and the action taken within one's real life and community. Social media platforms provide individuals with a screen to hide behind. They may appear to be involved with current issues when looking at their online persona, however they make no effort to engage with the issues outside the virtual platforms. One test that some students consider before posting about activism online is whether or not their commentary will add anything useful to the discourse that is taking place.¹³⁷ Without taking further steps to enact change or show support for the cause that one is posting about, one is engaging in performative activism. According to Cone, one must be putting themselves at risk and 'on the line' in order to be a true ally to the oppressed.¹³⁸ By this standard, something so simple as a social media post from the safety of one's bedroom could not possibly qualify as allyship.

There is also the possibility of common cause when it comes to the issue of allyship. The church is not required to always be the source of specific events, but rather also recognize when the wider community is doing work in the right place. It is important to acknowledge that there are forces within society that may also contribute to the cause of a specific issue that is shared by both groups of people. One example of supporting a common cause in this way could be through church members attending an environmental clean-up day hosted by a local group. If the church

¹³⁵ O'Mahony, "The Growing Trend of Performative Activism."

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 219-220.

body is concerned with issues of the environment, this would be a way to support a cause within the community and take steps locally to correct a large scale issue. Taylor addresses the behavior of church and wider community as needing to foster both love and justice, through the creation of social bonds that are capable of withstanding the challenges that come along with resistance to empire.¹³⁹ This establishes that the church is not alone in accomplishing these works, but engaging with both those who have been affected and communities of care.

According to Taylor, “Jesus-followers at their best create communities of action that nurture tactical resilience for transforming social and political life.”¹⁴⁰ These communities as well as their resistance to empire must be rooted in both the church and the wider community, powered by the spirit of the prophetic to have the maximum impact. Through common causes it is possible to establish a groundwork for being where God is and doing what God is doing. This is also evident in Taylor’s argument that in order to be in the right place to do God’s work, one must go on to Galilee.¹⁴¹ Previously discussed as a place of colonialism and resistance, the image of Galilee is immensely important to the action of the church in terms of rebellion. Taylor describes the land perfectly, calling it, “that place crossed by empires but always generating rebellion.”¹⁴²

Generation Z

As mentioned briefly before, much of the church’s revival depends upon the ability to speak to the younger generations. These generations, specifically Generation Z, are the future constituents of the church. Without their active participation in the church body, a revival will

¹³⁹ Taylor, *The Executed God*, 458.

¹⁴⁰ Taylor, *The Executed God*, 322.

¹⁴¹ Taylor, *The Executed God*, 457.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

not be possible. Gen Z statistically is the most diverse generation in terms of both race and ethnicity.¹⁴³ According to data collected by Mellissa Deckman, Gen Z's percentage of religiously unaffiliated individuals aligns closely with data collected on the Millennial generation in 2016.¹⁴⁴ Though there has not yet been an abundance of research conducted on this rising generation, if the trend continues, there will be no return for the church as it is condemned to a slow death by the exodus of members through its doors. According the Pew Research Center, the number of young people attending church have been on a steady decline.¹⁴⁵ Though Generation Z is not specifically included in the study, if the Millennial trend continues, it is highly likely for Gen Z to follow as well. Gen Z has gained a reputation as the least religious generation though it contains roughly the same number of non-affiliated individuals as the Millennial generation.¹⁴⁶ According to Manning, Gen Z is more likely than the Millennial generation to identify as either agnostic or atheist, as well as more likely to be completely unfamiliar with the religious tradition in which they had been raised.¹⁴⁷ This disinterest and lack of religious knowledge likely stems from the church's failure to address the generation itself and the issues that it holds as the most important.

Though Gen Z lacks strong ties to any particular tradition including Christianity, however this is not inherently a flaw when one examines the issues that are taken up by them. In terms of message, Gen Z has the correct one, devoting their time and attention to injustices across the nation and the globe. There are many examples of issues that they have taken the forefront on

¹⁴³ Deckman, Melissa. "Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show." (Religion in Public, 10 Feb. 2020), <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>. Accessed July 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Deckman, "Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show."

¹⁴⁵ Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace."

¹⁴⁶ Manning, Christel J. "Gen Z Is The Least Religious Generation. Here's Why That Could Be A Good Thing." (Pacific Standard, 6 May 2019). <https://psmag.com/ideas/gen-z-is-the-least-religious-generation-heres-why-that-could-be-a-good-thing>. Accessed July 2021.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

such as the Black Lives Matter movement, global warming and climate change, and others, becoming leading voices in both political and social affairs. The one thing lacked by this generation of political activists is leadership. They do not have the administration nor the structure to maintain large scale social movements. Part of this problem is reflected in the activism visible on social media mentioned in the previous section regarding the speed with which focus on a particular issue may shift. With a proper structure in place for administration and organization, Gen Z's passion for justice could be put to the best use. Through the use of existing institutions and infrastructures, Gen Z would have the capability to build long sustained movements with proper leadership, funding, and recruitment.

In order to return the church to relevance in the eyes of the younger generations, the church must be willing to address the issues that are of the most concern to those demographics. As the church is controlled by the state, it is confined to work only within the spiritual realm for the benefit of individuals. However, to get the church back on message, they must reengage with the political and economic spheres. The church has much of the infrastructure that is lacked by Gen Z's movements. Utilizing the institutions already in place for the church combines the structure with Gen Z's numbers creating a strong community with the necessary resources to keep up resistance. Big ticket issues involving politics, economics, the environment, and education absorb their attention and they do not engage in issues of theology. One way to reunite Gen Z with the church would be to join them in combating the issues that they deem most important. As previously mentioned, having common cause with a community can potentially work in the church's favor as it joins together with forces in society to do the work of God. Picking up on the work that Gen Z has undertaken could spark their interest in the church.

In order to highlight the concerns of Gen Z and how the church may address them, one of the issues that is most cared about may be used as an example. One of the main issues undertaken by Gen Z in global warming and environmental affairs. Addressing the problem on both an individual and large level, Gen Z encourages acts such as recycling and ethical eating while at the same time targeting large corporations that they believe are responsible for the most unregulated environmental harm.¹⁴⁸ Gen Z also expresses the most anxiety about the future, which then reveals itself in the form of their intensive actions toward the subject.¹⁴⁹ This mindset leads to a sense of urgency when dealing with the environment that many of the other generations lack entirely, with only Millennials coming anywhere close.¹⁵⁰

While Gen Z hold this issue as a very real threat to the planet and their own futures, many Americans are split along political lines, with Republicans far less likely to acknowledge global warming or climate change as a problem or as something that humanity has a significant impact upon.¹⁵¹ To make the church see the issue as both a problem that affects them and less of a political stance to be taken. One should not view the issue through only the lens of their political affiliation in order to assess its validity. The large concerns that Americans have toward global warming are holding steady for the most part, however while Democrats widely believe in global warming, Republicans are a great deal more skeptical.¹⁵² Christendom as well as the Christian Right in a prominent place of power within the church, addressing such issues held in importance

¹⁴⁸ Tyson, Alec, Bryan Kennedy, and Cary Funk. "Gen Z, Millennials Stand Out for Climate Change Activism, Social Media Engagement with Issue." (*Pew Research Center*, 26 May 2021) <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/05/26/gen-z-millennials-stand-out-for-climate-change-activism-social-media-engagement-with-issue/>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Brenan, Megan. "Global Warming Concerns Steady Despite Some Partisan Shifts." (Gallup, March 2018) <https://news.gallup.com/poll/231530/global-warming-concern-steady-despite-partisan-shifts.aspx>. Accessed July 2021.

¹⁵² Ibid.

by the younger generations becomes difficult. The disconnect between generations and the church is a gap that only grows wider the longer it is ignored. Rekindling an interest in the church for the younger generations will involve a dismantling that will make space to address political and social issues.

In terms of the environment, the church should not only address the issue due to its status as an ethical issue, but should also acknowledge the biblical framework that provides an imperative to do something about it. The church must find a way to address the ecological issue on both a theological level and on a societal level. Sallie McFague begins to address the ecological situation in a meaningful way through attempting to shift the metaphors used to understand God toward aspects that highlight God as a creator.¹⁵³ This is a step in the right direction as she begins to define a new relationship between God and the environment that is far more interconnected than it would be with previous metaphors. Another way to address the theological backing for the environment is to consider God the gardener rather than solely as creator according to Daniel Castillo.¹⁵⁴ Viewing God in this way gives humanity and the church an inherent responsibility to the environment so long as they seek to be where God is and doing what God is doing. To fulfill that task, the people must become gardeners as well. Through the implementation of this metaphor, it is possible to see the biblical framework that also justifies action and responsibility toward the environment. Employing the scripture of Genesis shows God as the planter of the garden of Eden, reinforcing the concept of God as the gardener. Genesis also shows the first responsibility of humanity as taking care of the garden, and by extension the earth and environment in order to uphold this responsibility.¹⁵⁵ This

¹⁵³ McFague, *Models of God*, 104-105.

¹⁵⁴ Castillo, Daniel P. *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology*, (Orbis Books, 2019), 72.

¹⁵⁵ Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation*, 73.

interconnectedness between nature, neighbors, and God then becomes a direct expression of God's love as well as God's action.¹⁵⁶

This is one example of the way that the church can address an issue theologically to demonstrate through metaphor, the relationship that others should have with the environment as well. On a societal level, the church has the institutional structure that Gen Z requires to sustain a movement. Through the use of the church's structures and the numbers of Gen Z movements, a sustained resistance could be built in regard to any issue of oppression that the two decide to take up. Furthering the example of the environment, a societal approach to the issue is not only backed by a theological framework, but also through the lens of combating oppression as those in poverty are more affected by the collapse of the environment than those in the upper classes.¹⁵⁷ This is displayed through Castillo's example that the African continent was once defined as under polluted resulting in calls for a redistribution of environmental costs to bring balance to the globe in spite of the immense negative effects this may have on some of the world's poorest nations.¹⁵⁸ As stated in the foreword of Castillo's book, "the care of creation is one that the church, in solidarity with the world, must urgently wrestle with today."¹⁵⁹

The Future of the Church

In considering the future of the church, one must determine the direction the church should take. There are several factors that play into the church's future direction. The first of these is the dismantling of Christendom. Then the church must engage with political sphere in a meaningful and oppositional way. Finally, the church must have the capability to critique the

¹⁵⁶ Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation*, 74.

¹⁵⁷ Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation*, xvii.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation*, xv.

economic sphere. This is the way for the church to come up against oppression and deal with the issues faced by their congregants in the here and now rather than remaining subdued by empire and confined to the spiritual realm.

Though Christendom has been shallowly addressed and defined, it has not yet been directly addressed in terms of dismantling. Before making any move toward a new future, the church must first pull itself apart from Christendom which has so thoroughly blended tradition and politics. As discussed previously, Christendom ensures that the agenda of empire also becomes the agenda of the church. This prevents the church from discussing politics or engaging with issues in any meaningful way. A twisted vine of piety and patriotism, Christendom must be pulled out by the roots in order for the church to flourish. Returning to the biblical tradition, and grounding itself in the truth of the scripture, the church may escape Christendom by getting back to its true message. To engage the political sphere, the church must escape its confinement to the spiritual realm alone. This would entail involvement and active participation within activism to combat the oppression faced by its congregants. Using scripture and biblical grounding as a basis for the issues it will take, the church is able to address important topics such as the environment from both a theological and societal standpoint. This kind of engagement is not purely for ethical causes, but also stems from the shared responsibilities that people have to one another both inside and outside their communities as a part of an interconnected world.

Critiquing the economic sphere makes up an essential portion of the new direction of the church. As the source of much of Christendom's individualism and ingrained oppression for the lower classes, the economic sphere in terms of unregulated capitalism must be removed. The church must stand in opposition to this institution which makes it nearly impossible to escape the class in which one was born. To do this, one can begin by removing blame from those in

poverty, refusing to call them lazy to justify their needs not being met. In acknowledging that the poor themselves are not to blame for their own situation, the church must then locate the source of this oppression which can be found within the economic order. In order to overcome such oppression, a new system must be enabled. The capitalist system cannot be permitted to run unchecked, but rather the responsibility to one another that the community of the church ensures must confirm that the basic needs of individuals are met at the least. Beyond this most basic aspect of economic justice repairs must be made to the system to eliminate the systemic barriers causing inequality among the many groups living within the United States.

This future direction of the church is grounded within both the biblical tradition and the idea of a proper metaphor for God that can inform the church's understanding of who they are meant to be and the work it is meant to be doing. Though many examples of metaphors have been presented such as mother, father, lover and friend, the image of the gardener is able to portray many of the aspects of God that are needed in order to properly understand the issues at hand.¹⁶⁰ As mentioned above, viewing God as a gardener provides a model for the way in which people are meant to treat and take care of the environment.¹⁶¹ A deeper dive into this metaphor reveals the gentleness with which a gardener treats the garden, treading lightly over the ground so as to not disrupt the natural state of the vegetation and creatures living there. This suggests a harmonious relationship among God, humanity, and the natural order as opposed to the natural order being treated as a commodity. By treating the natural order as an entity into which a relationship is entered, it creates a sense of responsibility instead of superiority. Through both a shift in ideology and decisive action it is possible that the church may pull itself back from the edge of collapse.

¹⁶⁰ McFague, *Models of God*, xi.

¹⁶¹ Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation*, 73.

Conclusion

Through the exploration of narrative theory, it is possible to discern the significant impact of narratives on the many groups participating in the religious community and society at large. Narrative theory and Abbott's emphasis on the distinction between narrative and story provide a new lens through which to view the world. In this consideration, narrative theory made it possible to access the level to which constructed narratives influence individual and collective lives and beliefs throughout the nation. Narrowing the focus to the church specifically in the time of American Empire, it becomes clear that the church is significantly tangled in the web of the political sphere and kept under imperial control.

Examining the nature of both ultimate concern and the individualism and collectivism of society and the church shows the effect empire has on the church as an institution. This examination reveals the pull of Christendom and highlights many of the issues faced by the church. The identification of such problems within the church's structure is the first step toward solving them. With the issues in mind, the church may arm itself with knowledge and the understanding that in order to avoid sinking into irrelevancy it must battle its impending death through the incorporation and acknowledgement of the younger generations it has failed to address in the face of imperial control.

On a physical surface level, this path forward for the church takes the form of actions including the building of close supportive communities and participation in social movements that address the concerns of the congregation members. On an ideological level, the church must consider not only the narratives that contribute to their lives, but also metaphors for God that provide a greater sense of understanding to the issues they wish to address. Turning away from

the monarchial God of empire and toward a God that has both gentleness, involvement and interconnectedness to the church body will make many necessary ideological changes to viewpoint from which the church operates.

Allowing the church to reject the ingrained narratives of empire and instead consider those that stem from the concern of the rising younger generations will permit the growth and promotion of a true church community rather than an individualistic doctrine confined to the spiritual sphere. Incorporating the younger generations and the issues that they deem most important will not only assist the church in escaping the confines of empire, but it will also make the biblical tradition relevant in addressing some of the biggest problems faced by the nation and humanity as a whole. This path forward may be the revival the church is in great need of.

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