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The content of the Journal shall be academic discourse which promotes and illuminates community dialogue. Appropriate topics of submissions include but are not limited to the secular critique of religion, inter religious dialogue, the interpretation of sacred texts, the interaction of religion and society, the validation of ethical discernment, and issues of race, gender, and class.

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And a special thanks to
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Note from the Editors

Fourteen years ago *The Denison Journal of Religion* was founded by students, staff, and faculty with the purpose of exhibiting the excellent scholarship produced by students in the religion department. Since then, the Journal has not only displayed quality work from Denison students, but also generated discussions pertaining to the place of religion and spirituality in modern society. We, the editors, strive to reflect the diversity of subject matter taught and discussed within the department and hope that our readers will find the selection of essays in this year's journal an honest reflection of departmental interests. With essays grounded in Hindu culture and theodicy, Biblical studies, and modern theological movements in America, we hope that we have faithfully represented the passions of students in Denison's religion department.

We are grateful for the many quality submissions we received this year, and although there was not room in the journal for the inclusion of all, we encourage students to continue submitting their work to the Journal, as the great number of submissions makes possible the variety and balance we hope to achieve.

We hope that you enjoy this fourteenth volume of *The Denison Journal of Religion* and find it a thought-provoking addition to the excellent scholarship in previous volumes. We would like to thank this year's new faculty advisors, Dr. John Cort and Dr. Maia Kotrosits as well as the academic administrative assistant, Erin Lennon, whose hard work and support made this journal possible.

With Regards,
Emily Metcalf, Senior Editor
Andrea Waclawek, Junior Editor

Interpreting *Sati*: The Complex Relationship Between Gender and Power In India

Cheyenne Cierpial

A recurring theme encountered in Hinduism is the significance of context sensitivity. In order to understand the religion, one must thoroughly examine and interpret the context surrounding a topic in Hinduism.¹ Context sensitivity is necessary in understanding the role of gender and power in Indian society, as an exploration of patriarchal values, religious freedoms, and the daily ideologies associated with both intertwine to create a complicated and elaborate relationship. The act of *sati*, or widow burning, is a place of intersection between these values and therefore requires in-depth scholarly consideration to come to a more fully adequate understanding. The controversy surrounding *sati* among religion scholars and feminist theorists reflects the difficulties in understanding the elaborate relationship between power and gender as well as the importance of context sensitivity in the study of women and gender in Hinduism.

India is a society in which women who perform *sati* have historically been considered honorable for their decision to burn themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres. The question arises, however, if the decision is truly the woman's, or rather is a result of the patriarchal Indian society that victimizes women. Western feminist scholars debate the morality of *sati* as violence against women condoned by religion, but critics have raised the issue that universal feminism lacks context sensitivity and is characterized by a lack of inclusion of women of other cultures. As British rule abolished the act as a crime, Hindu women began to further lose their voice in the matter. Regardless of her decision to perform or not to perform *sati*, there are consequences for her actions, creating a double-bind scenario for Hindu widows. The act of widow burning as a double-bind reflects the complex relationship between power and gender in Indian society as well as brings into question the free will and moral agency of the women choosing to immolate themselves. In examining this ritual as an attempt to recognize and prevent gendered violence, some feminists claim *sati* is an unjust violence against women while other feminists claim that culture is a necessary point of consideration in the understanding of *sati*.

1 A.K Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay," in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 23 (1989): 41-58.

Women in Hinduism: A Brief Overview

In order to examine more fully the act of *sati*, one must understand the way women are viewed in Indian society and Hinduism. One key aspect to understand in relation to *sati* and patriarchal society is that women are considered part of their husbands and therefore wives must give their energies and power to their husbands.² Men must control women and therefore the ideal woman is usually portrayed as a dutiful wife and a fertile mother.³ In other words, women are defined in relation to men. This simple explanation of patriarchy in India speaks to both sides of the argument surrounding *sati*. On one hand, it illustrates the control men have over women in society and the ways in which women do not make decisions for themselves. Conversely, it illustrates how performing *sati* means a woman is a “devoted wife who chose to overcome death by becoming a goddess or *sati-mata*.”⁴

Sati can be literally translated to mean “virtuous woman”; a woman becomes a *sati* through devotion to her husband.⁵ However, the idea of *sat* or goodness that is accumulated through devotion to the husband can be related to his death. The wife is supposed to protect her husband from death through serving him, providing for him, caring for him, performing rituals on his behalf, and being devoted to him. Through these practices and devotion, *sat* is created in the dutiful wife and accumulates so that it can save and preserve the husband’s life.⁶ In Hindu society, a widow can be blamed for the death of her husband. *Sati* acts as a ritual necessary in order to regain and achieve ultimate devotion to her husband. The more metaphorical illustration of *sati* is that a good wife has so much *sat* from her husband’s lifetime that “on his death the accumulated heat of her inner goodness compels her to the pyre,” which portrays the *sati* as an honorable hero by her choice to immolate herself.⁷ For women who do not chose to burn themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands, their lives after their husbands’ deaths can be difficult. Widowhood results in the loss of value and place in society because women are defined by their relationship to men.

Sati and Colonialism

In 1829, the British colonial authorities passed an act prohibiting and abolishing the act of widow burning, condemning it as an inhumane crime against

2 Susan S. Wadley, “Women and the Hindu Tradition,” in *Women in India: Two Perspectives*, ed. Doranne Jacobson and Susan Wadley (Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1995), 115.

3 *Ibid.*, 117.

4 Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73.

5 Andrea Major, *Sati: A Historical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), XIX.

6 *Ibid.*, XXVII.

7 *Ibid.*, XXIX.

women.⁸ This itself raises many problematic concerns in relation to women and *sati*. The abolition of *sati* was part of the “project of codifying law [that] was intended to facilitate rule, ensure clarity as well as uniformity, and minimize the supposed prejudicial readings of indigenous interpreters of scripture.”⁹ This act did not stem from Western Christian beliefs, but rather the abolition was more rooted in creating a Hindu law based on Hindu scriptures; British colonial powers explored the extent to which *sati* is presented in the scriptures.¹⁰ In the years leading up to 1829, the debate, which did not involve women, continued on whether or not there was religious sanction in this act. The British placed certain restrictions on *sati* based on age, pregnancy, intoxication, and coercion.¹¹ The final decision was made on December 4, 1829, to outlaw *sati* and make it punishable by criminal courts.¹²

In *Sati: A Historical Anthology*, Andrea Major provides several varied Indian opinions on the abolition of *sati*. She provides several pages of dialogue and discussion between an Indian advocate and an Indian opponent, thus illustrating the continued debate and controversy. Major also includes a congratulatory address thanking the government of India from *East India Magazine* after passing the Act to abolish *sati*. The address includes detailed descriptions of the violent crime and the attempts made to stop a burning widow from escaping. It concludes with the following:

In consideration of circumstances so disgraceful in themselves and so incompatible with the principles of British rule, your Lordship in Council fully impressed with the duties required of you by justice and humanity, has deemed it incumbent on you for the honour of the British name to come to the resolution that the lives of your Hindoo female subjects should henceforth be more efficiently protected; that the heinous sin of cruelty to females shall no longer be committed.¹³

This Indian opinion argues in favor of the Act against *sati*, saying it was put in place to protect women from violence and to uphold human rights and maintain justice. However, Major goes on to include a “Petition of the Orthodox Community against the Sati Regulation,” which states that the petition is a response to “certain persons taking it upon themselves to represent the opinions and feelings of the Hindu inhabitants of Calcutta” who “have misrepresented those opinions

8 Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, 73.

9 Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 16.

10 *Ibid.*, 16-17.

11 *Ibid.*, 18.

12 *Ibid.*, 24.

13 Major, *Sati: A Historical Anthology*, 146.

and feelings.”¹⁴ The petition goes on to claim that the regulation of *sati* “interferes with religion and customs of the Hindus which we most earnestly deprecate and cannot view without the most serious alarm.”¹⁵ These differing opinions of Indian citizens on *sati*, as well as the differing opinions between British missionaries interested in social reform and British pragmatists who viewed colonialism as solely a money-earning enterprise, illustrate how the controversy becomes increasingly complex when the component of colonial power is introduced.

The Case of Roop Kanwar

One specific case of *sati* in 1987 that caused a public outcry in India and stirred the debate and controversy by scholars was the death of Roop Kanwar. Roop Kanwar was eighteen years old and had been married to her husband for eight months when he died. She committed *sati* in front of thousands of people following his death, which was seen as a voluntary act of honor and devotion by the village.¹⁶ However, both politicians and activists took sides, arguing with reports that Roop Kanwar had been drugged with opium and pressured by those around her.¹⁷ Reports of those who witnessed the *sati* varied; some claimed they witnessed supernatural powers of Roop Kanwar with glowing red eyes and internal heat being emitted, while others said that the widow was unsteady and appeared drunk or drugged. Both of these claims have been interpreted as witnessing Roop Kanwar in a kind of spiritual trance.¹⁸

While pilgrims and villagers worshipped her as a new goddess and erected shrines and pictures, small groups protested for the end of celebration of widow death.¹⁹ In response to anti-*sati* groups, pro-*sati* groups emerged that argued for religious freedom to perform ancient traditions and spoke out against anti-*sati* women claiming they were “corrupt, godless, westernized, and having abandoned tradition.”²⁰ After the eruption of violence and controversy surrounding Roop Kanwar’s death, police arrested several men said to be involved in administering her drugs, lighting the funeral pyre, and otherwise involved.²¹

Mary Daly and Universal Feminist Response to Sati Ritual

One can begin to explore the feminist views, using the case of Roop Kan-

14 *Ibid.*, 146.

15 *Ibid.*, 147.

16 Mala Sen, *Death by Fire* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 2.

17 *Ibid.*, 2-3.

18 *Ibid.*, 5.

19 *Ibid.*, 7.

20 *Ibid.*, 8.

21 *Ibid.*, 11.

war as an example, which argue for the protection of women against gendered violence but also raise many problematic generalizations about women across cultures. Mary Daly, a radical Western feminist who is outspoken on the topic of *sati*, argues that the widow is the victim of a patriarchal society imposing violence against widows. Daly's examination of *sati* begins with the discussion of treatment of widows in Hindu society, noting, "their religion forbade remarriage and at the same time taught that the husband's death was the fault of the widow. . . everyone was free to despise and mistreat her for the rest of her life."²² This societal standard can be justified by Hindu texts, such as the *Adi Parva of the Mahabharata*, which states that a woman is to have only one husband during her life and should not have intercourse with another man during or after her husband's lifetime.²³ As previously discussed, the ideals of femininity and the expected roles of women in Indian society cause the widow to lose her place and value in society, especially if the widow has no sons.

Elaborating more on the detailed status of widows in Hindu society, Sakuntala Narasimhan emphasizes that widowhood "came to be seen as the worst calamity that could ever befall a woman; it became the ultimate degradation because it practically invalidated her continued existence."²⁴ Narasimhan goes on to explain some of the limitations and oppression faced by widows following the death of their husbands: widows are permitted one meal a day, should sleep on the ground, and are forbidden from wearing perfume, flowers, dyed clothes, and hair adornments. Men were advised not to eat food prepared by widows, and a widow among one's presence was said to jeopardize one's chances of success.²⁵ This paints quite clearly a picture of the alternative of *sati*: life as a widow.

Commenting on this, Daly continues, "If the general situation of widowhood in India was not a sufficient inducement for the woman of higher caste to throw herself gratefully and ceremoniously into the fire, she was often pushed and poked with long stakes after having been bathed, ritually attired, and drugged out of her mind."²⁶ The stance that women who perform *sati* are not making their own decisions arises on different levels. On one hand, there are ideological arguments that a patriarchal society has been making decisions for Hindu women throughout their lives. If their decisions to marry, who to marry, where to go to school, and what job to take or not to take a job, have primarily been made by their fathers and husbands, is the decision to immolate themselves truly being made by themselves?

22 Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 115.

23 Isvarachandra Vidyasagara, *Marriage of Hindu Widows* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1976), 73.

24 Sakuntala Narasimhan, *Sati* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1998), 57.

25 *Ibid.*, 58-9.

26 Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 116.

On the other hand, as Daly points out, the decision to perform *sati* may be made for them through the use of pressure or drugs that impair decision-making.

Daly's argument extends far beyond the stance that *sati* is wrong. Delving further, she explores the notion that *sati* and other sado-rituals are "an obsession with purity."²⁷ She views this obsession with purity as a mechanism for silencing, in which the victims are killed through rituals that are centered around purification. For example, the rite of *sati* is not performed during an impure time for a woman, such as during menstruation, and several key aspects of the ritual focus on purification. This purifying aspect speaks to the larger issue of purifying society of the wicked, the widows or traces of female rebelliousness.²⁸ Ultimately, the threat of death in relation to purity is used to keep other women and young girls from experiencing the same fate, disciplining young girls and women to acting in accordance with the patriarchal values of taking proper care and being subservient to men.²⁹ This continues the repetition of the cycle of men dominating and controlling women, silencing them so that their voice and decision is not one that occupies space. If it is not her decision, the *sati* is a violent crime against women.

Julia Leslie and Criticism Towards Daly

Many postcolonial feminists criticise Daly's understanding and presentation of *sati* as a universal wrong as problematic, overly generalized, and lacking context sensitivity. In their critique of Daly, Renuka Sharma and Purushottama Bilimoria argue that the position one should take on the issue of *sati* is not one within the dichotomy of acceptable or wrong, but rather one that exists in the margins and with sensitivity towards the topic.³⁰ They go on to argue that Daly's argument applies a Western feminist view to the social phenomenon and lacks research on the cultural, historical, and spiritual aspects of the rite of *sati*.³¹ In other words, Daly operates on the assumption of universality, that Western feminism is the only lens through which to view *sati*. Sharma and Bilimoria, however, write that once an Indian social context is applied, "the evidence of the complicity of patriarchy at each stage of the act is unredoubtable; however, that does not necessarily mean that patriarchy alone and unmodified is generating this violence in all its

27 Ibid., 131.

28 Ibid., 131.

29 Ibid., 131.

30 Renuka Sharma and Purushottama Bilimoria, "Where Silence Burns: Sati (Suttee) in India, Mary's Daly's Gynocritique, and Resistant Spirituality," in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Daly*, ed. Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Marilyn Frye (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 324.

31 Ibid., 324.

locations.”³² In fact, contextualization of *sati* through a religious lens, noting the places in which female sacrifice on behalf of men occurs in religious history, may lead to the conclusion that *sati* “yields greater liberative potency” and that the female is the one in control.³³

In an essay analyzing the differences between Daly’s radical universal feminism and Audre Lorde’s culturally inclusive feminism, Amber L. Katherine further identifies problems with Daly’s statements as supported with evidence and quotations by Lorde. Though her critique of Daly is not specifically aimed at understanding *sati*, it does provide valuable insight into this struggle between cultural/context sensitivity and universal white feminism. Katherine quotes Lorde saying, “the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background . . . serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women . . . Assimilation within a solely western European herstory is not acceptable.”³⁴ The point that Katherine and Lorde make is that universal feminism cannot use whiteness as the norm to which all women are compared. One must not use the western European and North American feminism as the only right perspective, excluding and othering different cultures such as that of the Hindu women in India. In order to make progress against oppression, feminists must aim to be inclusive of differences in culture, religion, and lifestyle.

Julia Leslie, a feminist scholar who has focused on South Asian studies and Hindu women, provides a feminist view with a more contextualized interpretation of *sati*. From the very start and in response to Mary Daly’s stance on *sati*, Leslie insists on understanding and judging. She emphasizes the need for true understanding, as well as takes the position that violence of *sati* must be ended. She writes, “While trying to understand the empowering aspects of *sati*, we must never forget the violent and degrading reality. Second, there is a place for outrage.”³⁵

Understanding why *sati* makes sense to so many women and men does not mean condoning it or accepting the necessity for it, or even refusing to judge. What is important to note is the discourse that Leslie uses in analyzing the controversy surrounding *sati*. She does come to a conclusion about *sati* and the need to protect women from gendered violence, but she does not approach it from a universalist perspective. In no way does she glorify *sati*, but instead aims to “juxtapose the two views” associated with *sati*— woman as victor and woman as

32 Ibid., 345-6.

33 Ibid., 346.

34 Amber L. Katherine, “‘A Too Early Morning’: Audre Lorde’s ‘An Open Letter to Mary Daly’ and Daly’s Decision Not to Respond in Kind,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Daly*, ed. Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Marilyn Frye (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 276-77.

35 Julia Leslie, *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1991), 177.

victim. Fundamentally, she is looking for the ways in which women bring power and dignity to an oppressive ideology.³⁶ Through this perspective and approach, Leslie is able to bring into question several aspects that may be left unconsidered when assuming a more universalist standpoint. This allows for the exploration of the relationship between power and gender as well as the moral agency and free will of the widows choosing *sati*.

With Leslie's proclamation that *sati* need not be condoned or glorified, she presents an explanation and understanding of *sati* through a Hindu lens. *Sati* can be used to ensure a place in heaven for the husband through the wife's actions, cleansing any negative karma accumulated for unwifely actions or lacking *sati* in the marriage. Erasure of the ritual results in no ritual of atonement for the widow and therefore no escape of what awaits her in the next life.³⁷ She concludes that one aspect of empowerment of *sati* is that it is a "strategy for dignity in a demeaning world," yet this is where many intersections and deeper issues remain.³⁸ She notes that it is a demeaning world, which is because of the patriarchal values and gender ranking of Hindu society, and that *sati* may serve as redemption of morality and respectability.

If the widow kills herself to make up for the degradation imposed upon her by the patriarchy, what is supposed to be empowering is still tightly bound in the power structure. It reflects the ways in which women's lower status is disguised to be an honorable act. Scholar Sakuntala Narasimhan elaborates on this, stating, "The rite of *sati* seen as part of this wider canvas of women's status in society shows how immolations take their place as an extension of the elaborate grid of pressure brought to bear on women, right from childhood on to turn what is in fact murder, into a mystical act."³⁹ The rite of *sati*, death, is contrasted against a continued life of oppression (unable to remarry, unable to wear good clothes or jewelry, unable to go outdoors, unable to participate in happy occasions) so that either way the patriarchal values and power are being projected onto the woman.⁴⁰ This further illustrates the double bind, in which there are very limited options for action and all of them expose the individual to harsh consequences or deprivation.⁴¹ Regardless of the choice that a *sati* or widow makes, she will undoubtedly be exposed to some form of pain and suffering. This, in itself, is a mechanism for silencing women.

36 Ibid., 177.

37 Ibid., 187.

38 Ibid., 190.

39 Sakuntala Narasimhan, *Sati* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1998), 42.

40 Ibid., 43.

41 Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," in *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 68.

Context Sensitivity and Universal Human Rights

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the phenomenon of “white men saving brown women from brown men” in which either way the voice of the Hindu woman is not heard.⁴² Either choice that is made by the *sati* is a reflection of patriarchal values of either brown men or white men. To what extent is the *sati* able to voice her opinion? In this way, the *sati* takes on the subaltern subjectivity, or the identity of a marginalized, silenced person who lacks access to power. The abolishment of *sati* by British colonialism also brings into question the context sensitivity required by Hindu theology.

As seen in the case of Roop Kanwar, the abolition of *sati* did not stop all of the widow burning rituals from occurring. The British colonial authorities, and therefore independent Indian government, have encountered difficulties in enforcing the regulation.⁴³ As Daniel J.R. Grey explains this difficulty in “Creating the ‘Problem Hindu’: Sati, Thuggee, and Female Infanticide in India,” stating, “All that could be done . . . was for colonial officials to publicize the ban widely, stress the ‘inhumanity’ of *sati* among the Hindu community, and hand down stern but ‘fair’ punishment towards those who failed to prevent a self-immolation.”⁴⁴ While feminists and scholars continue to debate the topic of *sati* and the oppression and violence against women in Hinduism, one must recognize that there is no inherent, correct conclusion that can be made. As many Western theorists and feminists claim, epistemic violence and misogyny are universal wrongs, regardless of context. Other feminists argue, however, for the need of inclusion of culture and understanding of different religions in women.

What arises out of this controversy with seemingly no right answer is the need for dialogue and consciousness-raising. While no one scholar, religion, or government can declare what is right or wrong for a group of people, education and discussion serve as a necessary starting point. To raise awareness about different religions and cultures as well as possible acts of violence occurring internationally is to begin to protect universal human rights. This raises a much larger issue at the heart of global universal rights discourse: To what extent is a human being entitled to universal rights regardless of their religion, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, and race? And upon answering this, careful consideration need be paid to making sure that universalism is not a way for western practices to be placed as the norma-

42 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,” in *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010) PAGE.

43 Daniel J.R. Grey, “Creating the ‘Problem Hindu’: Sati, Thuggee, and Female Infanticide in India,” *Gender & History* 25, no. 3 (2013): 501.

44 *Ibid.*, 501.

43 Martha Nussbaum, “Women and Cultural Universals,” in *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1999), 46.

tive structure for all. Martha Nussbaum, a theorist on human and women's rights, argues for "The capabilities approach," which insists that "a woman's affiliation with a certain group or culture should not be taken as normative for her unless, on due consideration, with all capabilities at her disposal, she makes that norm on her own."⁴⁵ Though this speaks to the need for universal human rights, it cannot dictate what is right and what is wrong within a culture. If there was a way to know that a woman had all capabilities, knowledge, and choice at her disposal, does that make *sati* acceptable in terms of human rights? Each culture, characteristic, and orientation of individuals must be addressed in order to assume a complete understanding of their rights, even if they are universal.

Context sensitivity, again, comes into play when deciding through which perspective one will see the world. A person can decide to view religion as a disciplinary apparatus that further enforces gender ranking and stratification and perpetuates sexism, misogyny, and oppression. On the other hand, this same person may view religion as one of the most important aspects to life, providing a framework for ethical and moral choices. Regardless, context sensitivity must be considered when interpreting religion and culture in order to assess issues like *sati* in the most appropriate and inclusive way.

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The Catholic Worker Movement

Victoria Newman

The Catholic Worker movement, founded in 1933, has sprawled from its humble beginnings to become an international network of communities, remaining continually “committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer, and hospitality for the homeless, exiled, hungry, and forsaken.”¹ The movement was originally spearheaded by French peasant Peter Maurin and Catholic convert journalist Dorothy Day. Understanding the Catholic Worker as an intentional community movement requires the historical background of its origins (including some biography of its founders), an analysis of the Catholic Worker’s tradition of resistance, and a study of hospitality as it enables other activities of the community. The Catholic Worker is unique from many other intentional communities because of its large scope and long tenure of existence and success. While certainly unique, the Catholic Worker has come to influence other communities that have sprung up in its legacy. This essay attempts to give a brief and insightful look at that legacy and ultimate impact.

The Catholic Worker is involved in the same ministry as many other Christian intentional communities. The work of the Worker is simple: love and serve the poor. Put in a slightly different way, their mission can be understood as efforts to remove systems of oppression in our society and in our world. The goal is not simply to give a poor man a meal to eat, but to question why he was hungry to begin with. Is there some greater force (or forces) at play in the way our world works that keeps him from being able to eat or to feed his family? How do race and class divides help to answer these questions? The Catholic Worker is an intentional community not built on charity alone; it is built around the simple and yet radical claim that the world we live in does not have to be one of inequality and destruction. The movement remained and still remains staunchly pacifist, resisting the war effort in the 1940s and in the early 2000s. The Catholic Worker has also been at the forefront of racial equality issues in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, ruffling the feathers of the status quo along the way. Finally, the Worker is best and most widely known for its position on justice in the labor market, both in the early days of its founding in the depths of the Great Depression and in today’s recent recession and fiscal crisis. Many groups have heard the call of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin and have created communities in the tradition of the Catholic Worker without necessarily being Catholic.

¹ “Celebrating 80 Years: 1933-2013,” *The Catholic Worker Movement*, <http://www.catholicworker.org/index.cfm>.

Despite their work for justice and equality on many fronts, the Catholic Worker was and is doing something even more meaningful and even more powerful than mere lobbying, protest, or litigation. They began, and continue to his day, to welcome those into their houses of hospitality who have no where else to go. They offer a warm meal, a bed, clothing, a shower to those who would have little hope of receiving such anywhere else. Hospitality was paramount to the founders of the Catholic Worker, and it is a legacy that has persisted through the decades. It is a welcome, a message of hope to those who are forsaken and marginalized. Hospitality, for the Catholic Worker and other Christian intentional communities like it, has become a way to live out the Gospel message; it has become a radical witness to the testimony of Jesus, the Savior who taught his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”² Hospitality does more than lay the foundation for justice efforts—hospitality is the justice effort. Hospitality is a means of resistance.

Maurin, Day, and Personalist Politics

To one unfamiliar with the Catholic Worker, Peter Maurin is perhaps the lesser known face, despite the fact that Dorothy Day once remarked, “Peter Maurin is most truly the founder [of the Catholic Worker]. I would never have had an idea in my head about such work if it had not been for him.”³ So who was this man, and what exactly was his impact on Dorothy Day and the movement that would become the Catholic Worker? Maurin’s own life experiences, first as a peasant farmer in France, then a homesteader in Canada, and finally an odd jobs man in America before founding the Catholic Worker, came to deeply affect facets of the movement, particularly in developing a theology and activism that was intended to serve the poor. Maurin was no stranger to poverty or to work; he was the first of twenty children born to his father, a farmer whose family had been on their land in France for generations. Maurin was raised to be devoutly Catholic and nearly joined a religious order, but instead came to Canada and then to America. He pursued various odd jobs of menial labor with little pay, eventually becoming a vagrant of sorts, a wanderer and a beggar.⁴ He lived on whatever he could find and whatever was given to him, all the while talking with people about his developing philosophies and ideas. Dorothy Day wrote of Maurin that he saw himself as a “troubadour for Christ,”⁵ one who would spread the Gospel best by traveling, singing, and poetry.

2 Matt. 25:40, RSV.

3 Dorothy Day, qtd. in William D. Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 17.

4 Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 25-30.

5 Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), 172.

Maurin showed up at Dorothy Day's home in 1933, after being told about her and her work from some mutual friends. He decided that she was the sort of person he wanted to share ideas with—or perhaps more accurately, he wanted to share his ideas with her.⁶ After many long nights of discussion, Maurin and Day decided to publish a newspaper, what would become *The Catholic Worker*. This was part of Maurin's larger "program," which required a synthesis of "cult, culture, and cultivation," or rather, round-table discussions, houses of hospitality, and "agronomic universities" (farm communities).⁷ After the *Catholic Worker* gained steam and influence, Maurin's behavior sometimes got him into trouble; he often wore the same clothes for long periods of time without bathing, and once when he arrived at a dinner party, he was mistaken for the meter reader and sent down to the basement instead of welcomed to the table as the guest of honor.⁸ This mistake is illustrative of exactly what Maurin was interested in, that is, the tendency of the average person to send the poor away instead of offering them hospitality. Maurin was heavily influenced by personalist philosophy, which stated that "Christian love should be brought from its position of limbo where human affairs are concerned and infused into the process of history. . . . This redemption began with man, for in the human person was the final, indivisible entity that stood above process."⁹ So when Peter Maurin was invited to this party, it was to share his ideas and intellect—a high honor. Yet when he arrived, he was perceived not to be the guest of honor, but an average worker, a menial labor meter reader—worthless. For Peter Maurin, the *Catholic Worker* was to be a place where no one was sent to the basement or thought of as less because of their clothes or income.

Personalist philosophy would eventually find itself at the heart of the *Catholic Worker*, though it was not often articulated as such. Personalism was molded by Maurin and Day to function as both American and Catholic, but it was "originally fashioned in France as a religious but nevertheless politically engaged alternative to both existentialism and Marxism."¹⁰ The personalism of the *Catholic Worker* has three central tenets for individuals: each must serve those in need directly, each must work to change the systems that have created need, poverty, and injustice, and each must work to create viable alternatives to current systems and conditions.¹¹ It was not always clearly communicated in the early days of the

6 Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 169-170.

7 *Ibid.*, 171.

8 Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 19.

9 *Ibid.*, 5-6.

10 Patrick G. Coy, "An Experiment in Personalist Politics: The Catholic Worker Movement and Nonviolent Action," *Peace & Change* 26 (2001), 83.

11 Coy, "An Experiment in Personalist Politics," 83.

Catholic Worker that the philosophy driving Day and Maurin was personalism, not Communism. The confusion arose out of the resonance between the two schools of thought in terms of questioning the current system of injustice and inequality, but personalism has at its heart the Christian message, a message of forgiveness and reconciliation for all, whereas Communism more heavily relies on conflict (class conflict, of course) in order to gain momentum. A Communist, at least in the eyes of the Catholic Worker, would not be willing to forgive and accept a member of the so-called proletariat because of their alignment with a particular class or group. A personalist, by contrast, must welcome the employer and the unemployed, the CEO and the day-laborer, because personalism is concerned about the welfare of individuals and offers an “unabashed affirmation of the dignity of each and every human being.”¹² That is the central message of the Catholic Worker, and though it does sometimes cross paths with Communism or even capitalism, it remains distinctive.

As for Dorothy Day, her journey to the Catholic Worker is similarly interesting, though she and Maurin are by no means similar. In the Day family, “the name of God was never mentioned. Mother and father never went to church [and] none of us children had been baptized and to speak of the soul was to speak immodestly.”¹³ The family moved several times when Dorothy was a child in order to accommodate her father’s search for work as a newspaper writer, a career that Dorothy Day would also pursue. Day grew up with an understanding of working class inequality and eventually joined a Socialist group in college.¹⁴ She left the university without finishing her degree because she did not find academic pursuits as compelling as “identification with that socially abandoned class, the one she had instinctively known all of her life as first in that community of man for which she longed.”¹⁵ Day pursued a career as a journalist in New York and Chicago, affiliating with radicals and young revolutionaries, though she never officially belonged to any particular group or organization. Eventually, she entered into a common-law relationship with Forster Batchingham, and they had a daughter, Tamar, in 1927.¹⁶ During this period in her life, Day was drawn to Catholicism and began attending Mass and praying the Rosary. She and her daughter were eventually baptized into the Church, marking her separation from Forster, who was suspicious of religion. Day writes that leaving her relationship with For-

12 Ibid.

13 Dorothy Day, *From Union Square to Rome* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 20.

14 Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 36-37, 40.

15 Ibid., 36.

16 Ibid., 55, 57.

ster was the most difficult part of her conversion.¹⁷ After moving around several more times and pursuing various jobs, Day ended up in New York, where she would meet Maurin and eventually found the *Catholic Worker*. Their combined life experiences—that of a French vagabond and a journalist more interested in the poor than in a paycheck—would come to create a community movement that not only sympathized with the poor, but stood with them.

Maurin and Day met after Day's conversion to Catholicism, and early on in their friendship, Maurin introduced her to his personalist ideas that revolved around developing an active love for all that would "change institutions so that man might find the freedom necessary to live in the fullness of spirit."¹⁸ It was Maurin who suggested that Day might best engage personalist philosophy through her work as a journalist, and thus *The Catholic Worker* was born. The first issue was sold for a penny a copy on May Day, 1933 in the midst of Communist demonstrations in Union Square. Maurin wanted to call the paper *The Catholic Radical*, but Day, as an ex-Communist, thought that *The Catholic Worker* would resonate better with their audience.¹⁹ The second issue of the paper was largely written by Maurin, and in it he outlined his program for social change—"cult, culture, cultivation"—which included roundtable discussions, houses of hospitality, and "agronomic universities" that would act as Christian utopias in an increasingly urbanized America.²⁰ Day and Maurin joined forces with others who were interested in the cause of the poor and the marginalized, and despite much financial instability and interpersonal conflicts, the *Catholic Worker* movement gained steam, continually publishing their newspapers and widening their circulation. By 1937, there were twenty-two houses of hospitality, two farms, and thirteen "cells" which acted as meeting places and headquarters for the movement, if not actual living spaces.²¹ Through the decades the movement has grown and now boasts over two hundred houses of hospitality nationwide. *The Catholic Worker* can still be purchased for a penny a copy, a price that the *Catholic Worker* insists will remain constant so that the paper will be easily accessible to all, a small but powerful testament to the commitment of the *Catholic Worker* to meet the needs of the poor at their own expense.

17 Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 144-145.

18 Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 64.

19 Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 175.

20 Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 67.

21 *Ibid.*, 114.

The Catholic Worker and the Catholic Church

At the heart of the Catholic Worker Movement is the personalist belief in the dignity and respect of each human person. This pours out of a hope in “the theme of eschatological expectation, which was so powerful in the early days of the Christian community.”²² Personalism’s concern for each and every individual manifests for the Catholic Worker through hospitality efforts, community service, and participating in justice movements, which of course look differently depending on the location and needs of the particular community. Importantly, the Catholic Worker, while independently created, cannot be fully separated from the Church and tradition claimed in its name. There are some more loosely affiliated communities, deemed “Protestant Catholic Worker Houses,” such as the Open Door in Atlanta, Georgia, but the majority of Catholic Worker communities are tied to the Church at large. This makes the Catholic Worker unique among intentional community movements because it is rooted in a religious tradition while also rebelling from social mores and carving out a unique space of an alternative reality. The Catholic Worker is undoubtedly Catholic, but it expresses its faith and ties to the Church in a way that is seen as countercultural and even radical. Moreover, the Catholic Worker is rooted in the Roman Catholic Church, a tradition often criticized for its opulence and unwavering positions on certain issues despite societal changes. Still, both Day and Maurin believed that the mission of the Catholic Worker was not to destroy the Church, but to remind it of its own teachings: love and serve the poor. Peter Maurin believed that their radical witness need not be at odds with the centuries-old institution of the Church, as he wrote in one of his “easy essays”:

If the Catholic Church
 is not today the dominant social, dynamic force,
 it is because Catholic scholars have failed
 to blow the dynamite of the Church.
 Catholic scholars have taken the dynamite of the Church,
 have wrapped it in nice phraseology,
 placed it in an hermetic container
 and sat on the lid.
 It is about time
 to blow the lid off
 so that the Catholic Church
 may again become the dominant social dynamic force.²³

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

²³ Peter Maurin, qtd. in Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 25.

The intentional communities of the Catholic Worker, Maurin believed, may just be the dynamite to blow the lid off the Catholic Church.

Maurin and Day's personalism did not require them to attack or directly criticize the Church in the same way that personalism would ultimately diverge from Communism—personalism is concerned with individuals, every individual. Its concern is not to frontally attack institutions. Maurin's program of hospitality houses and discussions were not based on destroying capitalism or the organized Church. Both Day and Maurin understood that their movement was about changing the hearts and minds of people, not the laws and doctrines of institutions (though this could certainly happen as a result of changing people). Day believed that as long as people remained "as they are, Peter's program is impossible. But it would become actual, given a people changed in heart and mind, so that they would observe the new commandment of love, or desired to."²⁴ Thus, neither of the founders of the movement ever publicly criticized the Church at large, nor attempted to attack its teachings or practices. That is not to say that they did not seek change—radical change—in the way the Church ministered to the world. For Maurin, personalism as well as Christianity was about reformation from the inside out. The Catholic Worker and its members "are to be announcers of a new social order and not denouncers of the old."²⁵ Personalism did not have to be at odds with the Catholic Church. It could, however, be the dynamite to blow off its lid, as Maurin indicated in his essay. Day and Maurin were, through personalism and loving all in an active and real way, hoping to draw the Church out of its comforts and complacencies and into its own teachings and doctrines. Day in particular saw this contented Catholicism as part of the reason that Communism was gaining hold in some parts of the American labor force. Communism, according to Day, is a heresy and a false doctrine, yet, "there is no false doctrine that does not contain certain elements of truth. I believe it is the failure of Christians which has brought about this heresy and that we will have to give an account for it."²⁶ Day and Maurin were interested in revitalizing the Church, not destroying it, and they were trying to change it one person at a time.

The Roman Catholic Church, more than other Christian denominations, has acts of service (officially known as the Works of Mercy) included into their doctrine as essential to their faith. Still, these demanding and sometimes more difficult acts of service to the poor are often forgotten in a world that is more preoccupied with upward mobility and financial gain. Day, an ex-Communist, recognized

24 Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 171.

25 Peter Maurin, qtd. in Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 7.

26 Day, *From Union Square to Rome*, 147.

that Communists “were saying so much about misery and injustice. Ought not Christians to say more?”²⁷ During the early days of her burgeoning Catholicism, Day was distraught when reading the lives of the saints because although they did much to serve the poor, they did not seem concerned with what was making their work necessary. She wondered, “Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves but to do away with slavery?”²⁸ Day’s concern was similar to the saints—for the individual poor and marginalized people she served over the years—but she saw her own work as aiming to the larger transformation of the Church and society. Even *The Catholic Worker* worked to this end. It “was not a news medium . . . It became a personalist paper, setting forth personalist approaches to those great human problems of the 1930s and the decades following. It was the paper of the labor’s poor in spirit . . . it declared a communion with the heroes and martyrs of radical labor.”²⁹ The *Catholic Worker* was not a Communist organization, it was a personalist one—though at times their goals certainly shared common ground. Because of the nature of the philosophy—caring for people authentically and without directly or primarily dealing with greater institutions—personalism flourished as the driving force behind the *Catholic Worker* and its founders.

In the early days of the Catholic Worker movement, the average Catholic in America was not always willing to accept the movement as part of the Church and its teachings. At this point in American history, on the brink of the Red Scare, most of the general public was wary of Communism or anything that resembled it. Many Catholics saw the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality and could not believe the voluntary poverty of the members was derived from the Christian message. Day acknowledged that “voluntary poverty was only found among the Communists . . . the very word ‘worker’ made people distrust us at first.”³⁰ Many Catholics were “quite willing to give to the poor, but they did not feel called upon to work for the things of this life for others which they themselves esteemed so lightly.”³¹ The average American Catholic was caught up in the status quo, adhering to their sense of American capitalism and enterprise rather than clinging to their faith as the guide for how they should live and treat their fellow man. Many of the Catholic Worker’s teachings—“worker-ownership,” “the right of private property,” and “the need to de-proletarianize the worker” led many American Catholics to conclude that the Workers “were Communists in disguise, wolves in sheep’s clothing,” despite

27 Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 72.

28 Day, *From Union Square to Rome*, 47.

29 Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 76.

30 Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 188.

31 *Ibid.*

the fact that these teachings were also emphasized in papal encyclicals.³² In Day's own life, Communism and Catholicism crossed paths: "the mass of bourgeois smug Christians who denied Christ in His poor made me turn to Communism, and . . . it was the Communists and working with them that made me turn to God."³³ Day also writes that though Catholics believed and adhered to the Incarnation, that Christ came to earth and became man for man's salvation, they did not seem equally interested in the facts of Christ's life on earth—that "He was born in a stable, that He did not come to be a temporal King, that He worked with His hands, spent the first years of His life in exile, and the rest of his early manhood in a crude carpenter shop in Nazareth."³⁴ The Catholic Worker embraced the Church and its teaching more deeply, and in doing so the movement was calling all Catholics to the same daunting task.

"Justice is important, but supper is essential"

One of the key objectives of the Catholic Worker is hospitality; in fact, hospitality is arguably the glue that holds the movement and its goals together. Hospitality can mean many things, but most often it simply refers to welcoming any and all into the home for a meal, for shelter, or even just company. Hospitality functions as a foundation for protest and resistance because it first develops a relationship between those who wish to serve the community and those who know what the needs of the community are. Beyond that, hospitality can function as a form of resistance in and of itself. By welcoming the unemployed, the sick, the disabled, and the otherwise marginalized people of society, the Catholic Worker and other communities that practice such radical hospitality are inherently critiquing a Church and a society that does not give such people a second glance. Dorothy Day refused to determine between the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor, that is, those who were deserving of help and those who were merely freeloaders. Day's belief in the dignity of each person led her to teach the Workers that when problems with those they served arose, they should not be dealt with through an imposed order, but they should instead be suffered in love.³⁵ When Workers from another house wrote to Day about a person who was "poisoning community life" with their behavior, which they believed was the result of mental instability, Day insisted that they continue letting the person live in their community rather than exiling them. She believed that "eccentricity and madness were marks of suffer-

32 Ibid.

33 Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 10.

34 Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 204.

35 Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 110.

ing, and those who bore them should be cherished even more.”³⁶ This level of welcome and hospitality is far beyond what most people—even most Christians—are comfortable or willing to offer, which is precisely how the hospitality of the Catholic Worker functions as an act of resistance.

Hospitality was key in the early days of the Catholic Worker and part of Maurin’s three-tiered program. Maurin opened the first Catholic Worker house of hospitality in Harlem in 1934, a year after the first issue of *The Catholic Worker* was distributed. Maurin believed that hospitality was essential, especially in a place like Harlem; he believed that “the personalist leaven must go where lives had been blighted most by injustice.”³⁷ This first Catholic Worker house did not last long, as the owner of the building felt that the Workers were “too subversive” and refused to let them continually rent the space.³⁸ From this anecdote, it becomes clear that hospitality is not only foundational to resistance—hospitality is resistance. Day relates the telling response of the landlord: “people instinctively protect themselves from being touched too closely by the suffering of others. They turn from it, and they make this a habit.”³⁹ In welcoming any and all into their communities, the Catholic Worker is inherently critiquing a Church and a society that hesitate and ultimately refuse to do the same. Ed Loring of the Open Door writes that “housing precedes life,”⁴⁰ and Maurin continued to insist that “we need parish homes as well as parish domes.”⁴¹ Having a place to sleep, eat, and bathe, a place to feel welcomed and wanted—this is essential to any justice efforts because it represents the desired outcome of such efforts. Justice aims for fairness and equality—what is a better representation of equality than a table where all are welcome to share the bread without fear and without shame? This requires that the Church be more than a meeting place on Sunday morning for an hour or two of worship; it requires the Church to become a kitchen, a clinic, a school, a community, and a home.

Following in the steps of the houses of hospitality of the Catholic Worker is the Open Door Community of Atlanta, Georgia. It is in the “Catholic Worker tradition” though the community is almost entirely Protestant; the personalist philosophy of Maurin and Day is able to transcend the boundaries of institutions and denominations. It is known for fighting racism, capital punishment, and the status quo when it comes to the poor in their city. Still, the primary building block in all of this is hospitality and community. It is named the “Open Door” and not the “Equality” or

36 Ibid., 117.

37 Ibid., 80.

38 Dorothy Day, qtd. in *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 80.

39 Day, *From Union Square to Rome*, 7.

40 Ed Loring, *I Hear Hope Banging at My Back Door: Writings from Hospitality* (Atlanta: The Open Door Community, 2000), 38.

41 Peter Maurin, qtd. in *A Harsh and Dreadful Love* 98-99.

“Justice” community because none of those things can happen without first opening the door to those shut out by everyone else. As with most Christian intentional communities, the table is surrounded by faces and stories that are not all alike:

We’re a community that is Black and white; we are strong and weak; some of us are highly educated, and some of us are unable to read. We have women and we have men. Sometimes we have children—not all the time. We have a number of us who are aging. And we are young people. We have people whose hope is fierce and feisty and ready.⁴²

Such a diverse group would not have come together unless hospitality had been first offered. For the Catholic Worker and the Open Door, hospitality is central to the Christian message and essential to their community.

Within the realm of hospitality is the sharing of a meal, of bread. This is perhaps the most important Christian element of hospitality offered by the Catholic Worker and the Open Door. Bread is central to the Gospel; Jesus uses physical bread to represent life as well as membership in the Body of Christ.⁴³ A primary way that Jesus interacted with his followers was through the sharing of meal, the breaking of bread.⁴⁴ One of the requests of Jesus to God in the Lord’s Prayer is “Give us this day our daily bread.”⁴⁵ In sharing a meal, those involved are acknowledging their equal need of and their equal fulfillment from the food served. Sharing food sustains life and creates communities; therefore, if any group seeks to build a community and pursue justice, it is a good idea to start at the dinner table. For the Open Door, “every meal we eat is related to the Eucharist, to the eschatological banquet” where there will always be enough for everyone.⁴⁶ Day writes, “Christ is the bread on our altars because bread is the staple of the world, the simplest thing in the world, something of which we eat and never get tired. . . . For the life of the body we need food. For the life of the soul we need food. So the simplest, most loving, most thorough thing Christ could do before He died, was to institute the Blessed Sacrament.”⁴⁷ Regardless of whether a community believes the presence of Christ in the bread is literal or metaphoric, the message is still the same: God is present when we share a meal, and everyone is invited to God’s table. Therefore, those who call themselves followers of God should be ready and willing to send out the invitations to their own tables.

42 Ed Loring, *I Hear Hope Banging at My Back Door: Writings from Hospitality* (Atlanta: The Open Door Community, 2000), 4.

43 John 6:35, RSV.

44 Matt. 15:32-37, Matt. 26:17-29, among others.

45 Matt. 6:11, RSV.

46 Loring, *I Hear Hope Banging at My Back Door*, 6.

47 Day, *From Union Square to Rome*, 163-164.

Despite the eschatological and perhaps romantic visions of table fellowship and hospitality, the lived reality of communities like the Catholic Worker or the Open Door is often fraught with the struggles of everyday life. Financial concerns, disagreements among leaders, and the simple physical fact that there is *not* enough room at the table for everyone, at least not in this life. Sometimes people are turned away from the Open Door; they sleep outside on the porch or at a nearby basketball court when there is no place for them inside the house. As Loring of the Open Door laments:

That is the hardest part of our lives. We can't always say, "Yes." We distinguish, discriminate, and make decisions. We say, "Yes," and we say "No." We say, "Come in," and we say, "Go out." We say, "You are welcome, and we say, "If you don't move and stop what you're doing we'll call the police." It is harsh and dreadful. It is cross and finitude. The decision is filled with forgiveness, grace, and love. We become urgent in our patience. We want justice and we want it now!⁴⁸

Dorothy Day was similarly troubled, nearly eighty years before:

To think that we are forced by our own lack of room, our lack of funds, to perpetuate this shame [of homelessness, unemployment, etc.], is heartbreaking.

"Is this what you meant by houses of hospitality," I asked Peter.

"At least it will arouse the conscience," he said.⁴⁹

Hospitality is taxing, difficult, frustrating, and expensive. Despite the fact that Day, Maurin, and Loring all believe it to be their call as Christians to welcome and feed the marginalized, that does not make funds magically appear or remove all the tension that naturally arises when people live together. In the early days of printing *The Catholic Worker*, Day and Maurin were vocal about the importance of hospitality for the movement, and they were clearly radical. More than once, people would read their papers and show up the next day on their doorstep, expectant. This eventually led Day to be more cautious about what she put in print, aware that they should not write about such radical hospitality "unless we are willing to assume the obligations such writings bring with it."⁵⁰ Hospitality is a difficult calling, but for the Catholic Worker and the Open Door, it is essential to their faith and to their mission.

The Catholic Worker movement has done much to bring social justice issues to light in the Catholic Church and American society. The personalism of Peter

48 Loring, *I Hear Hope Banging at My Back Door*, 8.

49 Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 215-216.

50 *Ibid.*, 260.

Maurin and later of Dorothy Day assured that the movement would not become irrelevant with the rise and fall of Communism or other institutional movements. Personalism, it has been stressed, is concerned with direct, individual, active love, motivated by an eschatological, spiritual urgency. Through personalism, the Catholic Worker spread into many houses of hospitality around the world, all committed to keeping their doors open to any who have need, regardless of the value that society has assigned them. In doing so, they are rejecting the claims of the status quo in the economic and political order. Though they function as a religious group and are affiliated with a larger Church, their actions are inherently critical of that larger Church. The hospitality of the Catholic Worker and the Open Door is meant to be a wakeup call to what they see as a complacent church. Their hospitality is their legacy of resistance, sending the message that an open door and a loaf of bread can be just as political as picketing Wall Street or signing a bill into law.

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Poetic Justice: Hip-Hop and Black Liberation Theology

Mimi Mendes de Leon

*“It’s bigger than hip hop, hip hop, hip hop, hip hop
It’s bigger than hip hop, hip hop, hip hop, hip hop”¹
– Dead Prez “Hip hop”*

When Macklemore, a white rapper from Seattle, won the 2013 Grammy for best rap album, *The National Review* joined the ensuing debate over the outcome of the awards ceremony, arguing that the Grammys put “politics before music.”² By politics here, *The National Review* meant the public debate over social issues—in this case gay rights. Macklemore’s album featured the chart topping “Same Love,” the summer anthem for the marriage equality movement, and his win seemed, to *The National Review*, to be a statement of support from the music industry to the movement. Kendrick Lamar’s album, *good kid, M.A.A.D. city*, however, should have won, according to the same article, because it is a “really gorgeous, moving album . . . about life in Compton.”³ This makes the claim that Macklemore’s album is political whereas Lamar’s is not. However, Lamar describes his own album: “It’s not just music to me. This is a story about the youth and the people that they call delinquents in my city.”⁴ That is what *The National Review* missed: Hip hop, in its very nature, in its stories and its experiences, is political. It is political because it brings to the public a discussion that should be happening, a debate that affects the lives of citizens and how the government works for and against those citizens. Lamar narrates the situation of a community and the greater systematic effects of both the government and the economy on that community. In this way, *good kid, M.A.A.D. city* is political because its content discusses and challenges Lamar’s hometown. As Chuck D of hip hop group Public Enemy states, “Rap is Black America’s CNN.”⁵ In this way, hip hop content is about people and the politics that affect their lives.

1 Dead Prez, “Hip Hop,” in *Let’s Get Free*, produced by Dead Prez (Columbia, Loud, and Relativity, 2000).

2 Betsy Woodruff, “Macklemore’s Not the Best Rap Album,” in *National Review*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/369551/macklemores-not-best-rap-album-betsy-woodruff>.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Chuck D, interview by David Thorpe, *BOMB*, Summer 1999.

The Corner

*"The corner was our Rock of Gibraltar, our Stonehenge
Our Taj Mahal, our monument
Our testimonial to freedom, to peace, and to love
Down on the corner"⁶
– The Last Poets, The Corner*

Hip hop comes from the Corner. The Corner is often used in hip hop as a reference to the heart of the inner city community. Although the Corner sounds like it is on the outside, in hip hop it is the center of activity, a place of intersection and community. It is associated with the underground economy, in terms of the dealer on the Corner, but in this it has been lifted up as a place of knowledge. This Corner can be in any neighborhood or any community, and it reflects hip hop's dedication to the lives and experiences of its followers. The Corner is the active, present heart of the community, and it is a place that may be out of reach to outsiders, but vital to those in the inner city. In her book, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses the invisibility : hypervisibility dynamic that exists in contemporary hip hop.⁷ Collins argues that while Black youth are the global face of hip hop, being made hypervisible by the music industry, the conditions of the majority of Black American youth are ignored. As Collins contends, mass media images of Black youth are of "athletes and entertainers," but the "actual ghettoization of poor and working-class African Americans" makes them invisible.⁸ Hip hop itself comes from this invisibility, and in looking at the content of hip hop, one can see the invisible being made visible.

Consequences of Invisibility

The Corner is a "least of these" location. Hip hop comes not from within the dominant consciousness, but outside of it. Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, authors of *Yes Yes Y'all*, an oral history of hip hop, mark the start of hip hop with the DJs and house parties of the 1970s. The two argue that hip hop "rose out of the gang-dominated street culture."⁹ This can be seen in three of the first hip hop DJs—DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash. All three were connected to turfs and crews that mimicked and grew from life in New York City. Hip hop

6 Common ft. The Last Poets and Kanye West, "The Corner," in *Be*, produced by Kanye West (New York, NY: GOOD Music, 2005).

7 Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 4.

8 *Ibid.*, 3.

9 Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip hop's First Decade* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), quoted in Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip hop Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 17.

centered, for these early starters, on peace, love, unity, and fun. Afrika Bambaataa and his crew the Zulu Nation worked hard to bring gangs together, especially warring gangs. DJ Kool Herc also had a crew, the Herculords, and The Five Percenters. The Five Percenters were a branch of the Nation of Islam who worked with DJ Kool Herc to maintain peace at his parties. Grandmaster Flash had the Furious Five, who used their new popularity to share “The Message” from their corner in the South Bronx. Their corner is “like a jungle sometimes / it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.”¹⁰ As Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five move through each verse, they describe their neighborhood, their situation. This perspective from the Corner is vital to hip hop. It takes in the systems of power and oppression that are invisible to those who are not on the Corner.

The system of empire that makes these neighborhoods the invisible, least of these, is new racism. Empire here will mean the networks of power—political, economic, social, and religious—that oppress primarily Black and Brown Americans within the United States. As Collins argues, hip hop “lived the shift from a color-conscious racism that relied on strict racial segregation to a seemingly colorblind racism that promised equal opportunities yet provided no lasting avenues for African American advancement.”¹¹ There are several systems working in this new racism, including the War on Drugs, prison industrialization, and market capitalism. In order to understand how these systems function and how they provide hip hop with its content as well as context, an analysis of the two is presented below.

Mark Lewis Taylor outlines the consequences of the War on Drugs and prison industrialization in his book, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*. “Lockdown America” refers to our system of incarceration based on false pretenses and the theatrics of terror.¹² The government expands its power through terror by parading its large and growing prison industry to warn the marginalized to stay in their place. In *The Art of Rap*, Immortal Technique, a Peruvian born American rapper from Harlem, speaks about the inner city male community moving in and out of prison, and this has historically been the case for inner city Black youths.¹³ The reason for these arrests is often based on the drug trade. The War on Drugs is used as a tool of controlling the population and keeping bodies within the prison industry. Taylor describes the paradox of the prison system. When crime rates increase, prisons are built as a means of control, and when

10 Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message”, in *Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five*, produced by Ed Fletcher, Clifton “Jiggs” Chase and Sylvia Robinson (New York: Sugar Hill, 1982).

11 Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, 3.

12 Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 21.

13 *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap*, DVD, directed by Ice-T and Andy Baybutt (2012; Los Angeles: Indomina Films).

crime rates drop, the success is accredited to the prison system and more are built to drive the rates down further.¹⁴

What this misses entirely is the racist nature of the War on Drugs. In June 2013, the ACLU published a report on marijuana arrests by race.¹⁵ It found that although Blacks and whites use marijuana close to the same amount, Blacks were more likely to be arrested for it. Across the United States, Blacks are 3.73 times more likely than whites to be arrested for marijuana. In Brooklyn, one of the areas of the nation with the highest arrest rate, this rate goes up to ten times more likely. Although the War on Drugs has been given attention recently with the legalization of marijuana in Colorado and Washington, the effect of this “war” on the lives of those on the Corner has been left invisible.

These bodies are paying for the success found in other areas of the city. These hip hop bodies are seen as disposable, and rappers know this. “Got a law for raw n----- now, play what it be like?/ when will n----- see they got us bleedin with three strikes,” the West Coast rapper Tupac raps in *Military Minds*.¹⁶ Yet Tupac and others are sacrificed as a means of preserving the upper class way of life. The prison system is seen as promoting the efficiency of our economy by keeping unproductive members behind bars. This means that those who do not have stable jobs are seen as a threat to the function of society. The unemployed, or worse, the unemployed finding alternative means of employment, are put behind bars in order to keep the image of a successful economic system in place. This does not account for the fact that these “unproductive members” are given few choices for legally making a livelihood. Their imprisonment covers for the fact that the current economic system does not provide access for everyone. Because these hip hop bodies are moved in and out of jail and affiliated with this way of life, they are rendered “virtually invisible.”¹⁷ The life on the Corner is one where the threat of imprisonment contends strongly with the threat of being unable to provide for oneself and one’s family.

Added to the War on Drugs is the economic system that marginalizes those in the Corner. This means that the urban poor are overlooked in free market capitalism and thus construct a transformed economic system from below. Free market capitalism, as based in privatization and accumulation, remains as a dominating system and lends to the public a faith in the system, not only as an economy that works, but as the only economy that works. According to Joerg Rieger, many

14 Taylor, *The Executed God*, 19.

15 “The War on Marijuana in Black and White: Billions of Dollars Wasted on Racially Biased Arrests” (New York: ACLU, 2013).

16 Tupac Shakur, “Military Minds,” in *Better Dayz*, produced by Afeni Shakur and Johnny “J,” (Atlanta: Amaru, 2002).

17 Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, 3.

believe that economic upturns will correct the downturns and that the income gap will disappear over time.¹⁸ We have hope in the market and trust that it will work. But the logic of downturn brings to light that the economy does not work for everyone. As Rieger points out, the economic gap is growing, and capitalism is only benefitting those who control production.¹⁹ Hip hop bodies are left behind in this system.

Hip hop relates to the fact that the market does not work for everyone. Those who rely on their own labor as their only source of income are overlooked in favor of those who have resources to begin with. Jung Mo Sung, also argues that the system of the free market creates necessary sacrifices.²⁰ These necessary sacrifices are those who are oppressed by capitalism, such as the bodies Taylor discusses in the prison system. They live outside of the mainstream economic system of capitalism in that they find alternative means of income. This means that their work is viewed as illegal and outside of the system. In Sudhir Venkatesh's *Off the Books*, he explores the underground economy of a Chicago neighborhood, and he depicts how life on the Corner relates to the neighborhood-wide system of living shut out of the mainstream market.²¹ By underground economy, Venkatesh means the constructed economy of the Corner that exists outside of the law and "off the books." While many assume gang activity to be the driving force of underground economies, most function in both illicit trade such as drug dealing as well as licit trade, like providing lunch or car repairs. Despite the off the books nature of the underground economy, there are still rules, codes, and systems to follow. And the motivations for participating are often a mix of short-term, cash-need basis, meaning that work comes in these communities as a mix of off and on the books jobs. In many ways this economy resembles the legal economic system and engages with it. However, in the public sphere, many view these underground economies as unlawful and blame participants for their own lack of success in the above-ground market—the epitome of the "welfare queen"—since, as Rieger points out, the system is believed to work for everyone. Sung adds to this argument with the myth of hard work.²² Hard work, according to liberal theory, will result in financial success. Thus, people are appreciated based on their capital, but since the system does not benefit all, as Rieger points out, those who have no capital are not seen as valuable and become the necessary sacrifices of the system.²³

18 Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 1.

19 Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*, 35.

20 Jung Mo Sung, *Reclaiming Liberation Theology: Desire, Market and Religion* (Norwich, UK: SCM Press, 2007), 43.

21 Sudhir Venkatesh, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 17.

22 Sung, *Reclaiming Liberation Theology*, 13.

23 Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 29.

This is where hip hop emerges from—the necessary sacrifices—and it informs a large part of hip hop content. On the Corner, Black youths, especially men, “started from the bottom,” in the words of the rapper Drake, with nothing except their own labor.²⁴ With a system that does not provide them access to good jobs or training, these hip hop bodies turn instead to the underground economy. As Nas, a New York-based rapper, comments, “a person’s status depends on salary,” and for many, the only access to a market is through the drug trade.²⁵ In *Misunderstood*, Common, a Chicago rapper, narrates the life of a man on the Corner:

He stood on the corner with the rest of them
 Though he knew that this corner wasn’t the best of him
 Hard streets and a life that crested him
 Dirt police domestic beefs that’s festerin
 He knew the President wadn’t addressin him
 Though dead presidents was undressin him.²⁶

What Common gets at here is the problem with the belief in “rising tides” on the “least of these.” Because of the importance of capital, in terms of survival and power, men and women turn to illegal trade and activities in order to make money. This Corner thus has a perspective outside of the system, since it must work in direct opposition to the system in order to survive. This position makes the Corner a location of what Rieger would call a theological surplus.²⁷ As Kelly Brown Douglas argues, this belief that the “least of these” have preferential moral agency is grounded in both the life and words of Jesus. Preferential moral agency here refers to those who stand outside systems of “unjust privilege” and are granted to the least of these because “they are the ones most unlikely to be deceived into thinking that certain systems and structures of domination are not inherently evil but can be mended to be more just.”²⁸ Looking closely at the situation of Jesus’ birth, we see that God chose to come into this world not amongst kings, but in a manger with the marginalized shepherds. Jesus continued this siding with the poor throughout his life. He describes a new world where “the last are first and the first are last.”²⁹ This does not indicate a reversal of status, but rather, a world where

24 Drake, “Started From the Bottom,” in *Nothing Was the Same*, produced by Mike Zombie and Noah “40” Shebib (New York: Republic Records, 2013).

25 Nas, “Life’s a Bitch,” in *Illmatic*, produced by L.E.S. and Nas (New York: Columbia, 1994).

26 Common, “Misunderstood,” in *Finding Forever*, produced by Devo Springsteen (New York: GOOD Music, 2007).

27 Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 139.

28 Kelly Brown Douglas, “Marginalized People, Liberating Perspectives: A Womanist Approach to Biblical Interpretation,” *Anglican Theological Review* 83 (2008): 41.

29 Matthew 20:16, *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985).

status is indistinguishable. Here the invisible become visible and the Corner is no longer a center of illegal trade, but a community hub.

Resistance and the Corner

It is also important to note here the historical background of the Corner. As Nas covers in “Bridging the Gap,” there is a connection between the language of resistance in previous Black music and hip hop. Performing the song with his father, Olu Dara—a jazz and blues cornetist, singer, and guitarist—Nas speaks of the “history of this track,” or how the resistant language of the blues and jazz led to the creation and language of hip hop.³⁰ These previous genres serve as the basis for much of hip hop, being the tracks that are mixed and re-mixed for the MCs to host on. As Ralph Basui Watkins argues, hip hop shares the four primary characteristics of the blues:

1. Hip hop affirms the somebodiness of the hip hop nation.
2. Hip hop preserves the worth of the hip hop nation through ritual and drama.
3. Hip hop transforms the life of hip hoppas by rapping and singing about the life and struggles of the hip hop nation.
4. Hip hop symbolizes the solidarity, the attitudes, and the identity of the hip hop nation and thus creates the emotional forms of reference for endurance and aesthetic appreciation.³¹

What this demonstrates is that while hip hop has its own slang and its own codified language, it has roots in a long tradition of resistance in Black music. Early slave rebellions relied on the use of the talking drums, and masters worked hard to keep drums out of the hands of slaves.³² The blues spoke a language of social resistance, “I’m gonna leave you baby / And I won’t be back no more.”³³ Hip hop, as Nas says, “bridges the gap” from this language to the language of the streets.

Analyzing these four primary characteristics more closely, the Corner location of hip hop can be seen on a larger scale, not just with the blues, but with the Civil Rights Movement. The first point, the “somebodiness of the hip hop nation,” speaks to what Collins outlines as Black nationalism.³⁴ Although some view Black nationalism as a political movement, Collins defines it as “self-definition, self-determina-

30 Nas and Olu Dara, “Bridging the Gap,” in *Street’s Disciple*, produced by Salaam Remi (New York: Columbia, 2004).

31 Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011): 61.

32 Megan Sullivan, “African-American Music as Rebellion: From Slavesong to Hip Hop,” in *Discoveries*, 3 (2001): 21.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, 75.

tion, and self-reliance.³⁵ Hip hop content reflects this in that it defines and declares itself a culture. KRS-One, one of the original grandmasters of hip hop, had hip hop recognized as a culture by the United Nations. Tupac worked toward building a somebodiness for himself and his listeners in “Keep Ya Head Up” when he said “feelin like Black was the thing to be,” and “the darker the flesh then the deeper the roots.”³⁶ In hip hop culture, rappers are somebody, with a voice and a message.

The rituals and drama of hip hop, call-and-response and signifying, also come from a history in Black churches and culture. Call-and-response refrains from a pattern of leading lines and reply. Many spirituals by slaves were based on this technique as a form of sharing information like forms of African poetry and music brought over on slave ships. Call and response functioned as a means of both active participation as well as teaching of tradition, both of which were principle to the African oral tradition.³⁷ In the New World setting, these traditions adopted the guise of Christian narratives as a means of hiding the dialogue of freedom from masters. This tradition has continued on throughout Black literary and musical forms. In hip hop, call and response functions as a means of connecting the rapper with his audience. For example, in Jay-Z’s “Jigga My N---,” he shouts out to the crowd, asking his name, and they respond, sharing with Jay-Z in the chorus.³⁸ Or in Naughty by Nature’s O.P.P., the group asks “You down with O.P.P.?” to which the crowd responds, “Yeah, you know me!”³⁹ In using call-and-response, hip hop, like generations of Black music, embraces the act of active participation, drawing the audience into the sound and passing along information.

Signifyin’ is a African American literary tradition where the denotation and literal meanings of a word or concept are played with. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. outlines the history of signifying in Black literary tradition in *The Signifying Monkey*. According to Gates, “signifying is the grandparent of rap, and rap is signifying in a postmodern way.”⁴⁰ What this means is that rap comes from a history of long oral resuscitation that exploits and turns on its head the work before it. Gates describes his father doing this in a tradition called the Dozens, and then the following generation picking this up in the form of Toasts. Rap functions in the same way as the long verse of Gates’ father in that it works to marry and re-marry language. For example, when Kendrick Lamar says, “I don’t smoke crack motherf--- I sell it,” in

35 Ibid., 75.

36 Tupac Shakur and Dave Hollister, “Keep Ya Head Up,” in *Strictly 4 My N.I.C.G.A.Z.* produced by DJ Daryl (Santa Monica, CA: Interscope, 1993).

37 “Call for Deliverance: The Oral Tradition”. *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, ed. Patricia Liggins Hill (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 10-11.

38 Jay-Z, “Jigga my Nigga,” in *Ryde or Die Vol. 1*, produced by Swizz Beatz (Santa Monica, CA: Interscope, 1999).

39 Naughty by Nature, “O.P.P.” in *Naughty by Nature*, produced by Naughty by Nature (New York: Tommy Boy Records, 1991).

40 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “An Anthology of Rap Music Lyrics,” in *The Financial Times*, November 5, 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/87cca6b0-e7a9-11df-8ade-00144feab49a.html#axzz2uJlmrYu>.

his “Control” verse, he is twisting around the words of Eminem’s words, “I don’t sell crack, I smoke it,” in the song “Weed Lacer.”⁴¹ This itself is a reference to the TV show *COPS*, “I don’t sell crack, I’m a prostitute.”⁴² Although neither Lamar nor Eminem have created something new, each reworking of the former adds a new meaning to the lyrics, one for the next artists to jump off from. This is the characteristic “parody and pastiche” Gates describes in rap. The intertextuality of the genre means that language is worked and reworked within itself, complicating any type of literal interpretation. It is a performance, like the *Dozens* and *Toasts* before it, and in signifying, hip hop finds power in challenging and exploiting our concepts of language and of the world around us.

The final component of Watkin’s understanding of hip hop includes the “solidarity, the attitudes, and the identity of the hip hop nation.” This can best be seen in the discussion that takes place within the hip hop community. Hip hop tracks are never done. Artists remix and sample other’s tracks constantly, and they also appear in each other’s work. Rappers call each other out for slipping up or for misogynistic content or not being “real” enough. Lamar call out a stream of artists in a verse on “Control,” by Big Sean: “Mollies’ll prolly turn these n— to f— Lindsay Lohan / A bunch of rich a— white girls looking for parties.”⁴³ Upon hearing the verse in which Big Sean himself was called out, he said it “was just what hip hop needed.”⁴⁴ As Gates argues, rap does not “take itself too self-consciously, or try to overburden its lines with rehearsed wisdom, or the cant of ideology.”⁴⁵ Rather, hip hop pulls its strength from pastiche, from sampling other artists, collaborating with artists, and from building off of what has come before, just as the genre itself has done. Despite the multiplicity of riffs and arguments within the hip hop community, these artists are working and crafting the form, making sure the others do not forget their roots or the nature of hip hop.

In understanding hip hop roots as a place of theological insight and moral authority, it is clear why so much of hip hop deals with the inequalities of the mainstream market system and prison industrialization. Coming from the communities that were marginalized by these systems of power, hip hop has been able to see more clearly the system and has been liberated from it by its participation in the underground.

41 Big Sean, Kendrick Lamar, and Jay Electronica, “Control,” produced by No I.D. (New York: GOOD Music, 2013).

42 “Rock Refund, Fort Worth Police,” *COPS*, Spike TV <http://www.cops.com/rock-refund/>.

43 Big Sean, Kendrick Lamar, and Jay Electronica, “Control.”

44 “Big Sean: Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Control’ verse is just what hip hop needed,” *NME*, September 2, 2013. <http://www.nme.com/news/kendrick-lamar/72398>.

45 Gates, “An Anthology of Rap Music Lyrics.”

The God on the Corner

Despite the tension between the church and hip hop, hip hop bodies embrace the spiritual. Artists find a truth about God coming through their music to speak to the real needs of their communities. Most god-talk in hip hop is subtle. References are made throughout artists' anthologies that can be read in multiple ways, including a discussion of the God on the Corner. The God on the Corner is one who is active and present in the lives of the neighborhood. This God knows the pain and struggles of hip hop bodies and, despite their actions, continues to walk with them. Just as Douglas argues that the God of the blues is the God of a "radical Black faith," so too is hip hop as it presents a God that suffers with the people.⁴⁶

As James H. Cone, a founding figure in black liberation theology, argues, authentic speech about God would resemble treason and heresy because the true word of God is the word of revolution.⁴⁷ The God on the Corner takes the side of those outside power structures. In the Gospels, Cone has demonstrated that Jesus identifies with those cast as sinners by society, those who are pushed to the margins and oppressed.⁴⁸ He does this first through his baptism. Jesus noticeably does not baptize others for this act would place him as superior to them. Rather, Jesus chooses to be baptized with the followers of John, demonstrating that he is one of them. Throughout Jesus' life he takes the side of the oppressed. When he is tempted in the desert, Jesus refuses to divert his attention from the poor. He refuses to self-worship or to accept the devil's offering of land and power because worship does not come through power structures.

Acknowledging that Jesus stood on the side of the oppressed means that to speak of God is to support the oppressed against their oppressors. Most societies would consider this inherently treasonous because if so, then God talk calls for a radical break in social order. In this way, the idea of black liberation for Cone would be seen as a threat in a white society.⁴⁹ Speech about God would be calling for the end of the current order in the light of Black liberation. The result of liberation would mean the whites would lose their hierarchy, stability, and power in society.

Hip hop artists have engaged in authentic speech about the God on the Corner. Hip hop calls for revolution. In the song "Terrorist Threats," the rapper Ab-Soul raps, "If all the gangs in the world unified / We'd stand a chance against the military tonight."⁵⁰ Identifying oneself as a terrorist or as a threat to the nation is

46 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012): 142.

47 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 58.

48 *Ibid.*, 121.

49 *Ibid.*, 103.

50 Ab-Soul, "Terrorist Threat," in *Control System*, produced by Anthony "Top Dawg" Tiffith and Dave Free. Carson, CA: Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012.

not uncommon in hip hop. These artists understand that the system will not be in their favor, and therefore, will not rap to support it. In the song “Revolutionary,” the rapper Immortal Techniques raps, “My mission is to take you, lyrically break you / lyrically assassinate you / Lyrically incinerate your body and recreate you / To destroy the power that mentally incarcerate you.”⁵¹ Hip hop is revolutionary because it deconstructs the ways in which hip hop bodies are taught to think of themselves and are treated by society.

To make an authentic speech about God, Cone argues that one needs to include two points. The first of these is to “smash false images,” meaning to destroy the white god and put the Black God in its place.⁵² This means that a Black prophet would need to clarify God’s blackness in his speech to ensure that the Black people know he is not speaking of the false white god. Hip hop artists do this by claiming both God and Jesus as Black. For example, in Mos Def’s “Black Jesus,” but also by claiming God and Jesus as on their side, as walking with them.⁵³ Similarly, in “Jesus Walks,” Kanye West raps:

To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers, even the scrippers
 Jesus walks for them
 To the victims of welfare for we living in hell here, hell yeah
 Jesus walks for them
 Now, hear ye, hear ye: want to see Thee more clearly
 I know he hear me when my feet get weary.⁵⁴

The God on the Corner is with the people on the streets, and hip hop artists testify to that. Although many reject the churches that have rejected them, they still find God on the Corner because they know that God suffers with them.

The second thing a prophet needs to do to ensure true speech is to make sure he or she does not separate Black religion from the Black community.⁵⁵ Black religion must be specifically tied to Black experience, and it must speak directly to the community in order to inspire it to action. Liberation is the goal of God and the Black community; therefore, it will be the focus of any speech about God. While there are hip hop artists who leave their communities behind, many continue to speak to and for their communities as they move through the industry. In “Blessed,” Kendrick Lamar speaks to his community to motivate them to action: “Yes, my n—, you’re blessed, take advantage, do your best, my n— / Don’t stress,

51 Immortal Technique, “Revolutionary.” In *Revolutionary, Volume 1*, produced by Jean Grae. New York: Viper, 2001.

52 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 59.

53 Mos Def, “Black Jesus,” in *OMFGOD*, produced by Mannie Fresh, <https://soundcloud.com/omfgod/black-jesus>.

54 Kanye West, “Jesus Walks,” in *The College Dropout*, produced by Kanye West. New York: Roc-a-Fella and Def Jam, 2000.

55 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 62.

you was granted everything inside this planet/ Anything you imagine, you possess, my n—.”⁵⁶ Speaking about God, Lamar calls the community to action. Hip hop artists understand that the Black community to whom they speak will both know and need their music. As rapper Talib Kweli says in “The Hostile Gospel,” he is “preaching to the choir.”⁵⁷ When he asks “What the people want?” his backup screams out, “Please deliver us.” The God whom hip hop speaks of thus is engaged and active in a communal call for liberation. This revolutionary god-talk is thus a foundation for understanding the God on the Corner.

The revolution to which hip hop speaks in not naïve; rather, it fulfills the actual needs of the community. Ralph Basui Watkins calls this a “sheep theology,” after the parable of Matthew 25:31-46.⁵⁸ As the sheep and the goats are separated for the kingdom of heaven, the sheep are welcomed for providing for the needs of Jesus by providing for the needs of others. The goats, however, are not welcomed for they have not provided for the “least of these.” Hip hop provides for the least of these, offering a hope that feeds the soul and speaks to the real issues of the community.

The language of hope, which Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman says has been “denied so long and suppressed so deeply,”⁵⁹ liberates the community. Hip hop does not present false hope. It addresses the despair and the hardship, “We got to face what lies ahead/ Fight for our truth and freedom and ride for the dead.”⁶⁰ In this creed there is no doubt that God is on the Corner, and with this God the community will realize the promises of the future arising in the present. In the song “Hope,” rapper Twista raps the following:

We will never break, though they devastate, we shall motivate
 And we gotta pray, all we got is faith
 Instead of thinking about who gonna die today
 The Lord is gonna help you feel better, so you ain't gotta cry today.⁶¹

God on the corner is found amongst the harshest realities. The God on the corner is both always out of reach as a God of the future yet lives in the present struggles of the community. This God answers Tupac’s question “Where do we go from here? / Where do we go?”⁶² The God on the corner stands beside Tupac and other hip hop bodies and moves forward with them toward liberation. Although

56 Schoolboy Q and Kendrick Lamar, “Blessed,” in *Habits and Contradictions*, produced by Dave Free (Carson, CA: Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012).

57 Talib Kweli, “The Hostile Gospel,” in *Eardrum*, produced by Just Blaze (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records, 2007).

58 Watkins, *Hip Hop Redemption*, 113.

59 Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 65.

60 Talib Kweli, “The Proud,” in *Quality*, produced by Ayatollah. (New York: Rawkus, 2002).

61 Twista, “Hope.” In *Coach Carter*, produced by Toxic. Los Angeles: Capitol, 2005.

62 Tupac Shakur, “Where Do We Go from Here,” in *R U Still Down? (Remember Me)*, produced by Tony Pizarro and Tupac Shakur (Santa Monica, CA: Interscope Records, 1997).

many have cast hip hop in a bad light, hip hop is not afraid to call out the obstacles in front of this goal. Hip hop names the problems that affect the community—prison industrialization, poverty, invisibility, and racism. Hip hop being seen as morally wrong is a result of hip hop calling to light the hip hop reality. Although hip hop artists know that their actions and the actions of their brothers and sisters have the potential to harm the community, they present the deeper cause of these actions and the pain of living their experience.

In the same way, Jesus named the reality of his experience that countered the dominant narrative. In the Gospel of John, the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus about a woman accused of adultery.⁶³ The scribes and Pharisees believed, in accordance with Jewish law, that the woman should be stoned. The men were testing Jesus to see if he would be faithful to the law, as their faith professed. Jesus replied that “He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone.” The men disband, knowing themselves for their own sin, and Jesus tells the woman to “go and sin no more.”⁶⁴

Like Jesus, hip hop artists reveal the reality of their experience and that their reality cannot be dominated by the moral codes of others. They call out for society to understand the evil that they perpetuate in the lives of hip hop bodies. Jesus asked the scribes and Pharisees to recognize the humanity within themselves and within the woman. Jesus broke down the lines the scribes and Pharisees had constructed to separate them from the woman. In this way, Jesus liberates the woman from the system of oppression that has classified her as a sinner and lesser than the men. Hip hop, too, continues this work for freedom from stereotypes and assumptions about hip hop bodies. While the sin of the woman may be cast as negative, the woman herself is not evil, just as the actions of hip hop bodies may be seen as negative, but not evil.

By existing within the harsh realities of the corner, the hip hop God understands the needs of the community. The God on the Corner keeps alive a God that works with and for the oppressed. This God acknowledges the reality of the system and provides hope for liberation. Liberation here will emerge from a change in mindset that is a communal call to action and awareness. Hip hop reveals a prophetic voice from the inner city that allows for the God of the Corner to continue working within the community.

63 John 8:1-30.

64 John 8:11.

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Evil and Theodicy in Hinduism

Sunder Willett

The concept of evil colors much of today's understanding of the world. In "The Abuse of Evil," Richard Bernstein writes that evil is often used to obscure, to demonize and to stifle intelligent dialogue about serious issues.¹ By calling something *evil* one can avoid having to understand and analyze the conditions which allowed such events to occur. And yet what exactly is meant by the term *evil*? Due to the moral connotations of *evil*, there tends to be a generalization of *evil* as an absolute term. However, even in the supposedly secular United States of America, there is a distinctively Christian bias to the popular understanding of evil: that it is unnatural, wrong and in need of subjugation. But is this understanding true outside of a Christian frame of reference?

I argue that it is not. To illustrate this, I analyze how Hinduism, a religious tradition with beliefs and theologies very different from a Christian or even an Abrahamic perspective, treats evil and theodicy, or the study of how evil and a benevolent god can both exist in the world. Because Hindu conceptions of evil and theodicy are very different, one cannot examine evil and theodicy in Hinduism from a Christian perspective. In fact, due to the theological differences between the two religious perspectives, the two come to very different conclusions about evil and theodicy. The Hindu perspective on evil and theodicy is informed by its unique, multifaceted and ultimately context-sensitive theology and on its unique beliefs in rebirth, reincarnation and karma.

In this paper I examine evil and the question of theodicy within Hinduism. To provide a greater context, I compare the Hindu conceptions of evil and theodicy to how Christianity generally treats evil and theodicy. Beyond a simple examination of these two, however, I first look at how the terms "evil" and "theodicy" have usually been used and some of the cultural and religious baggage these two terms carry. Because of the origins, or at least heavy influence, of a predominantly Christian framework, "evil" and "theodicy" are context-sensitive terms that cannot be used freely outside of said Christian framework. Finally, I examine how Hinduism actually treats evil and theodicy. In doing so, I look primarily at the doctrine of karma;² however, I also examine

1 Richard J. Bernstein, "The Abuse of Evil," in *Deliver Us from Evil*, ed. M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 102.

2 It should be noted that *doctrine* is also a loaded term, especially in this context referring to karma. *Doctrine* implies an official systematization or codification of ideas. This is not necessarily how karma was organized. There was not a Hindu equivalent of a Council of Nicaea which established the "doctrine" of karma.

Hindu mythology and extensively use Wendy O'Flaherty's seminal work, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*.

A Brief Discussion of Comparative Religious Study and Problems Therein

Comparison is everywhere. Unless faced with an entirely unfamiliar subject and having had no useful previous background, it is quite likely that one will use some sort of comparison when evaluating new information. Sometimes comparison, as William Paden went so far as to say, is "simply unavoidable."³ This is especially true for religious studies, as it is extremely difficult to examine a religion entirely on its own without looking at how its perspectives might match up (or not) to a religion more familiar to one's own context. Furthermore, the term 'religion' is itself difficult to define.

In his introductory text, *Studying Religion*, Gary Kessler discusses some of the difficulties scholars have had in defining what "religion" is or is not. For his purposes, Kessler chooses to identify more closely with William Alston's cluster definition, which states that the "essence" of religion cannot be precisely defined. Rather, religion can be described as generally having certain characteristics, which he goes on to list. However, he adds that there can be no set determination of which combination or how many of these characteristics precisely define what a religion is. Rather, all of the world's religions, in some fashion, possess at least some of these characteristics.⁴

However, while such a definition allows for intellectual broadness in considering religion, the term itself contains within it certain biases. The word *religion* comes from the Latin *religio* which in classical times indicated a "ritual observance or sacred, binding obligation."⁵ Some of this old usage can be found in the adverb *religiously*. According to Kessler, though, throughout the early Christian church and well into the Middle Ages, *religio* referred to "genuine sincere worship" and was used to distinguish the dedicated monastic orders from the lay believers.⁶ The use of the term *religion* to refer to belief systems such as Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism is only a more recent usage of the past few centuries. *Religion* doesn't even necessarily have corollaries within other cultures.

For instance, within Sanskrit, there is no actual word that can be translated as *religion*. The word most often translated as *religion* is *dharma*, but this is itself problematic because *dharma* is essentially untranslatable into English as it likewise has

3 William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 2.

4 Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction Through Cases* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 18-22.

5 Paden, *Religious Worlds*, 11.

6 Kessler, *Studying Religion*, 22.

no English corollary.⁷ *Dharma* means something like order, virtue or way of life. So while it is similar to a Western-Christian conception of what religion might be, applying *religion* to Hinduism still imposes some sort of cultural bias.

If this is true with the most general term *religion*, definitions become even more problematic when using the terms *evil* and *theodicy* to describe elements of Hinduism and Hindu theology. To be sure, there are definite corollaries between a Christian conception of evil and theodicy and a Hindu conception, but to use such terms without any sort of caveat would cause assumptions about Hindu theology that otherwise could be avoided.

What is Evil?

Like *religion*, evil is also a term that is somewhat difficult to define. One answer to what *evil* is has been defined simply in moral terms: that evil is the opposite or absence of good. However, this definition creates problems, one reason being because it does not distinguish between action and intent. If the Holocaust was carried out with the best of intentions, does that lessen the evil of its effect? If someone murders a grandmother whose grandson is then inspired to become a prosecutor and subsequently convicts hundreds of murderers, does that lessen the evil of the intent?⁸ In addition, this simple “opposite of good” definition also leaves out the idea of natural evil, or disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes which can disrupt and ruin innocent lives. Finally, is it evil that, around the world, millions of children die of starvation, that they are deprived of a basic human necessity by mere circumstance?⁹ These questions are still debated by academics and intellectuals; however, there is a general consensus that *evil* includes both natural and moral elements although there is not a clear definition of moral evil.¹⁰

Within Judeo-Christian theology, evil is perceived more specifically as a taint or impurity that defiles an otherwise perfect creation.¹¹ Christian theology even more explicitly goes on to argue that this defilement has emerged from the disobedience of Adam in the Garden of Eden as told in the third chapter of the book of Genesis in the Old Testament.¹² Adam’s disobedience created something called “original sin” which, as the first father of all humankind, Adam passed on to all of

7 John Cort (Lecture, REL-215 Hinduism, Denison University, January 28, 2014).

8 Manfred Kuehn, “How Banal Is Evil?” in *Deliver Us from Evil*, ed. M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 145.

9 Mark Larrimore, “Evil as Privation: Seeing Darkness, Hearing Silence,” in *Deliver Us from Evil*, ed. M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 151.

10 David Parkin, “Introduction,” in *The Anthropology of Evil*, ed. David Parkin (New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985), 15.

11 Donald Taylor, “Theological Thoughts about Evil,” in *The Anthropology of Evil*, ed. David Parkin (New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985), 32, 38.

12 *Ibid.*, 36-38.

his descendants, i.e. all of the world's population. So, in this sense, all of humankind has been defiled and exists in a state of impurity. This concept of "original sin" also helps answer the question of theodicy in Christianity, as it explains how evil entered into the world if it was created by an ultimately good God. However, this concept also means that, within Christianity, evil is inherently unnatural as it was introduced into creation by beings who were not the creator. Therefore, Christianity ultimately seeks the elimination of this evil, which defiles God's creation and is in contradiction to the creator God.

This Christian view of evil can create problems when examining evil in other contexts and religions. If evil is viewed as being against the natural order of the world, then an examination of evil would involve looking at how other religions cope with the existence of evil. This has two implications. First, such a comparative viewpoint will always perceive evil as being antagonistic towards people and a force that must be combated or otherwise countered. Second, such a viewpoint presupposes that good and evil must exist in a dichotomy or binary. Thus, if one is not already, one would seek to be on the side of good through salvation or redemption, both of which are prominent features of Christian theology. However, both of these implications lean towards a triumphal conclusion, an ultimate victory of good over evil, which can truly be said to be present within Hinduism.

What is Theodicy?

Christians, as far back as Augustine of Hippo in fourth century CE, have grappled with the problem of believing in a good God.¹³ The problem is not the fact that He is supposed to be good. The problem is that there is so much evil in the world, both moral and natural. Whether in the form of the Holocaust, the Rwandan Genocide, Hurricane Katrina, the 2011 Japanese tsunami and Fukushima disaster, or just the multitude of thefts, rapes and murders that occur every day, evil exists in the world. Even if one does not believe in a god or goddess at all, there are still the time-old questions of "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and "Why do good things happen to bad people?"¹⁴ Theodicy, literally "divine-justice,"¹⁵ is the attempt to answer these questions and, if one is religious, reconcile the belief in a good god with the existence of evil. While the term itself originates with the eighteenth century philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz, the actual questions surrounding theodicy have existed for hundreds, if not thousands of years.¹⁶

13 Bernstein, "The Abuse of Evil," 101.

14 Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 138.

15 From the Greek: *theos* "God" + *dike* "justice"

16 Bernstein, "The Abuse of Evil," 101.

Theodicy has been potent within a Western-Christian theological and/or philosophical context for a few reasons. First, Christian theology puts forth that the Christian God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and ultimately benevolent. These claims are difficult to reconcile with the observable evil in the world. Emerging from this contradiction is the second point: if there is such evil in the world, does this not disprove the existence of a benevolent God? Thus, the question of theodicy has not only centered on reconciling the existence of evil and God, but it also has evolved into a justification of whether God can even exist with such evil in the world.

However, it is important to note that these concerns of theodicy are somewhat peculiar to a system of belief which revolves around the particular theology of the Christian God. In addition, they also dichotomize the two values of *good* and *evil* as binary terms that are ultimately irreconcilable. As such, if one did not subscribe to a particular system of belief that involved a supreme god that was omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and ultimately benevolent or that dichotomized good against evil, one would have rather different theodical concerns. Hinduism is one such system of belief.¹⁷

Hinduism's Treatment of Evil and Theodicy

Unlike Christianity, Hinduism does not dichotomize good against evil. Hindu mythology depicts evil as being created alongside the rest of the universe. Thus, there is not the perspective that evil is unnatural and must be vanquished or conquered as there is in Christian theology, especially surrounding the figure of Jesus the Christ.¹⁸ Much of Hindu theology, in fact, focuses on the idea of maintaining balance between order and chaos, *dharma* and *adharma*.¹⁹ Even though Hinduism predominantly treats evil as a natural force of the universe, it still holds that people should strive to live their lives in a good way as opposed to an evil way. Even so, as I discuss below, the roles that gods play are somewhat ambiguous in their moral classification. Hindu mythology does not clearly define whether or not Hindu deities are purely good. In fact, the lack of a dichotomy between good and evil in Hinduism extends down to gods and demons in Hindu mythology. While gods are popularly depicted to be good and demons depicted to be evil, one's interpretations could vary depending on the specific myths one believes. However, Hinduism does offer us an answer to the question of theodicy in the form of karma.

17 Although what exactly Hinduism is and whether or not it is truly a system of belief according to Western conceptions of religion is debatable.

18 Taylor, "Theological Thoughts about Evil," 35-36.

19 *Adharma* is essentially the absence of *dharma* which itself is roughly translated as "order."

Simply put, karma is a combination of the principles of cause-and-effect with the South Asian belief in rebirth or reincarnation. It actually offers a fairly rational explanation for why both good and bad things happen to people, according to or in spite of their most recent actions. Even though karma answers theodical questions fairly well, it does so by omitting divinity from its consideration. As I discuss later, this causes problems for some Hindus, and while karma has been hailed by Western scholars as a wonderful doctrine for its explanatory logic, ironically, it is not held in the same high regard by all Hindus.

Karma as Theodicy

Karma has a curious place within Western philosophy. In his *The Sociology of Religion*, the famous sociologist, Max Weber, wrote sweeping adulations about karma, saying, "The most complete formal solution of the problem of theodicy is the special achievement of the Indian doctrine of *karma*."²⁰ In another text, Weber wrote, "[Karma] stands out by virtue of its consistency as well as by its extraordinary metaphysical achievement."²¹ Part of Weber's delight with the doctrine of karma is how it treats the question of theodicy and why bad things happen to good people. Peter Berger has said that karma is the most logical answer devised to the question of theodicy,²² so perhaps this is why karma has become popular outside of India and Hinduism.

The doctrine of karma basically states that the moral implications of one's past actions dictate what sort of events will happen to one's future self. As outlined by Bruce Reichenbach in *The Law of Karma*, karma involves five basic principles. First, every action which is "performed in achieving some result or which arises from desire and passion" has a consequence. In this sense, an action must not be disinterested and instead contain a motivation in order to "attract karma."²³ Second, every moral action has a good or bad consequence depending on whether it is right or wrong. Third, consequences arise immediately in this life, in the next life or at some time in the distant future. Fourth, karmic effects can be cumulative, and fifth, humans experience rebirth. This final principle is perhaps the most crucial for the proper functioning of karma because it explains why a murderer may continue to experience good things and why a young child might develop cancer when he or she has clearly not done some great wrong in this lifetime to deserve such a disease.

20 Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 145.

21 Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, trans. & ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 359.

22 Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

23 Bruce R. Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Study* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 13-22.

In addition to describing the fundamentals of the doctrine of karma, I must make two additional points. The first is that, as noted previously, “doctrine” is a very slippery word. While most scholarly articles and texts refer to the *theory* or *doctrine* of karma, as with many terms, *theory* and *doctrine* come with specific academic baggage. Foremost is the idea that a theory or a doctrine must have been rigorously formulated or systematized. Regarding karma, this is absolutely not the case. This is not to say that karma lacks rigor or systematization, but that it should not be treated as a scientific theory that has been carefully designed and tested. In fact, this is one of the theoretical problems Reichenbach discusses in his text. Because karma relies on the idea of rebirth and reincarnation, karma is “a convenient fiction.”²⁴ One rarely has memory of why karma is affecting him or herself. Even if plausible reasons for karmic effects could be conceived of, they could never be verified or falsified (falsifiability is key to the Scientific Method). In addition, karma is not an empirical answer to the question of theodicy; rather it is a rationalization which, while satisfactory for many, is still just another “interpretation of human experience.”²⁵

Part of this lack of memory poses another problem to philosopher Whitley Kaufman, who writes that if karma exists, it is an immoral and unjust solution to theodicy. If one suffers karmic events due to actions of a past life, there can be no idea of why one is being punished or rewarded, which he claims is central to justice.²⁶ Kaufman goes on to describe five other problems he specifically finds with the doctrine of karma including that of verifiability. While Kaufman does bring up interesting points, karma is actually not a systematic answer to the question of theodicy. More importantly, unlike in Christianity, within Hinduism there does not exist a theodical dilemma of how to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with the belief in an all-powerful, benevolent God. Therefore, unlike Christian theological treatments of theodicy, karma only seeks to explain the existence of evil and suffering.²⁷ Karma is not a divine method of dispensing just punishment and reward. Rather, it is an explanation of why both good and bad things happen to people. In its most simplified form, karma is a law of cause-and-effect. However, karma does extend beyond this simplification.

According to many Hindu sacred texts, including the Upanishads, humans are bound to a cycle of rebirth called *samsara*. Ultimately, *samsara* is a kind of

24 Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1973, 76. Quoted by Bruce R. Reichenbach in *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Study* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 38.

25 Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma*, 38.

26 Whitley R. P. Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil,” in *Philosophy East & West* 55, (January 2005): 19-20.

27 Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis, “Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman,” in *Philosophy East & West* 57, (October 2007): 534.

suffering because one is continually forced to re-experience birth, life and death as well as all of the pain that is associated with life. This cycle of rebirth is perpetuated by karma.²⁸ The reasoning behind this argument is actually related to Sir Isaac Newton's law of motion: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. As a human accumulates karmic action or response through motivated moral actions, these accumulations must inevitably be released in that person's present or future lives. In this sense, karmic response keeps a person's soul attached to the person's physicality so that the accumulated karma can ultimately be dispersed. Since karma keeps people attached to this world through *samsara*, karma is actually undesirable since it perpetuates suffering.

As stated previously, the first principle of karma involves moral action that is motivated by desire and passion. Therefore, if one's actions are instead dispassionate and not motivated by a desire for effect, then one can escape the cycle of *samsara* through attaining salvation or *moksha*. If one ceases to accumulate karma, then there will no longer be karmic action holding him or her to this world and that person will thus attain release. As the *Katha Upanishad* states, "when a man has understanding, is mindful and always pure; He does reach that final step, from which he is not reborn again."²⁹

In short, while karma provides an answer to why good and bad things happen, it is not at all an answer to theodicy as more traditionally defined by Christian theology. The role of divinity in allowing evil to happen is completely outside the scope of karma. More importantly, though, karma does not need to address what the role of divinity in allowing evil is because, in Hinduism, the theological conundrum of a good god allowing evil to exist is simply not relevant as it is in Christianity. So even though karma does address theological concerns of evil and suffering, they are not directly tied into theistic concerns.

Problems with Karma

However, within Hinduism, karma possesses certain problems of its own. First, it undermines the authority of deities. If karma ultimately dictates what happens to individuals who have incurred a karmic burden, this means that gods and goddesses can never be omnipotent and are ultimately subservient to the power of karma. This would make karma the supreme power in the universe and not Vishnu or Shiva as many Hindus believe. According to Wendy O'Flaherty, the implication of this is that, for those Hindus who believe in such supreme deities, karma is actu-

28 Akiti Glory Alamu, "The Concept of Karma in Hinduism and Christianity: an Appraisal," in *Asia Journal Of Theology* 23, (2009): 249-52.

29 *Upanishads*, trans. Patrick Olivelle, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), *Katha Upanishad* 3.8.

ally “relatively unimportant and can be overcome by devotion.”³⁰ This is actually a core aspect of Vaishnavite and Shaivite theology, that through proper devotion to one’s respective god, one can receive salvation and grace. Despite the high regard in which Western philosophers, such as Max Weber, might hold karma, karma is not readily accepted by a majority of Indians and Hindus.

Lawrence Babb describes how in Tamil Nadu, the southernmost Indian state, there are two explanations for misfortune. The first involves karma. The second involves a belief called *headwriting*, which basically says that one’s destiny is written on one’s forehead six days after birth. Depending on the desire of the individual, whether or not one wants to take responsibility for moral actions or assume, fatalistically, that such deeds were inevitable, one could conceivably choose between either karma or headwriting to explain events and actions.³¹

Finally, some scholars have raised the problem of free will and how karma figures into free will. Johannes Bronkhorst discusses how through the accumulation of spiritual power, Brahmin priests were capable of inflicting curses on people.³² However, if a priest inflicts a curse on an individual, is it because of karma or because that priest chose to curse that individual? If a person is destined to suffer karmic consequences based on past deeds, are inflictors of karmic consequences compelled by karma or are they in control of their actions?³³ Can bestowing blessings or inflicting harm be justified through the doctrine of karma?

The general consensus appears to disagree. Even if a terrorist decides that killing others is justified because, if he succeeds, he will be meting out karmic retribution, he has no way of knowing that his actions are karmically ordained.³⁴ Moreover, karma does not say that every event or action is explained by karmic retribution. Rather, it is only every action done with desire that incurs a karmic debt.³⁵ In addition, since karmic debt is cumulative, if one has overall incurred a negative karmic debt, it is possible to reverse that trend through action with positive karmic consequences.³⁶ Therefore, karma ultimately cannot be applied fatalistically because it does not actually claim to be responsible for every event.

30 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 14-15.

31 Lawrence A. Babb, “Destiny and Responsibility: Karma in Popular Hinduism,” in *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, ed. Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 172.

32 Johannes Bronkhorst, *Karma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 98-100.

33 Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil,” 24-26.

34 Chadha and Trakakis, “Karma and the Problem of Evil,” 546-47.

35 Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma*, 26.

36 *Ibid.*, 52-53.

Evil and Theodicy in Hindu Mythology

Unlike the dichotomy of good and evil in Christian theology, Hinduism does not contain a straightforward separation between the two. For instance, there are beings called *suras* and *asuras* in Hinduism which are roughly analogous to the concepts of angels and demons within an Abrahamic concept.³⁷ However, while *suras* can generally be equated with angels on the side of the gods and *asuras* can generally be equated with demons in opposition to the gods, there is not necessarily a clear distinction of virtue between the two. This is because, according to Hindu creation myths, the creator, Brahma or Prajapati, created both good and evil.³⁸

An explanation for this is that the creator felt it was necessary for the universe to contain both good and evil in order to be complete. Another explanation says that the creator inadvertently created evil and that he was unable to undo his bringing evil into the world. Brahma is often considered a part of the Hindu trinity of primary deities, creator, preserver, destroyer,³⁹ yet he only has one major temple while the other two gods have thousands.⁴⁰ Some scholars suggest this may be because other gods offer salvation from evil while Brahma created it.

Another problem with dichotomizing good and evil in Hindu theology is that it is unclear which beings represent which. According to some Hindu legends, the difference between Hindu gods and demons is that the demons are aware of the proper order of the world whereas the gods are not. Unlike the gods, the demons are enlightened beings and, if they behave antagonistically towards humans, it is because they are aware of what is best for the universe as a whole, not just what is best for humans. However, the demons, while universally benevolent, are powerless compared to the gods who are wicked.⁴¹ Because the gods have the greater strength, they subjugate the demons and selfishly establish themselves as the beings for humans to worship. Other texts describe the relationship between gods and demons as evolving out of the jealousy of the gods. The gods desire humans to ultimately be good, but in order for people to have an incentive to be good, there must be evil in the universe which pushes humankind towards the gods. Therefore, the reason demons or evil continues to exist within the universe is because the gods permit it.⁴²

Since even the good or evil of the gods themselves is ambiguous, one might be tempted to conclude that Hindu gods are not benevolent and that Hindus wor-

37 Theodore Gabriel, "The Sura-Asura Theme in Hinduism," in *Angels and Demons: Perspectives and Practice in Diverse Religious Traditions*, ed. Peter G. Riddell and Beverly Smith Riddell (Hampshire, England: Ashford Colour Press Ltd, 2007), 126.

38 O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, 60.

39 Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva

40 Cort, John, (Lecture, REL-215 Hinduism, Denison University, April 3, 2014).

41 O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, 63.

42 *Ibid.*, 87.

ship out of fear of divine retribution. However, this is not the case. As Wendy O'Flaherty points out, while Hindu gods may want humankind to worship them, it is usually out of a desire for the salvation of mankind that they want worship.⁴³ The gods might even go so far as to appear in forms of evil to bring humanity closer to salvation. According to O'Flaherty, it is this action of the gods which comprises another division of Hindu mythology: devotional mythology or *bhakti*.⁴⁴ The following story of the Pine Forest Sages is an example of how such devotional myths make use of evil.

In a cave in a pine forest, there was a group of men who are either heretics themselves or Brahmin priests (some texts even specify that they are Buddhists). Whoever the men are, the story goes to say that they have unabsolved sins. The god Shiva appears before them in the form of a heretic known as a Kapalika.⁴⁵ Shiva comes into the cave and begs for alms with a bowl made out of a human skull, an extreme example of an impure object. The priests in the cave are repulsed by this figure, not recognizing Shiva, and, depending on the source, they beat him or kill him. However, the priests ultimately end up recognizing that this impure figure is Shiva who behaves mercifully and, while his precise action varies according to the text, then offers them a blessing: if they become devoted to him and worship him, he will absolve their sins (which are unnamed) and grant them release or salvation, also known as *moksha*.⁴⁶

The story of the Pine Forest Sages provides a counterpoint to the previous examples of ambiguous virtue amongst the Hindu gods. It also provides an alternative explanation to why the gods allow evil to exist in the world. In orthodox Hinduism, by not destroying all the demons, the gods allow evil to persist because "dharma is only...valuable, when adharma also exists to balance and to contrast with it."⁴⁷ Within the story of the Pine Forest Sages, *bhakti* mythology provides an alternative explanation for why there is evil. Because the gods want to provide *moksha* to humankind, they actually become evil to encourage people to new levels of devotion through which they can obtain salvation.

These two different interpretations of evil in Hindu mythology are different from each other and allow for very different interpretations of Hindu gods. However, according to O'Flaherty, this is perfectly acceptable. Hinduism is a religion which has developed without one single driving doctrine motivating it. For in-

43 Ibid., 378.

44 Ibid., 82-83.

45 Kapalikas are Hindus who worship Shiva with offerings of meat, blood and sexual fluids, all otherwise impure substances to orthodox Hindus. This is because Shiva himself once appeared in this form before the Pine-Forest Sages, shrouded in ritual impurity. See O'Flaherty 160-64 and 285.

46 O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, 316-17.

47 Ibid., 378.

stance, there are differing beliefs as to who is the Supreme Lord of the universe: Vaishnavas believe it's Vishnu, Shaivas believe it's Shiva and Shaktas believe it's Devi. Neither of these sects is technically wrong in their belief in a different Supreme Lord. All of these beliefs act alongside each other and each sect is true and valid for different people. In the concluding paragraph of *Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, O'Flaherty writes, "Hindu mythology superimposes on older views certain conflicting later views and balances the two... [T]hese views together provide a working solution to the problem of evil."⁴⁸ Therefore, in examining the question of theodicy within Hinduism and how it treats evil, while there appears to be multiple answers, all could be true, in some fashion, depending on the specific context.

Conclusion

For hundreds of years, philosophers, scholars and theologians have wrestled with questions of theodicy: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and "Why do good things happen to bad people?" Within the study of theology, these questions also include questions about the role of divine beings, specifically, "If there is a benevolent god, why does he/she/it allow for the existence of evil and suffering?" Hinduism treats these questions in unique ways.

First, it provides an answer to the first two questions with the doctrine of karma. Through a combination of the principle of cause-and-effect and the unique, South Asian conception of rebirth and reincarnation, karma gives an explanation for why both good and bad things befall people. Second, it possesses a unique mythology which contains at least two distinct explanations for why gods would allow evil to exist in the world.

While a religious scholar coming from a Christian background might be seeking to find a specific Hindu answer to theodicy and how it treats evil, the reality is that, within Hinduism, there rarely is a single, universal answer to any given question. For instance, while karma is a very rational answer to theodicy, if one is a believer of *bhakti* mythology, then he or she would probably relegate the importance of karma in comparison to the benevolence and power of his or her Supreme Lord or Lady. Unlike Christianity, within Hindu theology, there are no absolute universals. Therefore, in order to better understand how Hinduism treats evil and theodicy, one must examine multiple perspectives and the contexts in which they are applicable.

48 Ibid., 379.

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Seeing and Being Seen at the Margins: Insight into God from the Wilderness

Luke Hillier

**Introduction: “*She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar.*”
(Gen. 16:1)**

Throughout the history of the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, Hagar has been a character in the biblical story who has often gone unnoticed and overlooked. Her story, which takes place only in the sixteenth and twenty-first chapters of Genesis, is one that easily falls into obscurity, overshadowed by the ongoing narrative of Abraham and Sarah which is emphasized by the narrator and the faith traditions at large. In fact, the majority of the commentary regarding the account, which deals with the decision to use Hagar as a surrogate mother in order to ensure that Yahweh’s promise to Abraham is fulfilled, does not even take Hagar’s perspective into consideration, focusing instead on what the experience meant for Abraham and Sarah and what the theological implications of it are.

In more recent scholarship, particularly from a feminist/womanist perspective, the character of Hagar and her plight described in Genesis has received previously unexplored interest. This is due partly to the emblematic and archetypal role that Hagar has and the increasing prevalence of modern readers who are able to see their own experience reflected in her’s. Phyllis Trible notes:

As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose identity shrinks in service to others.¹

However, for many of these scholars, the evaluation of Hagar’s story is decidedly negative and disparaging—although Hagar is celebrated, the other charac-

¹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 26.

ters, including Yahweh, are condemned. When God is interpreted to be on the side of Sarah and Abraham, against Hagar, the account is read as a sanctioning of patriarchal injustice against women and a sacred legitimization of the mistreatment of those most marginalized and oppressed. When analysis of the passage is done from a modern perspective, this is of course a valid and understandable view, but for those within the Jewish or Christian tradition, it is one that yields little hope for Hagar or anyone else who finds themselves at the margins of life. Fortunately, this is not the only conclusion that can be made.

It is difficult to avoid reading our own perspective into the book of Genesis, which is a representation not of contemporary American culture but of ancient Israelite norms. However, when the text is approached from the context in which it was written, an understanding considerably more aligned with the authorial intent and original meaning is made possible. For this reason, it is beneficial to account for significant cultural disparities when reading Hagar's story, if only because it allows for conclusions to be made that reflect the author's intent which may otherwise be obscured through a modern lens. That is, of course, not to say that there is no ability for this ancient text to connect with the experience of the modern reader, but rather to argue that instead of projecting our own interpretations onto the text, we should allow it to speak into us. In doing so, there is the potential to find insight, both personal and theological, which is otherwise beyond our reach.

Instead of ignoring Hagar's experience entirely or assessing it through our modern viewpoint and immediately drawing conclusions reflective of contemporary understandings, I argue for a reading of Genesis 16 that strives to interpret the story in correlation with the world from which it was written. In doing so, readers will no doubt still find Hagar's treatment deplorable and her position at the end of the chapter dangerous. However, this can no longer be seen as treatment passively authorized by God, as a closer analysis of the interactions between Hagar and Yahweh and of the way in which the narrator describes Hagar will reveal. Instead, one can conclude that it is precisely at the outskirts where Hagar experiences God most intimately and finds herself transformed and blessed. Thus, a literary and culturally contextual reading of Genesis 16 that exposes the oppression of Hagar through the denial of her agency, the erasure of her identity, and ultimately the threat to her life will allow for an understanding of the encounter between her and Yahweh, yielding the theological insight that it is at the margins where one is most clearly seen and most capable of seeing God.

Agency Denied: “Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” (Gen. 16:2)

To modern readers, one of the most problematic elements of Hagar’s experience is the way that her autonomous agency is rejected by Sarah and Abraham (at this point, Sarai and Abram), those who have power over her as her masters. Genesis 16 takes place years after Abraham is promised by Yahweh to become the father of a great nation (Gen. 12:2), and yet we are told that he and Sarah have been unable to conceive even one child together. Sarah appears to assume that this is due to her barrenness, and she therefore tells Abraham to try to impregnate her Egyptian slave, Hagar.

A contemporary perception would see even this, the suggestion to allow for polygamy or at least surrogacy, as a morally questionable event in the narrative; however, to ancient Israelite readers, this would not have been the case. Because of the critical need for children, particularly sons, in order for families to carry on, the use of a concubine serving as a surrogate for barren wives was not seen as scandalous, but functional, and it was commonplace for families wealthy enough to own female slaves who could fulfill the role.² For this reason, Sarah’s suggestion should not be seen as anything beyond the realm of culturally accepted practices at the time, and the potential arguments regarding the extreme measures taken by using a surrogate are rendered inappropriate here.

Returning then to the point regarding the rejection of Hagar’s agency in this process, it is obvious that Sarah gives no consideration to the wishes of her servant, therefore hindering her ability to play any active role in the situation. Unfortunately, this too is not necessarily out of line for ancient Israelite culture, a point Robert Alter makes when he says, “. . . Hagar, to put it brutally, is a piece of property. . . . the two Hebrew words for her, *Shifhah* and *Amah*, both mean ‘a slave woman.’ In my translation, I decided to call it ‘slave girl’ to make it as demeaning as possible because, face it, she’s a piece of human property, owned by Abraham and apparently acquired in Egypt.”³ Perhaps somewhat brutally, his interpretation reveals that the dehumanization of those considered slaves was a harsh reality and that for Sarah to take Hagar’s desires into account before offering her to Abraham would be nearly unthinkable, since the “slave girl” would be seen as an object, not an equal. Furthermore, even if Hagar had been recognized as an equal by Sarah, that would have been unlikely to change much, as

2 John Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” in *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 64.

3 Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 188.

all women, regardless of their freedom, were given very little agency over their marriages and the inevitable sexual experiences necessary to carry on the family that followed.⁴

Although a reading of Hagar's treatment within the ancient Israelite context from which it was written softens many of the modern conclusions regarding the severity of her experience, that in no way suggests that she avoided oppression altogether. In fact, even after doing significant research on the reality of life in ancient Israel, Alicia Suskin Ostriker's midrash reimagining of the Genesis account still capitalizes on the devastation Hagar would have felt at the way in which her agency was rejected by Sarah.⁵ Despite our inability to assess with perfect accuracy the effects that this treatment would have had on Hagar, it goes without saying that the way in which her body was treated like an object and her human agency denied in the process would do damage to whatever internal sense of self she had been able to maintain. Therefore, despite the fact that, within her culture, the circumstances are significantly less unforgivable than they appear today, the denial of Hagar's agency should still be considered and condemned as a violation that will eventually serve as a catalyst for her encounter with God. Unfortunately, this is not the only way in which she was subjugated—in the Genesis 16 account we also see evidence of the erasure of her identity.

Identity Erased: "I gave my servant to your embrace . . ." (Gen. 16:5)

Another element of Hagar's experience that can easily be interpreted as oppressive to the character is the holistic erasure of her identity. The text introduces her as an Egyptian servant, implying that in order to live with Abraham and Sarah, she has been uprooted from her homeland and effectively severed from all ties to her former life prior to becoming their slave. Furthermore, a careful reading of Genesis 16 shows that whenever Hagar is described by Sarah or Abraham, her name is never used.⁶ In verses 2 and 5, Sarah refers to her only as "my servant" and in verse 6 Abraham does the same, calling her "your servant" when responding to Sarah. The possessive pronouns of "my" and "your" are indicative of the previously noted objectivation of Hagar, a point commented on by Miguel De La Torre when he notes, "Hence, Sarai accomplishes what God prevents through the object, not the person, of Hagar."⁷

4 Blenkinsopp, 59.

5 Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 73.

6 Sharon Pace Jeanson, *The Women of Genesis* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 19.

7 Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible)* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 172.

Returning to the context from which Genesis 16 was written may once again illuminate the way that original readers may have reacted to this treatment. During this period, women as a whole were considered to be property of the family's patriarch, and enslaved women were indeed expected to also serve under the authority of the wives, meaning that Hagar's experience was not unique in that regard.⁸ This cultural norm is likely to be audacious to the modern reader; however, it is critical to account for the ways in which a person conceptualized their identity then compared to now. William Countryman explains, "The value of each individual—so fundamental to modern democracy—was inconceivable in [an ancient Israelite] context. In its place stood the value of the family, which was the basic social unit."⁹

On one level, the ancient Israelite perspective that understands the family, not the individual, to be the building block of society makes Hagar's plight all the more devastating. Torn away from her family and reinserted into one that fails to reflect her own cultural customs and traditions, Hagar is inevitably forced to abandon central components of her original identity with little promise of it paying off considering her low-status as a slave in her new family unit. However, at another level, it potentially suggests that the erasure of her identity as understood by the refusal of both Sarah and Abraham to use her name is less problematic than the contemporary reader would expect. While at some level this is likely the case—without the expectation of being seen as an individual, Hagar would be less affected by that reality—the text possibly suggests that the objectification she faced was excessive and unjust. Although Sarah too would have been considered the property of Abraham, he uses her name multiple times throughout Genesis. However, perhaps more revealing than that is the intentionality on the part of the narrator to use Hagar's name each of the five times she is described outside of Abraham and Sarah's dialogue; this consistent and explicit use of Hagar's name stands in sharp contrast with Abraham and Sarah's total refusal to say it. Furthermore, it can also be noted that the narrator does at one point in the chapter refer to Sarah, but never Hagar, only by her title, saying "her mistress" in verse 4. In doing so, the narrator is essentially reversing the treatment Hagar receives from her masters, presenting Sarah only through a dehumanized title and, through the use of the possessive pronoun "her," acknowledging her identity only in relation to Hagar's dynamic with her. Thus, even when taking context into account, readers can argue that the way in which Hagar's identity was erased by Sarah and Abraham had the

8 L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, Revised Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 148-149.

9 *Ibid.*, 146.

potential to be deeply corrosive to her well-being and was another piece of the foundation that eventually led to her desperate escape, which also acts as her final and most critical experience of marginalization.

**Life Threatened: “Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.”
(Gen. 16:6)**

As the narrative progresses, the oppression that Hagar faces escalates, going beyond dehumanizing treatment to physical abuse until she finally finds herself at the very margins of existence, fleeing into the dangers of the wilderness. Following Abraham’s use of Hagar as a concubine in accordance with Sarah’s suggestion, we are told that Hagar does in fact conceive and begin to act differently towards her mistress because of this, inciting a rage that eventually results in Sarah acting violently against Hagar which prompts her to flee.

Current feminist/womanist critiques of this portion of the text take issue with what they feel is a negative portrayal of Hagar that ultimately places blame on her for the dangers she faces in the wilderness, and many English translations allow for such a reading. For example, the ESV Bible, reads, “And when [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress,” which is considerably strong language often read as a vilification of the previously victimized character that justifies her later abuse (Gen 16:4). Although some appreciate this reading, such as Bharti Mukherjee who comments, “I hope that Hagar smirked. . . . The smirk is the only way of dissenting that is allowed for a woman from a [disempowered position],” many commentators feel that translations like this are far too severe.¹⁰ Bill Moyers poses the alternative of “Sarah was lowered in her esteem,” which is a significantly less drastic interpretation that suggests that Hagar was in some way disappointed in Sarah.¹¹ This understanding would yield insight on the damage done to Hagar through Sarah’s rejection of her agency in the surrogacy process, and it is what informs Ostriker’s midrash reimagining that emphasizes the pain and betrayal Hagar feels after being used by Sarah.¹² Alternatively, one could see Moyers’ translation as an indication that Hagar, after becoming pregnant with Abraham’s child, simply saw herself as more of an equal to Sarah than before, a view corroborated by Claus Westermann’s commentary: “She looks down on her—the translation ‘despised’ would be too strong—because a woman’s status rises when she becomes pregnant. Natural maternal pride now finds expression,

¹⁰ Moyers, 194.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ostriker, 73.

and Sarah is offended."¹³ Regardless of the specific implication that Hagar's look would express, the consensus still argues that the narrator in no way depicted her as beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior, which nullifies any claims that the narrative framing is used to justify Sarah's abuse. In fact, a closer look at the text and the cultural context reveals that Hagar is actually framed in a way that would have inspired sympathy from readers and indignation on her behalf.

Looking again at what is possibly missed in translation, Burton Visotzky notes that the Hebrew term used in verse 6 to describe Sarah "dealing harshly" with Hagar is the exact same one chosen to describe the oppression that the Hebrew slaves endure at the hand of the Egyptian Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus.¹⁴ In this way, a dual set of similarities is made between Sarah and Pharaoh as oppressors and Hagar and the Hebrew slaves as the oppressed, and it is unlikely that ancient Israelite readers would find themselves siding with the former pair in that moment. Furthermore, bearing in mind what was customary regarding the treatment of concubines at the time, Sarah's abuse appears to be completely out of line, as Perdue notes:

Concubinage involved a female slave, either foreign or Hebrew, who was owned by a household and bore for it children to add to the labor pool . . . She was something of a second class wife of one of the males in the family. . . . A concubine could assume the role of a surrogate mother for the childless wife. She was to be supported by the household and was even allowed to rest on the Sabbath.¹⁵

Thus, the cultural norms would have called for an increase in status and privilege for Hagar now that she was pregnant with the child of the household patriarch, in no way authorizing the violent abuse she received instead. In this way, Sarah's response is seen to be an expression of excessive and uncalled for jealousy incited by a spitefulness and insecurity towards Hagar, which certainly does not paint the mistress in a positive light.¹⁶

After having her agency denied in the surrogacy process and her identity erased through the separation from her family and homeland as well as experiencing ongoing objectification from Sarah and Abraham, this unjust and culturally unacceptable violence against her becomes the final catalyst that makes Hagar desperate enough to escape. Westermann elaborates:

13 Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 124.

14 Moyers, 191.

15 Leo G. Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish Family," in *Families in Ancient Israel* by Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 189.

16 Countryman, 149.

The story narrates the origin of emancipation. Abraham had said to Sarah: “your maidservant is in your hand,” where “hand” is the equivalent of power. The word “emancipation” means *e manu capere*, where *manus* is likewise power. The will to be liberated and the acceptance of danger to one’s life which goes with it is always part of emancipation or the like. It is precisely this that is reported of Hagar. She cannot and will not endure such treatment from Sarah; she will be liberated from her, and she sees the only possibility of liberation in flight, even though it endangers her life and that of her unborn child.¹⁷

Delores Williams, a womanist scholar who is notably critical of this narrative, is in agreement with that interpretation, stating, “[By fleeing] Hagar becomes the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures.”¹⁸ However, her endorsement of the account essentially ends there, and she along with many others find fault in the fact that by liberating herself, Hagar is only catapulted into the dangers of the desert wilderness, once again finding her life threatened there. While this straightforward reading does seem quite bleak and without hope, that is unlikely to be the interpretation that the author intended to inspire. Instead, readers would have been left with the notion that the previous treatment that Hagar has suffered, while inexcusable, was ultimately worthwhile, for it is precisely at the margins that she is seen by God and blessed tremendously because of the encounter.

Seen by God: “And he said to her, ‘Hagar . . . ’” (Gen. 16:8)

It is here in the desert wilderness that Hagar is now approached by God. Although many scholars, as we will see, appreciate this moment between the two, others have found fault in three elements of their interaction in particular. One is the fact that most translations state that an “angel” or “messenger” of the Lord is the one who finds her in verse 7, and it is only later, if at all, that Yahweh reveals himself to her, seeing it as a second-rate treatment that fails to truly acknowledge her. Another feature that receives criticism is the nature of the promise that Hagar receives from the Divine, in that it explicitly revolves around the son she carries in her womb rather than her as an individual. The third portion most often criticized is the command Hagar receives to “Return to your mistress and submit to her” in verse 9. If one takes a fresh look at the text through the perspective of an ancient Israelite, however, these problematic components would not be seen as such.

¹⁷ Westermann, *Genesis*, 241-242.

¹⁸ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Maryknoll, 1993), 19.

Dealing first with the possibility that Hagar was not encountered by Yahweh himself but only an angel acting as an intermediary between the two, it must be noted that this way of writing about God—first describing him as an “angel” only to later reveal that it is Yahweh himself, as is done in verse 13 of this chapter—is a frequent technique seen throughout the Hebrew texts and should not allow for assumptions that belittle the encounter.¹⁹ Furthermore, the fact that Hagar is approached at all is a moment that is rare and revelatory. Claus Westermann comments that “The salutation in Genesis 16:8 has a special significance for the narrative. It is found only in narratives involving a small circle of characters. In it contact is made and an existing sense of solidarity is preserved; rejection of this salutation means rejection of this solidarity. In the desert, far from human habitation, this meaning is especially relevant.”²⁰ Echoing the sentiment of the final sentence, Walter Brueggemann’s reading of Hagar’s escape into the wilderness sees it as essentially suicidal. He notes, “[Verse 16:7] is a curious break in the story. It shows that all parties—Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael—would have left well enough alone. All parties except God! It is God who reopens the issue. The positive implication is that God is turned toward the outsider.”²¹ His understanding would clearly suggest that, without divine intervention, the typical expectations would have been fulfilled, which would have meant the death of Hagar travelling across the desert wilderness alone, and thus God’s encounter with her saves her life.

Turning to the complaint regarding the centrality of Ishmael, her son, rather than Hagar herself as the primary focus of the blessing she receives, we should again note that the family and not the individual was the basic social unit. Therefore, a blessing to Hagar’s firstborn son was a blessing upon her directly.²² Jo Ann Hackett, however, notes that the fact that Hagar, a woman, was receiving a divine promise that recognizes her future legacy at all would have been read by ancient Israelite readers as incredibly significant and radical, saying:

[God] then aggrandizes her by promising that *her* descendants will be “greatly multiplied,” that they will be innumerable. This is said in language typical in the Genesis narrative of what is usually called “the promise of the patriarchs,” a divine promise of descendants and often land. The surprising thing here, however, is that the promise is made to a woman. This is the only case in Genesis where this typical J-writer

19 Jo Ann Hackett, “Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day, 12-27 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 15.

20 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 125.

21 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 152.

22 Countryman, 146.

promise is given to a woman rather than to a patriarch, and so we sit up and take notice.²³

In fact, R. H. Jarrell has dealt extensively with the various interactions between Yahweh and mothers that follow and mirror this one with Hagar, and he concludes, “Yahweh does not make covenants with women; Yahweh instead makes contractual relationships that are expressed in the literary form known as the birth narrative.”²⁴ With this understanding, the promise that Hagar receives is certainly nothing to balk at, as it is seen to be a correlate with the one that Abraham himself receives from God.

Thirdly, when considering the modern critique of Yahweh’s command that Hagar returns to Sarah as her slave, it is logical to be frustrated and even appalled by God, but the narrative itself is not framed to inspire such a reaction. One commentator notes that returning was the only way to ensure that Hagar could have and raise Ishmael, as the harsh environment of the desert wilderness was unlikely to allow for that.²⁵ Although contemporary readers would be likely to ask why God could not have performed the impossible by aiding her in the process, it is crucial to note that the writers of the Hebrew text lacked the Greek conceptualization of God as omnipotent in which such a question is rooted, instead presenting him to be a significantly more limited character within the stories. Furthermore, the narrative in no way suggests that this command to Hagar somehow invalidates her struggle for liberation or serves as a punishment from God, as it precedes the promise to follow. Instead, it seems as though Hagar’s encounter with Yahweh is what allows her to return, as noted by Burton Visotzky who says, “Having been physically abused, she is told by an angel to go back and endure some more. Now, ‘go back and endure’ is not a message anyone likes to hear. But through her endurance, she merits blessing and becomes someone who speaks with God. She is transformed.”²⁶ When considering the catalysts behind this transformation, the promise she receives is an obvious cornerstone, as it would provide a faith and hope previously unreachable for Hagar. However, even before Hagar receives the command to return to Sarah, the narrative includes two details that were likely to be transformative, both of which are found in verse 8, the first sentence that Yahweh says to her.

The first detail to take note of is the very first word God says to Hagar, which is her name. After already exposing the intentional avoidance of the use of her

23 Hackett, 15.

24 R. H. Jarrell, “The Birth Narrative as Female Counterpart to Covenant,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 97 (2002): 4.

25 Jeansonne, 37.

26 Moyers, 210.

name by Sarah and Abraham compared to the consistent use of it by the narrator, it should be clear that for Yahweh to acknowledge her by her name is a significant moment, as it marks the first time that readers see it spoken aloud to her. Beyond that, Gerald Janzen's analysis of the text suggests that the question "Where have you come from?" also has significant meaning to Hagar. The obvious answer is that she is fleeing from her mistress, and this is the response that Hagar gives. However, Janzen comments, "Yet before she was a slave to these Hebrews, she was a woman of Egypt. That is where she originally is 'from.' And the angel does address her by her name 'Hagar,' thereby touching who she most deeply is."²⁷ In this way, Yahweh has reaffirmed two critical elements of Hagar's identity that have long been erased by Abraham and Sarah: her name and her place of origin, the latter of which seems to be of particular importance to Hagar as she chooses an Egyptian woman for her son to marry when she is later given that power.²⁸ Thus, the multiple ways in which Yahweh sees and blesses Hagar in this passage, including turning himself towards her to save her life, entering into a relationship with her that mirrors the covenant he made with Abraham, and acknowledging her unique identity prior to her enslavement all serve to transform her in the wilderness in a way that prepares her for what follows, as noted by Thomas Dozerman who says, "In Genesis 16 the wilderness takes on significance as a place of temporary escape, transformation, and rite of passage for a hero."²⁹ Lastly, we can see that although modern readers may take issue with her treatment here, Hagar's own response reveals only gratitude and praise: "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." (Gen. 16:13). What is of interest for the final point, however, is her comment just before that, in which Hagar makes it known that she has not only been seen by God, but has also seen him.

Seeing God: "You are a God of seeing." (Gen. 16:13)

While some may consider the climax of this narrative to be verses 11 and 12, in which Hagar receives the blessing of divine promise from God, another reading suggests that the truly groundbreaking moment takes place afterwards, in verse 13 when Hagar responds. Although she does express appreciation and awe for Yahweh as he sees and looks after her, Hagar also performs something significantly more radical by bestowing upon Yahweh a new name. The reality of this is somewhat lost in the English translation written in the title, but in the Hebrew text

27 Gerald J. Janzen, "Hagar in Paul's Eyes and in the Eyes of Yahweh (Genesis 16): A Study in Horizons," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13, no. 1 (1991): 8.

28 Jeansonne, 52.

29 Thomas B. Dozerman, "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 32.

it is clear that she refers to God using a title never given to him before: “El Roi,” which is translated as “God who sees.”³⁰ However, what is also lost to the modern reader is the weight of this action, and by analyzing the fact that Hagar names God at all as well as the name she chooses for him, we can yield insight into the meaning of this moment.

For readers in an ancient Israelite context, the significance of Hagar naming God would have been monumental, as the act of naming was such a meaningful experience particularly within the Israelite’s religious tradition. Michal Shekel shares:

In these early chapters of the Torah, the act of naming is highly significant. It is both empowering and embracing. . . . God names the children of Sarah and Hagar. God will also rename adult individuals, beginning with Abram and Sarai. From the very beginning, humans name animals and humans name each other. Yet here, for the first and only time in a Divine encounter, a human, a woman, names God.³¹

Thus, within its context the instance of Hagar naming God, an action that Torre notes “only a superior” would perform for those “lower in status” than themselves, would appear controversial and even audacious.³² In the narrative, however, there is no indication that this decision was considered to be problematic. In fact, Shekel argues that the inclusion of Hagar naming God is an indication of the narrative favoring her character in comparison to others, saying, “Abram has never done this, nor has anyone else. Throughout the early chapters of the Torah, Abram needs signs to substantiate his covenant with God. Hagar is somehow more accepting, more comfortable with God. Hagar accepts her encounter for what it is. She takes initiative and she names God.”³³ Although many of these comments can be taken to imply that Hagar was in some way superior to other biblical characters, including Yahweh himself, taking a closer look at what she chooses for his name could indicate that this gesture was received by God not because he had to as an inferior to Hagar, but because what she said about him was deeply and powerfully true.

Considering this is the one instance in the Bible where God is given a name by a human, it is worthwhile to examine the name that is chosen. Jeansonne makes a critical point regarding the uniqueness of the name and the deeply personal way in which it relates to Hagar, saying, “it is clear that Hagar named the

30 Torre, 176.

31 Michal Shekel, “Lech Lecha: What’s in a Name?” In *The Women’s Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, ed. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), 59.

32 Torre, 176.

33 Shekel, 59.

Deity in response to her experience. God has seen her, the experience did not consume her, and she still lives to receive God's plan for her and for her child. The narrator indicates that Hagar appropriated this experience and identified it by her unique naming of God.³⁴ Thus, it is clear that instead of attributing to God a name that applies in all circumstances and for all people, Hagar's choice was one born directly from her own understanding of him, shaped by this distinct encounter. Westermann, in concordance with this, comments, "That is not to say that Hagar gives to a hitherto nameless divine being a name that sticks to him everywhere and always; this is never so with a human being in the O.T., but Hagar says, 'For me he is, whatever else he may be called, the God who sees me, i.e., the one who came to my aid in my distress.'³⁵ That her naming of Yahweh is directly followed by her words of praise and gratitude for him is indicative that, for Hagar, "El Roi" is a positive title, one that speaks to the goodness of a God who saw her sorrow at a time when she was most marginalized and saved her from that distress.

Conclusion: "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." (Gen. 16:13)

What could this suggest, then, that Hagar alone is the sole figure shown to name God and that the name she chooses is "the God who sees"? One conclusion is that it reveals that it is at the margins of existence, where one is most disappointed by this world and most desperate for something beyond it, that humans are most capable of being seen by and seeing God.

Despite enormous cultural disparities that make it difficult to gauge the oppression that Hagar experienced through her own perceptions of reality, modern readers are still able to see that she was severely disempowered and mistreated. With no consideration for her own wishes, Hagar was given to Abraham by Sarah to be a surrogate mother, and in that moment all autonomous agency was stripped from her. By uprooting her from her Egyptian homeland and refusing to ever voice her actual name, Abraham and Sarah ensured that Hagar had her identity erased as she became increasingly dehumanized and severed from her former self. Lastly, due to abusive treatment from Sarah that would have been considered unjust at the time, Hagar is forced to flee into the desert wilderness, where she is inevitably confronted with the threats of starvation, thirst, and a fatally inhospitable environment. However, as the account continues, it seems as though these adversities are only the foundation necessary to eventually catapult Hagar into the wilderness where God reveals himself to her.

³⁴ Jeansonne, 46-47.

³⁵ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 247.

That Hagar is seen by God in the wilderness is an indication that God is drawn to those who suffer: the thirsty and exhausted, the homeless and lost, the stranger and runaway, the abused and violated, and all who are cast to the margins. The narrative reveals that it is not until Hagar is in the wilderness that she finds herself seen and known, indicated by Yahweh speaking her name and referencing the place she came from before enslavement. Beyond that, although she is seen in suffering, she is also given a hope for its eventual end in the promise given to her by Yahweh, allowing for an inner transformation that enables her to return to her masters in order to raise her child.

Furthermore, Hagar is not only provided for and seen by God in the wilderness; she also sees God there for herself. This is revealed through her privileged position as the only human in the Hebrew texts to bestow a name upon God. Although this action was customary during that time to imply the superiority of the namer over the named, it seems more likely that Hagar's name was received by God because of its representativeness of him. The narrative shows that the action was not a moment of arrogant domination over and against the Divine, but one borne utterly out of her own experience at the margins and the intimate way in which she came to encounter God there. In this way, Hagar's experiential theology allows for a conceptualization of God that is creative and unique, unknown to the world prior to her own revelation of insight about who God is for her and her alone. This is divulged from the name that she chose—El Roi, “the God who sees”—a title that speaks to the truth of God's embrace of her at a time when by all others she was most un-seeable. Beyond that, as revealed by her declaration of worship and gratefulness following this naming, this is a moment of deep joy for Hagar, suggesting that the name is a gift that she offers to the God who sees her rather than one imposed onto a God she resents and claims superiority over. In this way, she exists as an archetype, certainly for all those listed by Phyllis Trible, but also for any who have been forced to exist in the wilderness and have found themselves both seen by and able to see God from exactly there.

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